The Postlingual Turn

yasser elhariry, Rebecca L. Walkowitz

SubStance, Volume 50, Number 1, 2021 (Issue 154), pp. 3-9 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/sub.2021.0000

For additional information about this article
https://muse.jhu.edu/article/786052

For content related to this article
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=article&id=786052
Introduction
The Postlingual Turn

yasser elhariry & Rebecca L. Walkowitz

No one is born speaking or writing a language. We all begin as language learners, and in that sense, there are no native languages. There are only foreign languages. As language educators and as scholars of literatures produced by Black, migrant, indigenous, and multilingual artists, we know that even the universalism of “foreign languages” and “second languages”—which holds the Other at tongue’s length, so to speak—needs to be replaced by the universalism of “additional languages.” Every language is an additional language, not a primary, national, or natural language (Silva and Wang; Horner et al.). But if every language is an additional language relative to others that we use, or others that our neighbors use, it is also an additional language relative to itself. Languages are not additive or countable in ways that presume a static and durable separation among coherent wholes, one language and then another (Sakai). This is, first, a lingual axiom: we’re thinking here of the blended histories of Anglo-Saxon, Arabic, French, Latin, Spanish, and many other languages that have contributed to the syntax, diction, and spelling of the words we are producing on this page right here. It is, second, an axiom about the technologies of religion, media, communication, performance, translation, and circulation that distribute and also shape the meaning of our words right now.

The postlingual turn we discern in literary studies forks between the right here and right now of the tongue, understood as both a physical-spatial object (the buccal cavity, the language-producing anatomical apparatus, their prosthetic intermedial supplements) and a temporal dimension (produced by the technologies of lingual transmission and reception). We privilege “lingual” over “linguistic” to distinguish the postlingual turn from adjacent terminological usages in linguistics, for “lingual” resonates with literary perspectives on language that encompass forms of alingualism (Gramling 9; elhariry 149) as well as what Michael Allan calls waswasa, or forms of whispering at the intersection of sacred and secular knowledge.
“Lingual” even offers a hidden benefit. It provides English-language criticism with a term that inches closer to the always-split meaning of *langue* in French as both “tongue” and “language.” Indeed, “lingual” means “of or relating to the tongue”; it designates anatomical features such as the “lingual nerve,” the “sensory branch of the mandibular nerve that supplies the mucous membrane of the anterior part of the tongue and the floor of the mouth”; and it gives rise to a number of other compound nouns such as “lingual bone,” the horseshoe-shaped bone in the neck (*OED*).

The postlingual in this view is concerned with anatomical, physical, and spatial permutations, but it also specifically isolates language phenomena that occur after the adult development and supposed mastery of additional languages. The verbal arts and all literature are postlingual in this regard. Actually, postlingualism has been with us for a while, residing just on the other side of the disciplinary, political, methodological, and translational trappings of extensively debated critical paradigms such as translingualism, multilingualism, plurilingualism, and bilingualism. We can hear the desire for postlingualism in a comment by Professeur Lacombe, Francois Truffaut’s character in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), a world-weary *sorbonnard-normalien* cum alien music language specialist decked out in proto-80s, round, half-tint sunglasses. In an acme of translational-lingual frustration, he blarts, “*Ce bilinguisme m’ennuie!*” The line remains untranslated (“Bilingualism bores me!”) in the subtitles for the presumably unknowledgeable viewer, which must mean that translation and bilingualism were boring and frustrating well before the 1970s. Indeed, modern literary history brims with an excess of postlingual expression. Translation and bilingualism have been giving way to postlingualism at least since 1855, the year when Aḥamd Fāris al-Shidyāq published his landmark Arabic novel *al-Sāq ʿalā al-Sāq* (*Leg Over Leg*). Al-Shidyāq oversaw the publication of the book in Paris from beginning to end. *Sensu stricto*, then, this is a French book written in Arabic. Or it’s an English book (composed while Al-Shidyāq was in England) written in Arabic. Or it’s Arabic written over French and English palimpsests. Or it’s Arabic that’s pacifically invaded by French and English. *Leg Over Leg* may furthermore very well be a text that is born translated, in the sense that it folds within itself a downward spiral of ludic translational excess, inscribed and marked onto the body. But it is also a text that is born *counter*: counterdiscursive, countercolonial, counterorientalist, countermodern in Keith Walker’s coinage, even countercounter, or... counterlingual!

In Book 4, Chapter 11 of *Leg Over Leg*, “A Translation and Some Advice,” protagonist the Fāriyāq and his female alter-ego the Fāriyāqqiyah are in Hertfordshire, close to Cambridge, where Samuel Lee, al-Shidyāq’s real-life collaborator, is rector, and where the fictional Fāriyāq (like the
flesh-and-blood al-Shidyāq) carries out his work concerning the translation of the Bible at the rectory. One morning, the Fāriyāqqiyah comes to the Fāriyāq and reflects on the beauty of the English language. This all takes place twenty-five solid years before Stéphane Mallarmé’s musings sometime around 1879 on the florid lingual genius of English, “la fleur même de l’Anglais” (“the very flower of the Englishman”) (1140).

“How wonderfully this language falls on the ear and the mind, and how light it is on the tongue! Today I learned by heart a few lines of verse without any difficulty, except that I didn’t understand what they mean. Would you be kind enough to explain them to me?” “By all means,” he said [...] So she said

Up up up thou art wanted,
She is weary and tormented,
Do her justice she is hunted
By her husband, she has fainted. (157)

In the original Arabic, these verses appear in English, followed, incredibly, by Arabic lines where the script not only foils, in transliteration, the unattributed English quatrain, by all means semantically deprived in the first place, but disfigures it into a stereotypical Arabic couplet:

أب أب اب طكو أرت وانتد
بي هو رُنَن فين شت هي هنيد (156)

It is difficult to tell which language and which lines are a travesty of what. Is this mockery of Arabic monorhymes? A countercolonial ridicule of English’s limited capacity to produce rhymes when compared to Arabic? Whatever the case may be, the Arabic transliteration singlehandedly reverses the classic observation that we can hear what we see but we cannot see what we hear. Here, are we seeing what we hear or hearing what we see? Ears have no eyelids (Nancy, À l’écoute 34; Listening 14), and we cannot deactivate the sensory-lingual synesthesia triggered by the text. The passage’s postlingualism confounds our senses just as it smudges the neat boundaries separating one language from another.

Postlingualism moves literature beyond translation and untranslatability, beyond the strictures of bilingualism and Truffauldian ennui, beyond translingualism, multilingualism, and plurilingualism. Postlingual texts operate at the liminal thresholds that separate, as in Leg Over Leg, poetic genres within a language from poetic genres in another. They operate erotic and mystical sonic exits from grammar, syntax, semantics, poetics, and prosody. They inhabit the gap between languages. Where one language ends. Where the other begins. Where I end. Where you begin. Where we come together, postlingualism is born, reborn, and reborn again.
Nowhere are the semiotic codes that overlap sound and sense riper for postlingual reinvention than in heightened moments of sacred, intermedial, translational, performative, or lingually restrictive awareness and sensitivity. The essays collected in this cluster develop each of these postlingual manifestations in turn. Contributors engage with literary works that operate at the edges of language, sometimes multiplying expression across what have appeared to be distinct tongues, and sometimes blocking expression in any tongue. We propose ways of conceiving of those works and also of other works that have seemed more comfortably rooted in national languages. Taken together, our methodologies represent a postlingual turn in the theory and practice of literary history.

Michael Allan rightly points out that we are “obviously not beyond language in any strict sense,” and his opening essay to this cluster expands our understanding thus far of the postlingual as a historically situated modern literary phenomenon that follows the adult development, acquisition, and mastery of natural languages. By focusing on a moment of paralinguial expression—sibilant whispers, overheard during prayer-time Qur’anic recitation, as sounded by the patriarchal protagonist of Naguib Mahfouz’s novel, *Bayn al-Qasrayn* (Palace Walk) (1956)—Allan identifies “a critical horizon gesturing beyond the linguistic sense of the prose description.” The postlingualism of the passage animates several critical gestures that embed sacred litany within the secular prose of the world and the novel. The postlingual whisper unravels a complex post/secular intertwinement of embodiment, translation, and religion.

Allan inscribes Mahfouz’s example of Qur’anic postlingualism within the space of the page in the novel, as well as along a critical-social fabric where “the transmutation of scripture” reveals how “language takes place in its situational deployment alongside questions of form, genre, and sites of reception.” Now consider how the experience of a digital page, a printed book, an audiotape, or a performance, across the sensorium of touch, sight, sound, and cognition, activates different seams of language, different modes of reception, and histories of contact among languages. In his essay for this cluster, Jacob Edmond draws on examples in the global history of literature on magnetic tape across work from Allen Ginsberg to Anne Sexton, David Antin to the bards of magnizidat. He shows how sounds, versions, and circulations allow us to think about “a particular voice in a particular sonic environment at a particular place and time.” Accent, atmosphere, and technology together play a role in the production of the work and its expression as literature. Production, Edmond insists, is ongoing, because the sound of the text, the conditions of its reception, and the meaning of its languages change according to playback, ambiance, and audience. Accent, words, intonation, device—each of these elements
generates an experience of language and a seam of language, and those seams do not fit together in predictable ways.

In an extension of Edmond’s focus on media, Yasser Elhariry walks us through the first extant video recording of a performance by the late French poet Christophe Tarkos (1963–2004). Here, postlingualism is pushed to such an extreme that it loops back from a place after lingual mastery to the very time and moment that predate the acquisition of additional languages: the scream. By proclaiming, immediately after his birth-like screaming, that “the text is sonorous,” Tarkos gives substance to a phonic postlingual materiality, dubbed *patmo* (“wordjam” in Elhariry’s translation), and embedded deep within all literary texts. *Patmo* allows Elhariry to sketch a theoretical lingual continuum that cuts across and cycles through prelanguage, language, and postlanguage. His analyses of Tarkos’s recorded audio and video archive, as well as his printed books and poetry collections, reveal a different kind of “lingual bone” — the consonant—a stubborn growth at the origin of all human lingual difference. By screaming, Tarkos gives birth to vowels and nothing more, which allows Elhariry to question “the valorization of the consonant at the expense of the vowel” in the first place. The vowel, he shows by way of concluding, has been given short shrift by an enduring linguistic strain within poststructuralism.

Taking a radically different approach to lingual and linguistic absence and difference, Brigitte Rath, in her essay, turns to the erasure poetics of Brooklyn- and Berlin-based artists Uljana Wolf and Christian Hawkey, who in *sonne from art* (2012) rewrite, by whiting out, a German-language translation of an English-language sonnet sequence pretending to be a translation from a Portuguese-language sonnet sequence (Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Sonnets from the Portuguese*). Rath argues that Wolf and Hawkey’s work instantiates various social, romantic, lingual, and semantic relationships across space, time, and idiom. Those multiples complicate any effort to determine, permanently or singularly, where, when, and what language the literary work is “from.”

Rebecca Walkowitz’s essay furrows deeper into the exhaustion of English in narratives that block or restrict the meaning of words. Those narratives reduce vocabulary, use words as images, disrupt words with images, gesture to words without providing them, and provide inexact or approximate words. We are seeing a conceptual shift from objects that fit, however heterogeneously, within a single language container to objects that span varied lingual and paralingual containers. Looking at Junot Díaz’s strategic use of italics to retract distinctions between foreign and domestic words, at Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s postlingual campaign posters mixing the typographies of Spanish and English, among other
examples, Walkowitz considers the “prospect of valuing languages without counting them.” Walkowitz suggests that English-language writers, instead of expanding the anglophone, are trying to make it less than one.

When we began dialoguing about postlingualism, we wondered what anglophone, arabophone, francophone, germanophone, and lusophone have meant over the past forty years. We used lowercase letters to emphasize uses and operations of language, as these terms do not correspond to the proper-noun world of nations and territories. But are they literary formations, and thus a function of writers? Are they disciplinary classifications, and thus a function of readers? Are they political or ethnic categories? A way of speaking (-phone) or writing (-graph), or both? The contributors to this cluster reflect on these questions by turning to objects in numerous languages and versions of languages, including Arabic, English, French, German, Italian, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish. Within this diversity, we share the sense that extant literary histories of bi-, multi-, pluri-, and translational have operated within static monolingual paradigms, however expansive, and we propose instead models of literary history that are postmonolingual, postlingual, and intralingual. The essays draw on translation studies, media studies, sound studies, the history of the book, philology, and theories of sacred scripture to explore new visions for radical lingual, phonic, and graphic exits from the strictures of single languages. Through close and comparative readings of the histories and multimodal circulation of networks of literary objects—the translation of a translation of a translation of a poem; a twenty-first century novel incased in eleventh-century spelling; the playback of a recorded song; the narrative representation of Qur’anic recitation; the performance of poems without words or after words, after letters or beyond phonemes—the essays limn what postanglophone, postarabophone, postfrancophone, postgermanophone, or postlusophone literature could come to be. Challenging the paradigms of the -phone and the -graph, these essays highlight the exhaustion point of individual languages, and estimate what lies at and beyond the fray.

Dartmouth College (elhariry) & Rutgers University (Walkowitz)

Works Cited
Al-Shidyāq, Ahmad Fāris. Leg Over Leg or The Turtle in the Tree concerning the Fāriqyāq, What Manner of Creature Might He Be, by Fāris al-Shidyāq, Volume 4. Translated by Humphrey Davies, NYU P, 2014.


