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Multilingual Writing as Rhetorical Attunement

Rebecca Lorimer Leonard

Alicia grew up in Argentina, attending bilingual Spanish-English schools while learning Hebrew. Alicia's grandparents were Arabic-speaking immigrants to Argentina, so Alicia's use of their Arabic phrases is a family tradition. She took French in high school because she was "curious" and learned basic Portuguese from the "bunches of books" her family would buy when they traveled to Brazil. Alicia moved to the United States to attend a small liberal arts college and graduated four years later, marrying a fellow student and finding a job as an ESL teacher in the Midwest.

This tidy summary presents an impressive and eclectic multilingual life, offering an important reminder of the vast range of literate experiences writers carry from one place in the world to another.¹ It previews Alicia's numerous rhetorical resources shaped by as many languages, cultures, and institutions. But this brief biography belies the intricacy of a literate life in practice. As Alicia says, the language repertoire she has developed over time is "just complex":

I learned Hebrew through Spanish. So Spanish and English are connected, Spanish and Hebrew are connected, but there's no connection between Hebrew and English [she draws a triangle on the table]. What I'm trying to say is that when I'm talking to somebody that speaks Hebrew and English my mind is a total mess because I feel like I have to listen in English or Hebrew then translate into Spanish, then switch to English or Hebrew, then back. [. . .] Well I can, but *eeoooo*, it takes double the time.

Alicia details the "mess" of multilingual experience, not denigrating what she characterizes as productive chaos, but highlighting the difficulty of marshaling any literate

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resource in an act of communication. So although scholarship has rightly suggested that multilingual writers be encouraged to compose from the full expanse of their languages and literacies, such championing can suggest that multilingual writers' resources are fixed and stable, traveling with them from one location or language to another as an unchanged repertoire of knowledge and skills. But literate repertoires do not move as static, fully formed resources with writers. Instead, writers call on or create literate resources in the process of making do, asserting themselves, or communicating on the fly in specific rhetorical situations. In fact, these activities of creating and adapting language reveal the rhetoricity of writing across languages. This essay describes the shape of this experience and explores its rhetorical qualities: How does writing among languages create a rhetorical sensibility? How do multilingual writers act on this sensibility in their everyday lives?

The accounts of six multilingual writers that follow show how writing across languages and locations in the world fosters what might be thought of as *rhetorical attunement*: an ear for, or a tuning toward, difference or multiplicity. Rhetorical attunement is a literate understanding that assumes multiplicity and invites the negotiation of meaning across difference. By virtue of their daily experience with language variety, the writers in this study are tuned toward the communicative predicaments of multilingual interaction. Predicaments are idiosyncratic and ordinary moments in which rhetorical strategies are practiced but also created. This essay moves through these moments, exploring writing activities that reveal the negotiated, flexible quality of language, and showing that multilingual writers are not aware of this quality a priori, but come to know—become rhetorically attuned—over a lifetime of communicating across difference.

STUDYING MULTILINGUAL PRACTICES

The argument I present here is based on an analysis of life history interviews conducted with twenty-five multilingual writers in the Midwestern United States, selected through snowball sampling (Patton).² As a group, these writers are immigrants to the United States from seventeen countries, speaking twenty-two languages. In order to understand how multilingual immigrant writers move their literacy practices among their languages and the places in the world where they have lived, I asked them to describe their literacy practices across multiple geographical contexts and over time. Interview questions elicited experiences of reading and writing memories in home countries and native language(s), current in- and out-of-school literacy activities in English and other languages, and reactions to scholarly translanguaging theories. Such semistructured interview formats allow for adaptability to “the emerging worldview of the respondent” (Merriam 90) as experts in their own lived multilingual experience—a yielding of research authority that is particularly important in light

of the power differential inherent in a researcher/participant relationship (Fontana and Frey).³ Qualitative interviews are especially meant to draw out the “substantial experience, often combined with considerable insight” held by writers who write among multiple languages as a matter of everyday experience (Charmaz, “Qualitative Interviewing” 312).

Analysis of the interviews followed the “flexible, heuristic strategies” of grounded theory, which allowed for a principled but adaptable analysis of the study’s widely varied linguistic and cultural responses (Charmaz, “Grounded Theory” 510). With this analytic heuristic in mind, I coded interview responses in rounds first to look for patterns, then to refine categories, and finally to build theoretical arguments (Glaser and Strauss). Coding with gerunds—for example, *advocating* for literacy, *imagining* a future, *struggling* with systems—foregrounded the active do-ing of multilingual writing, and the use of “in vivo” codes allowed participants’ own words to become code names (Strauss and Corbin; Charmaz, *Constructing*). “Memo-ing” (Charmaz, *Constructing*) helped to refine codes during focused coding and led me to continually revise my interview protocol, as well as more consciously share with participants my own experiences with language learning. In this way, rounds of coding, refined through comparison, grouping, and memo-ing, distilled wide-ranging responses into theoretical articulations. This essay explores just one of these articulations: multilingual practices, when traced along the paths of migration, appear to be unstable but generative, shaping an attunement toward the often fraught normalcy of writing across difference.

ATTUNEMENT

Rhetorical attunement, as an idea, echoes much existing research on multilingualism in writing studies, applied linguistics, and other fields. Like theories of alignment or communication accommodation theory, in which interlocutors adapt to each other through “coordinated interaction” or carry out convergence and divergence across a “wide range of linguistic-prosodic-nonverbal features” (Atkinson et al. 169; Giles et al. 7), rhetorical attunement accounts for the manner in which multilingual writers adapt their rhetorical strategies to “depend on, integrate with, and construct” the meaning available in each communicative context (Atkinson et al. 172; Kramsch). In fact, Coupland et al. use “attuning” to reconceptualize accommodation “in terms of discursive and sequential acts” (Giles et al. 41). Rhetorical attunement shares much with concepts of shuttling (Canagarajah, “Toward”), translanguaging (Canagarajah, “Translanguaging”; Creese and Blackledge; Garcia), translingual dispositions (Horner et al.), and transidiomatic practices (Jacquemet) in that each accounts for the range of creative and agentive practices, processes, and communicative moves multilingual writers use to “make sense of their [. . .] worlds” (Garcia 45). And like

theories of multicompetence (Cook, “Poverty”; Hall, Cheng, and Carlson; Franceschini), which attempt to characterize the language knowledge of multilinguals as “successful multicompetent speakers, not failed native speakers” (Cook, “Going Beyond” 204), rhetorical attunement accounts for the practices multilingual writers create rather than lack.

Further, the emergent qualities of rhetorical attunement resonate with the use of “tune” or “tuning” as metaphor.⁴ Paul Prior and Jody Shipka, in their study of the literate activity of academic writers, use “tune” to emphasize how writers adapt or sync their writing activities to their writing environments, claiming that this environmental tuning is one of the “central practices in literate activity” and suggesting that writing studies would “benefit from the further study of these processes of tuning” (230). Sociologist Andrew Pickering has used what he calls the “perceptive metaphor” of tuning to convey an “aspect of temporal emergence” in the “real time of practice” (20). For Pickering, the materiality of tuning matters—the tuning of an instrument or car engine are activities that show how experience hones perception. Rhetorical attunement similarly proceeds from an emergent sensitivity to language and borrows from these tuning metaphors the honed quality of multilingual sensibilities, as isolated literate moments are situated in the context of changing global conditions.

In other words, rhetorical attunement shares much with historically long and in-process lines of research, and is not put forward here as an entirely new concept. Instead, this essay means to further elaborate the potential of attunement, with a focus on reading and writing practices not always captured in theories like alignment or accommodation, which often focus on speech. Optimally, rhetorical attunement might account for more than a disposition toward language difference or interiorized language knowledge like multicompetence (though neither are these distinctions so neat).⁵ Instead, the term aims to account for a sensibility fostered over time, across a spectrum of language and geographic boundaries. It is the fusing of practice and condition, in which individual literate practice cannot help but be understood in a larger context of globalizing literate experiences.

Rhetorical attunement highlights the rhetorical in multilingualism: its instability and contingency, its political weight and contextual embeddedness. In fact, calling attunement rhetorical serves to underline these elements—materiality, contingency, emergence, resistance. Like Krista Ratcliffe’s “rhetorical listening,” a purposeful identification with difference (19), rhetorical attunement is a kind of hearing that treats language difference as an element “at the heart” of rhetoric, a “mode of reasoning and decision-making which allows humans to act in the absence of certain, *a priori* truth” (Jarratt 8). Rhetorical attunement seeks to account for lived literate experiences that rely on discursive and provisional truths. The intention is not to classify multilingual rhetorical styles or to name the rhetorical strategies of proficient multilingual writers, but instead to follow a specifically neo-sophistic (Crowley; Jarratt;

Poulakos) and epistemic (Scott) tradition that understands language, and knowledge about language, to be both contingent and emergent. Rhetorical attunement thus not only highlights how multilingual writers negotiate and adapt to language multiplicity, but also traces emergent, unstable multilingual practices.

FROM RESOURCE TO PRACTICE

Researchers in writing and rhetoric studies have set out to describe multilingual writers' resources—the knowledge, skills, and experiences they draw on when writing (Canagarajah, “Fortunate”; Canagarajah, “Place of World Englishes”; Guerra, *Close to Home*; Lu). Scholars have produced an understanding of the rhetorical traditions of particular cultural or linguistic groups (Baca; Kennedy; Mao; Smitherman; Stromberg; Wang; You) and have begun to show how linguistically diverse writers communicate through multiple codes and identities (Gilyard; Norton; Sarroub; Shuck; Villanueva; Young). But often this research focuses on writers' knowledge rather than their rhetorical activities—what their literate resources are rather than how they are used.

For example, sociologist Nikos Papastergiadis suggests that “fissures within language and cultural identity” create a kind of “critical sensibility of innovation and improvisation” (118). Suresh Canagarajah argues that multilingualism fosters “a curiosity towards the language, the ability to intuit linguistic rules from observation of actual usage, a metalinguistic awareness of the system behind languages” (*Critical* 134), and “psychological and attitudinal resources” such as the “patience, tolerance, and humility to negotiate the differences of interlocutors” (“Place of World Englishes” 593). These facets of awareness suggest what multilingual writers know: that language difference is common, open to negotiation, and not a detriment to successful communication. Sensibilities described, for example, as *mestizo* (Baca), *critical* (Papastergiadis), or *translingual* (Horner et al.) might also suggest that cultural and linguistic difference makes writers aware not only of “different kinds of speech” or “the subtlety of meaning,” but also of a system of discourse beyond an immediate moment of communication, “the practice of connecting individual meanings of cultural difference within the ‘large, many-windowed house of human culture as a whole’” (Papastergiadis 14). We might consider this knowledge a “full understanding of the medium”: an awareness of the “local and global contexts [. . .] that shape the English language and those who use it” (Hattori and Ching 59). But this elaboration of what multilingual writers know often stops short of showing where these resources come from, how writers put them to use, or how they play out in specific moments of communication. As Alicia's account shows, these subtleties matter. They also have been called for. Bruce Horner, Min-Zhan Lu, Jacqueline Jones Royster, and John Trimbur ask about language difference, “What might this difference *do*? How

might it *function* expressively, rhetorically, communicatively? For whom, under what conditions, and how?" (303–304; emphasis added). Anis Bawarshi asks that teachers and researchers attempt to understand how students “negotiate between and make use of their varied linguistic and discursive resources” (197). These scholars are in pursuit of the “how”: how multilingual writers use their rhetorical, discursive, and linguistic resources and repertoires in practice.⁶

Existing theories of multilingual rhetorical practice include Damián Baca’s “Mestiz@ consciousness” (5), “pairing metaphors, crossing genres, shifting back and forth from one medium to another and borrowing from both Western and Mesoamerican symbolic material” (7), as well as Juan Guerra’s “transcultural repositioning,” the ways in which Chican@s and Mexican@s “learn to negotiate” the “abundance of literacies that demand a reconsideration of the world-at-large” because of a “specific and felt everyday need to navigate” among languages, cultures, and literate practices (“Putting Literacy” 32). Both Baca’s and Guerra’s theories echo those of applied linguists who argue that multilinguals “mix or switch languages in creative ways for different communicative functions” (Cenoz and Gorter 358). Similarly, Canagarajah shows how multilingual writers compose under a “negotiation model” in which they “wrestle with the divergent discourses they face in writing to creatively work out alternate discourse and conventions” (*Critical* 15). He identifies “recontextualization strategies,” in which a writer shapes context for a reader so he or she “will approach the text as a multilingual encounter,” and “interactional strategies,” in which a writer and reader co-construct a text’s meaning together (“Translanguaging” 14–15). Though these scholars show how multilingual writers negotiate, switch, and construct language, these strategies often are presented as intuitive or stable resources rather than in-process practices stemming from social conditions. As indicated earlier, languages are not fixed, but are “fluid codes framed within social practices” (Garcia 32). Neither literacy nor language is “a prior object that [. . .] exists out there in the world and can then be taken up and put to some use” (Pennycook 8). In other words, language—the stuff of a resource—is something we make as we move rather than something static we carry around; and resources, then, must also be externally influenced and socially practiced. This is why presentations of intuitive resources do not necessarily show us how writers create or adapt practices over the course of a lifetime. Rhetorical attunement attempts to account for this accumulative quality by acknowledging the ongoing, negotiated, and unpredictable use of practices over time.

PRACTICING ATTUNEMENT

Tracing practices draws attention to the mediating, or “meso-political” level at which the individual “doing of language” meets up with larger social systems, setting seemingly quotidian or random literacy incidents in the context of ideologically regulated social repetition (Pennycook 114). Therefore, the sections that follow

present ordinary moments in which rhetorical attunement is practiced and often created, describing writers who, by virtue of their daily experience with linguistic difference, welcome the communicative predicaments, the common disidentifications, of multilingual interaction. Such a presentation aims to highlight the echoed repetition of practices that foster attunement. Because understanding literate practice is understanding how we “constantly make our worlds—the ways we select from, (re) structure, fiddle with, and transform the material and social world we inhabit,” tracing practices helps us understand how multilingual writers “select from” and “fiddle with” their literate repertoires in the course of their everyday writing experiences (Prior and Shipka 182).

Alicia, Nimet, Sofia, Tashi, Yolanda, and Sabohi describe writing among more than one language almost their entire lives, calling the multiplicity of their and others’ languages “normal,” “natural,” and “human,” what Pennycook calls “the everyday language practices of the majority of the world” (133). These six writers compose across two to five languages with practices shaped by the specific educational, cultural, and political contexts in which they were raised, attuning themselves to the flexibility of language as they mix, mesh, and make choices. Nimet and Tashi are nursing students, though they both were teachers in Azerbaijan and India respectively. Yolanda, Alicia, and Sabohi work in multilingual teaching positions, though Yolanda was a veterinarian in Colombia and Sabohi was a journalist in Pakistan. Sofia works in retail and has recently enrolled in community college courses. They all used multiple languages, including English, in complex literate activities before their immigration to the United States. For example, Nimet moves among Turkish, Azerbaijani, and English in her everyday activities, but also grew up reading and writing Russian. Sabohi learned English before Hindi and Urdu, but used all three as well as Kashmiri in her school, home, and professional activities in Pakistan. These six writers together show the range of attunement and the variability of its practices: to be rhetorically attuned is not always to be rhetorically successful, for experiences of multilingualism often deemed transgressive, failing, or in-process also foster attunement. Importantly, attunement should be considered cyclical: the practices described in the next sections are not primary to a resulting awareness or sensibility. Rather, multilingual writing is interdependent with this sensibility, always intertwined and feeding back into the everyday literate practices that shape how writers use language.

Teaching Writing

Of the many practices these multilingual writers describe, teaching is a particularly fraught and fertile attunement activity. By virtue of their multilingualism, many participants are employed as bilingual teachers in the United States, and the classroom experiences they describe are often shaped by language play. With varying levels of intensity, they consider language negotiation a skill to be cultivated, advising

students to worry less about whether writing is “right or wrong.” As one participant says, “Just write. Even if you have to put like some Portuguese or whatever language mixed up, just try. It’s just a start.” Alicia draws on her own experience to teach her multilingual students to write, telling them how she came to understand that “it’s not that I’m doing it wrong, it just doesn’t fit this language.” Speaking specifically of the long sentences common in Spanish, she says, “In English most people won’t be okay with it, will find it too confusing or overwhelming or categorize it as bad writing skills. So I tell [students]—it’s not that the way you write is wrong, it just doesn’t follow the rules of English writing.” Instead she teaches them that in English “you need to have your introduction and your connecting sentence and your argument, one, two, three.” Alicia shows her students that they are not “wrong” for writing under Spanish stylistic norms, but that they need to better negotiate the multiple valid norms that exist.

Yolanda moves language negotiation beyond Alicia’s acknowledgment of multiplicity. In describing the language-mixing practices of her own multilingual students, Yolanda explains that she encourages improvisation in a manner that assumes language struggle will be present:

Sometimes I ask the kids when we’re reading something scientific, “How do you think you say this?” And they say “I don’t know.” [. . .] They know I don’t know how to say it, so I ask them, “How do you think? How would you say it?” And they find a way to say it, and I say “Let’s use it.” And then I ask one of the kids that I know dad’s a biology teacher or something, “Ask your dad and tell us the right way because we’re using this way but we don’t know if it’s right.” [laughing] It would be nice to use the right way. Like me, hello I’m teaching biology and I don’t know how to say the words we’re writing. I mean, that’s negative, but the thing is that I make it a comedy. It becomes a comedy for all of us, and then okay let’s move on. [. . .] And for kids that speak other languages, you know, I have an accent, but look at me, I can do it, so go ahead. “But what if it’s wrong?” Doesn’t matter, look at me! You can say it wrong, you know. So I think I help the kids sometimes with that.

This literacy practice—reading science writing in English—is one Yolanda carried with her from Colombia, where she had been trained as a veterinarian. She explains that in her Colombian university courses, she rarely had access to Spanish translations of the required reading—mostly scientific scholarly journal articles in English—so she and her fellow students worked together to translate their reading into Spanish or hire outside translators. Yolanda uses these practices—collaborative meaning-making and accessing experts—in a new classroom context. As a teacher, she treats her students and their families as experts, asking a student to consult his biologist dad on the pronunciation of terms.

This communicative event invites Yolanda to model multilingual practices for her students, showing them that language is up for negotiation. Canagarajah notes

that multilingual writers have a tendency to “creatively negotiate meaning in context” (“Fortunate” 24), and Yolanda’s account shows how she practices this negotiation in the specific rhetorical situation of her bilingual science classroom. She models a norm of language difference, showing her students how she hears certain words and tuning them to accented pronunciation. She has them laugh with her at the occasional comedy of reading and writing across languages and helps them, as she says, “move on” from certainty in a manner that evokes Alan Firth’s “let it pass” principle. Yolanda’s “let’s use it” encourages students to use a provisional pronunciation, revealing her own rhetorical attunement as she attunes her students to the normalcy of language uncertainty: “But what if it’s wrong?’ Doesn’t matter, look at me!” In this specific rhetorical situation, Yolanda’s literate resources prove to be particularly complex, indexing a quiet resistance to classroom practices that treat multiple languages as separate and standard. The moment captures teacher and students engaging in literate activities Yolanda had cultivated over a lifetime, showing how she tunes both her and her students’ ears toward difference.

Nimet and other participants have taught writing all over the world. Because of their mobility, this practice carries the weight of powerful global institutions. In the background of many participants’ life experiences, international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) maintain a quiet presence, deftly influencing literate practice in various countries. Nimet describes how NGOs conditioned the language-learning environment in Azerbaijan:

We founded Azerbaijani English Teachers Association with one of my friend; she uses perfect British English because she worked at American embassy. [. . .] So we just make this one association and the high school and university people come and apply ourselves [. . .] to this organization, Azerbaijan English Teachers Association. Yeah, we just contact the British Council and the American ambassador, American Council Education and Soros Foundation. They all have branch in my country. We go and ask, just let’s involve this organization, help us with a book. We finish the book and we write it ourselves, not our government; government doesn’t care. And we saw the result. [. . .] We begin just twelve people. Now we have eight hundred members.

This is not to say that Nimet was completely subject to the weight of these NGOs’ influence. In fact, starting and growing such a teaching organization is indicative of Nimet’s bustling personal and educational activism. Rather, Nimet’s description reveals what else she is attuned to: the power of English, the global interests at stake in language learning, the connection of large-scale politics to local-scale literate practice.

Essay Writing

The writers in this study have composed lab reports, literary analyses, translations, research papers, literature reviews, and master’s theses. They have written personal narratives for application and scholarship essays or brief essays for citizenship

applications. Those who have written high-stakes essays for entrance to programs or countries especially describe writing with a careful attunement toward language negotiation.

Although Nimet is happy to take on new essay strategies learned in her nursing program in the United States, the conventions are very different from those she was taught in Azerbaijan. After meeting with an advisor, she learned that her application essay to the program was “too long” because they wanted “brief information,” but, she says, “I don’t know what is the expectation.” Nimet was happy to have an advisor tell her that her essay should be brief and clear, but she was still puzzled by its purpose:

You have to show something, some question you have to answer. You have to explain why, why you apply for this program. What is your purpose? What kind of benefit you will give to the community? [. . .] Why, a lot of why.

Nimet explains that “a lot of why” felt uncomfortable because the essays she had written in Azerbaijani schools were almost exclusively for end-of-year testing and required her to relay subject matter with no opinion, certainly no “why.” One could draw tentative conclusions that under the Soviet government such individual exploration was not welcome in school essays, whereas it is exactly the purpose for a US university application essay. Once she understood the difference, Nimet welcomed the change but remained cautious:

You know this is different society. I grew up different society. You cannot match them because sometimes you write sentence. This society doesn’t understand me and then I need to change to the other. But it takes long sentence [laughing].

Nimet is attuned not only to the differences among multiple options for essay structure presented in multiple languages, but also to the societies in which these structures are fostered. In this way, Nimet associates her individual experience of multilingual writing to a larger social experience of communication across difference. She understands the length of a sentence, the amount of language, required to switch among socially derived language norms. She knows that she is part of a larger multilingual tradition and argues that sometimes such communicative predicaments “take a long sentence” to resolve.

Nimet’s reflections reveal the quick slippage between explanations of individual literate practice and the political history of a place in which a practice was learned. For example, in describing the language instruction of her younger school years, Nimet quickly shifts into a historical-political context:

History, geography, mathematics, everything in school Russian. We learn the Russian, not just for academic language. Because just fifteen republics we have all one language, and at the same time they come together. State language is a kind of Russian. You are not obliged to learn, but you have to because if you don’t know Russian you cannot find a job.

Nimet describes the language context of her early schooling as a consequence of living under the Soviet Union. In describing her experiences, she often closely links her literate practices in school to the Soviet political context, which she says dictated the language, learning, and even employment opportunities in Azerbaijan.

Such slippage is common in participant accounts. While explaining essay writing in Russian, Sofia, too, felt compelled to explain the political history of Ukraine:

So we will describe the tree in Russian, it will be a page or more. Of course if we make it in English, it's a little bit faster. In Russian long. So I give you little bit idea about Ukraine and Russian situation in past. Ukraine, some of country speak Russian, where I am from, and some parts speak only Ukraine. We are not separate, we are the same country, but in history something happened in south of Ukraine that they most speak Russian.

In her remembered and current essay-writing practices, language and history are parallel. Political change is ever-present in her understanding of her own language use, revealing the conditions that shape an attunement to the social situatedness of language. That these writers were speaking to someone they might have assumed to be a geographically naïve researcher could partially explain their desire to repeatedly provide such historical context. But the impulse is more noteworthy than that, both because it is hard to imagine a monolingual English speaker's felt need to provide a historical backdrop for his or her language history and because such descriptions of political conditions continued throughout writers' accounts, particularly in explanations of their multilingual identities.

For example, Tashi is attuned not only to literate play, but also to the political weight of her literate practices. As a daughter of farmers who did not read or write, Tashi guided her own learning from an early age. During the time allotted for homework at her boarding school, she studied English language materials on her own. She was motivated to begin such study when she realized that "whatever you have in your brain can't be seen by other people. You just have to write it down and show them that what you know." In India, she says, "it's not like here [in the United States], not like multiple choice. Over there everything in [English] essay. So you really need to express *out* all your brain." She felt that her grades were suffering because she could not express her Hindi- and Tibetan-related knowledge in English writing. So she set out to learn how this was done, collecting books and newspapers to analyze "how they write [. . .] how they go about it":

I just marked all the vocabularies and like and I point out the phrase, how they use it. And then I note how they uh [. . .] play with the words. And in contrast, and in literal meaning and in applied meaning. All those. This makes me how to play around with the words and get the things done. And play around with the sentences. So yeah, then I really learned the skill of how to play around with the words, and I really don't have to have a strict rule doing English. [. . .] [O]nce you get grip hold of it you can

manipulate whatever you want to with the language [. . .] and you know how things going around [swirling on the table] and then you understand for yourself how it works.

If Tashi had simply copied grammatical patterns, or noted the organization of newspaper stories to follow their structure, she would not seem to be negotiating meaning in her written English. But she looked specifically for how these writers “used” the vocabulary and phrases she marked, how these were used to make “literal” or “applied meanings,” and how one might “play around” with English to “get the things done.” Tashi’s repeated use of “play” shows her acknowledgment that meaning is not static but slippery. This is why she doesn’t “have a strict rule doing English.” Now that she feels she has a “grip” on English, she delights in manipulating it to accomplish “whatever [she] want[s] to with the language.” In her analysis of how English “works,” Tashi exhibits the “curiosity toward the language, [and] the ability to intuit linguistic rules from observation of actual usage” of a proficient multilingual writer (Canagarajah, *Critical* 134). This willingness to work with language, to read for semantic play, shows Tashi’s rich attunement to the negotiation of meaning that must occur across languages.

Significantly, like Nimet and Sofia, Tashi is also attuned to the political and historical trajectories of her literate practices. Tashi explains that when she communicates among her languages, she feels like a “jack of all trades and master of none.” She says, “[I]n a way that’s good, because I’m with the average of groups, I can express myself [. . .] [and] I didn’t get pointed out for being too weak.” But she says this linguistic identity is shaped by living as a Tibetan in India:

Being a refugee, we have no choice but to follow and be, when you are in Rome, be as Roman, so do as Roman do. Here [in the United States] it’s like so big and international society, but back in India they keep asking me, “[Y]ou guys are refugees here, you didn’t have your land, you should go back.” And you know they just keep reminding us of like being as countryless.

Tashi situates her literate identity in a political, historical context. She says her teachers always reminded her that “you have extra responsibility, you have to struggle to survive.” This responsibility was framed as mastering English and excelling academically to honor donors’ investments in the school. Tashi adds, “See, we did not have generations of our grandparents with a good education background with history records, nothing. So we just have to establish ourself, and if we do well in our life, younger generation will have a better life. That’s how we have to think of it.” Underneath Tashi’s literate accounts runs a history of the differing power of each of the languages in which she is a “jack of all trades and master of none”—Tibetan, English, Hindi, Kannada. Nearly all of her literate experiences bare the traces of the political past of India and Tibet, revealing the conditions under which Tashi has become attuned to difference, multiplicity, and language negotiation.

Using Dictionaries

Dictionary use is ever-present in participants' remembered practices. For many, dictionaries are used as a resource for language learning—one participant says she would take “whatever paper, whatever bill, whatever anything” she could find, “go to the dictionary, translate it and feel the victory!” But dictionaries also serve as texts that show how languages overlap and change over time. In their frequent use of dictionaries, these multilingual writers become attuned to the unsettled quality of written language.

For example, Sabohi finds language multiplicity unremarkable because she knows that languages that seem standard are really a historical conglomeration of loan words:

See how many words English has borrowed from Hindi. Sometimes I went to the dictionary, and I saw the first time “bund” in the dictionary [. . .] and origin was Indian, and I was like, yeah, there are so many things that are borrowed from other languages, and English too, so, what's the big deal! I mean, you want to communicate something and you want to write something for pleasure, even if it's literary, as long as somebody understands it and enjoys it, so what's the fuss about?

Because Sabohi is a habitual dictionary user, a practice cultivated from learning to write simultaneously in Urdu and English, she notices patterns of language use, and concludes on her own that languages are already messy. Nimet describes coming to similar conclusions because of her dictionary use. She explains that she cannot translate her first language, Azerbaijani, to her third language, English, without the mediation of Russian due to the dictionaries available when she learned English:

We used Russian because we had no direct English-Azerbaijani dictionary at that time. Well, there was professor who wrote one, but it was not high quality. We have English-Russian or Azerbaijani-Russian. We had a hard time, spent a lot of time to go Azerbaijani-Russian, Russian-English. [. . .] At the same time you have to learn two words. You have to understand Russian because this way you only can find the other.

The very availability of this resource, which was dictated by the political situation of the time, changed the way Nimet writes among her languages. She knows that language was available to her based on whichever political power felt inclined to grant that access, which in turn led her to believe that official or correct languages were related more to the whims of political change than to hard and fast rules. When she writes now in English, she still moves among multiple dictionaries, either as habit, or as method for making choices: “So I go synonym, go antonym, go homonym, and then come back. My god what kind of word can you substitute [for] this one?! And my Azerbaijani dictionary, they know better than me what I am looking for. In Azerbaijani dictionary I can look for what I need, then look in English dictionary.” Nimet manipulates her languages, negotiating meaning both with herself and with her dictionaries as she writes.

Writing in English

The conditions that foster rhetorical attunement are those in which multiplicity is a norm and difference is inevitable. As Sabohi explains, “In India, you know that no, there are other things, there are other people. You learn that early on in your life.” She says that growing up, she realized, “Okay this is Punjabi [. . .] this is Gujarati, and this is Hindi and this is this. And you try to communicate and you see, okay it’s different.” Such awareness of difference could be understood as nothing more than a particular kind of consciousness that makes these multilingual writers more multiculturally savvy or more understanding of the state of globalization. However, this norming of difference centers multiplicity in a distinct way, with writing in English as one option among many.

Running throughout participants’ experiences are lengthy descriptions of accent, culturally determined knowledge, and variously organized sentences, thoughts, or whole texts. These multilingual writers often use their understandings of multiplicity and difference to open up the inner workings of a language, in many cases the Standard American English common in their work and school settings. For example, Sofia describes writing in her English classes in the United States:

My idea is that all my knowledges from school in Russian helps me write, helps me in English. But building the sentences give me problem because we have different structure of sentences in Russian. If we write essay in English, so I did this in Russian, it helps that the idea is the same. But it seems to me in English it’s more like structure, best is clear. In Russian, if you begin writing you can describe that tree [pointing to a nearby tree], how I say, a lot. You can write *a lot*. In English it’s more bum bum bum, just clear.

Sofia acknowledges that her Russian writing instruction helps her in English in general, and especially in writing essays. But at the sentence level, she finds the differences to be more distinct and works hard to translate the amplified quality of the Russian language into the “bum bum bum” quality of English. In this way, her negotiation of multiplicity attunes her to audience and organizational choices, which she reflects into her writing in English.

Often these cross-language comparisons lead writers to conclude that English is “easier,” “clear,” and less “difficult” or “complicated” than other languages. English is often assumed to be more complicated when learned as a second, a third, or one of multiple native languages. But as these writers gather information about English through comparison, they find it to be straightforward, structured, and simplified, concluding that they must master these characteristics in order to write well in English. Alicia explains:

I took the TOEFL and we had the English format-type essay with “on the one hand, on the other hand,” but we [Spanish speakers] don’t really write that way. When I

think of writing in Spanish in comparison to English, we were encouraged to use longer sentences because you sound more sophisticated and like you know what you're talking about. That was very interesting process switching to English because it's the complete opposite. Chop chop chop, extra words extra words. No need. Where are your periods and sentences? Such things. [. . .] In English I feel like there are some more precise way of doing things with writing [. . .] with the organization in general or your thoughts.

Regardless of whether English speakers agree that writing in English is this tidy, these multilingual writers believe this is successful prose for essay writing, test taking, and other practices in English. They are pragmatic about the English it takes to get a good grade or gain access to a US university. As Alicia says, imagining others who review her writing, "I still have a lot of sentences that could be three, four lines long, but I like them that way. They make sense to me [pounding on the table]. Just give me your overall thought but don't give me crap about it." Like other multilingual writers, Alicia seems to have what Canagarajah calls a "relaxed attitude" toward stylistic or grammatical error, not because she does not know the rules or does not "care about form," but because she makes standards "subservient to her rhetorical purposes" ("Codemeshing" 411). Almost all of the Spanish speakers in this study describe being taught that, as Alicia says, "you sound more sophisticated [. . .] like you know what you're talking about" with longer sentences, fewer periods, and more coordination. Alicia gives in to "chop chop chop" for the sake of being rhetorically effective in English, but she knows both ways are "right." These writers are rhetorically savvy indeed, understanding English as a language existing among and connected to others.

At the same time, these writers experience English as a politically fraught and distinctly powerful language. They witness regional language change and language loss in younger generations. Participants say quite plainly, "I need to learn English because English is a universal language," and "English is *the* global language." Sabohi shares this view of English's global dominance and situates such power in an almost inevitable historical trajectory:

Well, it goes back to India being English colony. And it is like that slave mentality, I mean this is my understanding of the things. It's just Indians were enslaved and they were treated really badly. And even though they resented the English, but they were made to call them masters, masters, masters, and actually masters are like superior and you tend to imitate that thing and you tend to be more like them or something. And that translates, that travels down because if I had been living in that era, and then I was independent, I would like to be like the English master. Then if I had a son I would definitely want him to be like that. And then I am inculcating in him that mentality and he in turn grows up with that mentality that passes on to next generation. And next generation. And until now it is about convenience because English is, everybody understands in India, outside India, most of the world, half of the world probably speaks English. So it's again, convenience.

Sabohi's generational description is a complicated web of colonialism and globalization, though her comments are striking in that they move so quickly from one to the other—from a narrative of colonialism to one of globalization, from ambivalence to pragmatism. In this way, the colonial domination of the past—as embodied in the use of English—seems forgiven for the convenience of the language in the present. Growing up under such conditions, Sabohi recognizes the political power of English, but does not seem to blame or want to ban English for this history, though she admits there are many others who importantly do. Canagarajah notes that multilingualism can “provide a critical detachment from dominant discourses,” and Sabohi uses that detachment to recognize that there are high stakes in language maintenance, as well (*Critical* 134). She cites India's move to revert cities back to their precolonial names, a move she says she understands as “people wanting to protect an identity and not keeping up altogether with the times.” In other words, her attunement to “the times” is one of inevitable language change and a near dismissal of colonial remnants of language practice.

Describing a recent visit to her home country, Sofia also details conditions of globalization—adoption of English, language loss, language change—that shape her rhetorical attunement:

I visit last summer and [. . .] it was scary. They are saying everything in Ukraine language. And my god, I see everything in English. I notice signs. I thought to myself, good in English cause it's a little bit easier for me to understand than Ukraine. [. . .] This made me a little uncomfortable because I don't know Ukraine language and everything in Ukraine I don't understand. I said, oh my god I can't learn Ukraine, it's enough to do English for me.

Sofia was overwhelmed by the language dynamics in Ukraine during her visit because the country had changed, moving away from Soviet Russian and toward a recuperation of Ukrainian on public signs and in schools and other institutional settings. English, however, retained a presence as a global lingua franca on some signs and public notices. This was comforting to Sofia, who speaks only Russian and English, but still left her feeling distanced from her native country that had experienced so much political change in her absence. Her inability to speak Ukrainian as a woman from Ukraine is no small matter for Sofia; she is embarrassed by what she considers to be lacking in her literate repertoire. Sofia is attuned to the less benign side of literate difference, leaving her a rhetorical attunement similar to most of the participants in this study—savvy but not entirely hopeful about the power of language.

CULTIVATING RHETORICAL ATTUNEMENT

These six writers' accounts show that literate practices developed across languages and over the course of a lifetime are wide ranging and complex, grounded in individual

history but also surprisingly common. These writers share their multilingualism—they all write and communicate across multiple languages—but the communicative situations in which they find themselves differ, and thus the manner in which they act with their literate practices is highly individual. This is to say that although the multilingual writers highlighted here show a common ear for difference and a shared use of negotiation, they do so in specific ways informed by their own histories, memories, and changing life situations. Their attunement is both common and their own because of a “specific and felt everyday need” to cultivate a “consciousness that travels well,” one that moves with them as they travel across multiple languages and locations in the world (Guerra, “Putting Literacy” 32). Their rhetorical attunement is honed by their discursive navigation of difference, which allows them to act with language in distinct, but powerfully common ways.

The common conditions under which these writers developed their literate practices are indicative of the times: political changes are not neutral backdrops to the everyday use of literacy and language, but instead wield surprisingly direct influence over these writers’ access to literacy materials and language instruction, and on their identities as language users. Most of the writers in this study moved to the United States from countries that have undergone political change during their lifetimes. Such conditions attune writers to the political power of language, as evidenced especially in the quick slippage between explanations of personal language history and the political history of the place in which they learned language. All of these elements—the ordinary, the unpredictable, the political, the emotional—also exist in the literate resources that writers carry around, showing that these in-process repertoires are not a collection of static skills, but are highly charged experiences, values, and beliefs that influence the ways writers are able or not able to call on different resources in certain situations.

So what does writing across languages do for the rhetorical sensibilities of multilingual writers? This essay shows how multilingual writers hear something distinct in language. They hear cultural history, difference, politics, negotiation, “mess.” This is not to say that multilingual writers are smarter or more linguistically advanced than monolingual writers. As applied linguist Rita Franceschini suggests, “[A] monolingual can be as dynamic and variable in his or her use of a language” because mono- and multilinguals are “just exploiting the inherent characteristic of language variability on the wider or smaller scale of languages they can use” (350). Writing and rhetoric teachers might be well advised to remember that mono- and multilinguals differ “not on number of languages, but on amount and diversity of experience and use” because “all language knowledge is socially contingent and dynamic no matter how many language codes one has access to” (Hall, Cheng, and Carlson 229). Monolinguals may simply have communicated under different lived conditions than multilingual individuals, and thus have fewer opportunities to consciously tune themselves toward language dynamism.

Although the multilingual writers in this study both agree and disagree with these theoretical tenets—Sabohi does not think she is “smarter than anybody else who speaks one [language],” while another participant says, “[O]h my god I know all those languages so I feel really smart”—this essay does not intend to argue that rhetorical attunement advances multilingual writers’ cognitive capabilities. Perhaps it allows them to simply hear something different—they are tuned to language differently. One way to think about this difference is to consider its potential for connection to a larger language picture—monolingual writers hear a note; multilingual writers hear a chord. As Alandra, another participant from Brazil, says:

I feel connected. I definitely have appreciation for English and Portuguese and Spanish, so that means I know that the other person knows that I appreciate their language and that I want to communicate. How would I describe that in Portuguese? *Conectado*. I think in other languages I would use a word more like empathy. So it would be even deeper.

Alandra feels connected by moving across languages when she writes. This is a connection to the experience of speaking other languages and a connection to a desire to communicate across difference. That she feels this develops “empathy” and not simple cognitive capacity gives attunement a connecting quality—an ability to jump from individual literate experiences to those of many others: “the individual to the collective, the temporally situated to the trans-temporal, the unique to the common” (Blommaert 33). These connections are, in fact, the shade of rhetorical attunement often understated in scholarship—how multilingual writers connect seemingly benign norms of multiplicity and difference to an awareness of language as a powerful conduit of domination and power. Alandra is tuned to the experience of English, Portuguese, and Spanish all at once, hearing simultaneous discursive variability and social power. She is rhetorically attuned, like the other multilingual writers in this study, to a language system beyond the self.

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NOTES

1. In this essay “literate” does not mean the opposite of “illiterate” or simply the ability to read and write. Following Paul Prior’s “literate activity,” “literate” is used to indicate “situated, mediated, and dispersed” activity “strongly motivated and mediated by texts” (Prior 138).

2. Snowball sampling was carried out with a question at the end of every interview: “Can you think of other friends or acquaintances who also might be reading and writing among multiple languages?” Thus, multilingualism was the primary criterion that drove sampling, creating a participant pool that was all multilingual and primarily professional. That participants almost always referred me to their colleagues

was unexpected. For example, the nurses referred me to other nurses, but this group of seven nurses represented lower- to middle-class family backgrounds, high school to graduate degrees, six countries of origin, and ten languages. Nearly all participants held professional positions previous to immigrating to the United States—five were teachers, three worked in communications, and the rest spanned professions such as architecture, law, environmental planning, and medicine. But their class background, educational and work experience, and citizenship status varied widely: three came as students, twelve came with or to join their husbands, one came for her own job, two were refugees, two immigrated under diversity “lottery” visas, and five did not share their reasons or status.

3. Interview questions were organized into three categories—home, school, and community literacy memories; current literacy practices in English and other languages; and opinions about multilingual communication in general—and were designed to draw out the shape and specificity of everyday multilingual writing: letter writing, speech writing, advocacy writing, writing newsletters for work, writing notes, keeping lists and charts at home, and more.

4. I am influenced by Paul Hopper’s use of emergent as “real-time,” “social,” and “disputed” (156).

5. For example, Atkinson et al. expand alignment theory by showing how it accounts for “the full array of sociocognitive affordances” (172), and Hall et al. highlight the social potential of multicompetence. See Firth and Wagner for an important earlier critique of these concepts.

6. See also Ulla Connor, Ed Nagelhout, and William Rozycki’s *Contrastive Rhetoric* and Connor’s *Intercultural Rhetoric in the Writing Classroom* for Connor’s suggestion that contrastive rhetoricians research not only textual patterns but also “what went into the processes of writing as well as the historical background and context that affected the writing and the writer” (Connor, Nagelhout, and Rozycki 304).

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