The banyan tree: a story of language gain

JOANNA RADWANSKA-WILLIAMS

A personal account of 'additive multilingualism' that involves Polish, Russian, English, French and Chinese

ACCOUNTS of international migration and second language acquisition have sometimes emphasized the dimension of loss and disorientation, of the attrition of one's native language and culture. Sociolinguistically, the opposite of language loss is language maintenance. And yet 'maintenance' is not quite adequate to describe my own experience, which might rather be described as 'language gain', or as additive multilingualism. Moreover, it can be argued that the dimensions of loss and gain play out primarily on the individual, psychological plane, rather than as simply instances of sociolinguistic categories. In this paper, I adopt the autobiographical approach. Through a series of personal vignettes I first resist the sociolinguistic categorization, but then nevertheless try to draw inferences which might help to characterize the phenomenon of *additive multilingualism*.

The title of this essay could be 'My Life in Three Languages', but it is difficult to give exactly equal weight to all three – Polish, Russian and English. It is entirely possible that their relative weighting here does reflect their proportion in my linguistic makeup. Other languages also enter that makeup in smaller proportion, so three would not be an accurate number anyway. But three is many, since I wish to claim that they are all, to some extent, native.

Perhaps 'to some extent native' is an oxymoron. Within the Chomskyan paradigm in linguistics, the 'native' of 'native speaker' seems to be a plus/minus parameter. But immediately, Polish and Russian come to my aid and cast doubt on the accuracy of the expression 'native'. In Polish, there is no such expression, and 'native language' is *jezyk ojczysty*, which can be rendered loosely as 'father tongue' (rather than 'mother tongue') – the ancestral language, the language of one's fathers, the language of the fatherland (Polish also prefers the expression *ojczyzna* to 'motherland'). In Russian, the equivalent of 'native speaker' is *nositel' jazyka*, which can be rendered as 'the carrier of language', with the noticeably transparent cognitive metaphor *the mind is a container*. Therefore, to come back to my critique of Chomsky, 'native' does not equal 'innate', and the many events of one's life after birth concatenate to influence language acquisition, resulting in one language, or two, or three, or more.

Language acquisition is not a zero-sum game. Some accounts of the second-language acquisition of English have emphasized the language attrition of the mother tongue as the other side of the coin of acquisition. But this need not necessarily be the case. Admittedly, additive bilingualism, or additive multilingualism, requires a sort of active and conscious involvement on the learner's part. And yet, I have seen this sort of process not only in myself but in others, and the question is worth asking: What is gained in the process of acquiring, and maintaining, more than one language? What is the impact on one's life history and one's psychology?

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I have purposely phrased this question more broadly than 'one's sense of identity'. Psychology, the psyche, involves more than identity; invoking 'identity' immediately attempts to pin an individual down, and in particular, down to a group membership. Do you belong to the Polish group, the Russian group, or the English group? Within the English group, do you belong to the British group, the American group, or another English-speaking group? In which group do you feel most comfortable? In which group do you feel 'at home'? Perhaps, some allowance is made for overlapping group memberships, and yet each membership, again, seems to be a plus/minus parameter. Moreover, there is often an attempt to pin the response down to a ranking. In which group do you feel 'most' at home? Which is second?... Third?... The universe of discourse is narrowed and quantified. Let me therefore try to escape quantification, and focus on the messy and poetic details of my own life.

Origin

> Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred,
> And of ourselves and of our origins,
> In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds.
>
> — Wallace Stevens,
> *The Idea of Order at Key West*

1 The first steps: June 1962

It is a warm summer day, and the long room is filled with light. On the shelves of that room, I would later learn, are treasures: shells from the far Adriatic, an ornamental red fox, and a small bronze statuette which my grandmother would call Tom Thumb, the hero of bedtime stories she would tell... But I have not advanced that far yet in my exploration. I am one year old, and my grandmother is teaching me how to walk. She is seated on the floor in the other end of the room, her arms stretched out towards me in a welcoming gesture. Somehow, I comprehend what I am supposed to do. I am supposed to traverse the wooden ocean of the floor. Magically, without holding on to anything, across the air and the sunlight, I totter towards my destination. Victory!... I feel my grandmother's warm embrace. What did I just do? How did I do it? I do not know. And yet I know that I have done something very great. Perhaps never again would I feel such a pure sense of accomplishment.

2 Santa Claus: December 1965

The presents are piled, invitingly and mysteriously, underneath my grandparents' large writing desks. My grandparents are both professors, and the entire apartment smells of books and scholarship. Their desks stand back to back, and underneath them there is a deep tunnel, where I like to play, on the floor between where my grandmother and grandfather sit. But now the tunnel is impenetrable, full of Christmas presents. I wonder whether Santa Claus will bring some more. From the kitchen, tantalizing smells waft and overwhelm the usual scholarly smell. My Russian great-grandmother Alexandra is stewing cranberry sauce and baking cabbage casserole.

My grandmother takes me aside. Over three years have passed since that first walking lesson. The child is now fluent in her native language, a miracle of development which my grandmother, as professor of psychology, well appreciates. 'There is something I need to tell you, Joanna,' she says. This is going to be an adult conversation. 'Santa Claus will not come, because he does not exist. It is just a tradition to tell the story of Santa Claus at Christmas. The presents are not from Santa Claus, but from us to you and to other members of the family.' I feel a cool wave of shock at this dose of rationalism. 'I suspected so, grandmother,' I say reproachfully, 'but why did you have to tell me?' I've been robbed of a fairytale, I who love fairytales, by the same person who tells me bedtime stories, which are also make-believe! Before I have time to digest the metaphysical implications with my poor developing brain, my grandmother hands me a white beard made of cotton wool. 'I know you like make-believe,' she says slyly. 'You can be Santa Claus. You are a big girl now, and you know your letters. You can read out the names written on the presents, and give each person his present. And I know you will love this sort of treasure hunt in the tunnel.'

My face brightens. I am Santa Claus! What an honor! And so it would be in my family; to this day I am Santa Claus. The lesson the little Santa Claus learned at age 4 and 5 was how to read. Before I went to school, I was already literate in Polish. And by age 8 I was also literate in Russian – a skill I learned on my grandmother's knee, through her patient instruction. The first thing I read in Russian was Pushkin's magnificent rendition of the fairytale we know

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as 'Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs' – 'The Tale of the Dead Princess and the Seven Heroes.'

New beginning

Il y avait un petit navire,
Qui n'avait jamais navigue...
Il entreprit un grand voyage...

— A French song

3 ESL: September 1970

In my primary school in Putney in London there are few immigrant children, unlike in my secondary school two years later. But I am lucky: there is another girl in my class, Haesun from Korea. The school organizes a small ESL class for us: Haesun and her elder brother, and myself. Our teacher, Miss Helen Koumulides, is herself multilingual – something I do not know at the time. She speaks Greek, German, French and Russian. In our school, she teaches French and music. Now, she is given the task of teaching us English. We are pulled from the regular English class for one term. She tries to have a basic conversation with us. 'This is a window. I am opening a window. What am I doing?' I stare at her in embarrassment. I know what I'm supposed to say, but the words do not want to pass my lips. The problem is that the sentence 'You are opening a window' contains the word *you*. In Polish, which has a different polite form of address, it is impolite to say 'you' to a teacher. 'Open window', I say. Fortunately, she reframes the task. 'Now, ask me to close the window.' 'Please close the window' passes my lips. I am happy that I have managed to say something correctly, but the unanswered question remains in my mind: What is the polite way to speak to a teacher in English?

4 African Elephant: January 1971

Having made progress in ESL, I am allowed to rejoin the regular English class with my classmates in Mr. Chapman's Form 3C. The assignment is to write a story about an elephant. A story does not come to my mind, but I know that the main purpose is just to practice my English. 'There are two kinds of elephants,' I write, 'African elephants and Indian elephants. African elephants have big ears. Indian elephants have small ears.' And two more paragraphs about African and Indian elephants, one each. Beyond my expectation, my teacher is very pleased. He takes me to the office of the headmistress, Mrs. Stradford, and has me proudly read my little essay. Mrs. Stradford finds a greeting card in the drawer of her desk and gives it to me as an award, 'for great progress in English.' On the card there are two squirrels, which I think rather illogical since my story is about elephants, but I am delighted with it nonetheless. Somehow, in the space of several months, at least in the written medium, I have managed to catch up with my age bracket in language skills. I am literate in English. The first books I start to devour are C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*.

Trans-Atlantic

Prekrasna ty, nebes prostor, jantarnye polya,
Velichye lilyovyx gor, surovaya zemlya...
Amerika, Amerika, Gospod tebya khrani!

— The Russian translation of *America, America!*

5 Quondam Garboil: September 1977

I am sitting on the grass at Freshman Orientation Camp at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. My mother has been recruited by the university to help develop a program in Reproductive Endocrinology. Suddenly, I have catapulted from the fifth form of my secondary comprehensive school in London to the first year of college in the United States. During Orientation, the novelist Doris Betts represents the English Department, and I ask for her advice. 'I am Polish, and I'm only sixteen years old. I have placed out of Freshman Composition. Should I take some more courses in English?' She suggests creative writing. Another girl comes up to me and introduces herself, 'My father is Polish. I am seventeen.' We feel an instant kinship.

Later, a group of friends forms, and I run an informal creative writing club, Quondam Garboil. We scour dictionaries for words that rhyme, and take courses on Samuel Beckett and Ezra Pound. One evening, we are drinking champagne and studying William Blake for the final exam in Romantic Poets. Alas, we discover that champagne is not a memory aid. The next morning, the mind is a tabula rasa. I still wonder how I managed to pass that exam. Perhaps it was on the strength of the passages from Wordsworth's 'The Prelude' that I had memorized for my British 'O' Level in English Literature.

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6 The Berlin Wall: June 1987

I am attending the World Congress of Linguists together with my Ph.D. adviser from the University of North Carolina, Maria Tsiapera. We are in East Germany, and nobody has yet dreamed of the fall of the Berlin Wall. There are two thousand linguists in Berlin, and perhaps as many policemen. Paradoxically, I feel safe with the heavy security presence. I do not feel nervous or out of place in Eastern Europe. I have just spent a year in Poland, doing research for my doctoral dissertation, and living with my grandparents in the apartment where I had spent my early childhood. Now, Dr. Tsiapera and her daughter Nike are travelling with me to Poland. It is their first time in Eastern Europe. Here, I am the host. At first, the plan is to meet up with my mother in West Berlin and go to Poland together. But something has gone wrong – as we learn later, my mother's travel agent has booked a nonexistent hotel. A remarkably friendly telephone operator helps me to call every hotel in West Berlin: 'Eine Fräulein suche seine Mutter...' To no avail. Afraid of forfeiting our East German visas by going into West Berlin, I make a decision. We will go straight to Poland by train. I notify my grandparents in Warsaw that I have been unable to contact my mother. The train goes through desolate borderlands, then reaches more familiar territory, the Polish countryside with its small family farms and patches of woodland. When we get to Warsaw, magically, my mother is waiting to meet us at the station. She, too, had gone straight on to Poland, frustrated by the partitioned Berlin. The homing instinct has brought us home.

Three years later, at Moscow University, somebody gives me a piece of the Berlin wall as a gift. It looks quite ordinary – a chip of concrete. My donor assures me that he procured this piece himself with a small pickaxe; in fact, he is only giving me a small chip from the bigger piece, which he will not part with. I feel honored. Carefully, we write on the piece in Cyrillic letters, 'Berlinskaya stena'. Now the small shard of concrete is no longer ordinary. It rests in the palm of my hand, a piece of history. A treasure.

Plosion

Give me support, and I shall move the Earth
Around its blazing pole, in starred penumbras
Beneath slumberous breath...
— Joanna Radwanska,
Plosion, from all the ways, 1978

7 Breakdown: December 1993

It is an evening lit by the moon and soft city lights. We are walking on the beach along the shore of Lake Michigan, in Evanston near Northwestern University. My companion is tall, muscular, blue-eyed, and looks with great concern into my eyes. 'Joanna, will you marry me?' he asks. My answer is, 'No'. The waves lap gently at our feet. The irony is, we are already married. In the wedding, we both dressed in white, and the attendants in Carolina blue, under the scorching North Carolina sky. My husband knows all my friends from college; he is part of my crowd. But now, something is crumbling. The mosaic of my past is somehow being disassembled. During our marriage, I have spent a year in Poland and a summer in Russia; it is not that per se he objects to. I would want our children to speak Polish; again, this is not specifically the objection. Rather, I am accused of not wanting to be ordinary, not wanting to commit to settle down without bouts of international travel; there's something un-American about me, despite my citizenship. On my part, I do not object to being American. I love America. But I cannot erase other parts of me. And I do not feel a sense of compositionality; I am not composed of parts. I am whole. My husband's subtle notes of disapproval make me quiver. So, we will go to his lawyer and sign the papers, and then go out to dinner together to commiserate. Divorced.

8 China: July 1998

The stars are bright on Hainan Island, unlike in Nanjing, where a solitary Venus sometimes peeks out from behind the smog. I am here on vacation with my postgraduate student from Nanjing University and her family. My student is an experienced teacher of English, but she is studying for her master's degree to raise her qualifications. When she gets her degree, she hopes to transfer to the university in Hainan, where her husband has a private business. He has opened a small factory for wood products such as brooms and cutting boards. They have one daughter, a teenager who commutes between her mother in Jiangsu and her father in Hainan. This is a family in the new China, where I have lived and worked for three years.

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They are taking advantage of the new economic opportunities, and they want the best possible life for their only child.

Right now, we are in a swimming pool and I am teaching their daughter to swim. The pool is huge and warm, situated over a mineral spring. It is part of a luxury hotel on this tropical island which is attracting quite a lot of tourism. It is night, and the stars are heavenly. My swimming pupil is diligent and actually succeeds in conquering a few yards on her own. I am her foreign auntie, and the moment is endearing. There have been many such moments, which are more significant in the aggregate than in their singularity. Obliquely, it is for this that I divorced. I am free to travel and to know the world: to know fragmentarily, imperfectly, and yet to know. I can say that I know China. I did not anticipate this. But the feeling is real.

The return

> We shall not cease from exploration
> And the end of all our exploring
> Will be to arrive where we started
> And know the place for the first time.
>
> — T.S. Eliot, *Little Gidding*

9 Belarus: June 2000

This is a homecoming to a point in history before my birth. My mother and I have come to Arepichi, my great-grandfather's native village in Belarus. Before the First World War, this place was a part of Imperial Russia; before the Second World War, a part of Poland, and after the Second World War, a part of the Byelorussian Republic of the Soviet Union. Here my great-grandparents had a homestead with a beautiful orchard, fish ponds, and beehives; here my grandmother spent the formative years of her youth. Now, in the post-Soviet era, my great-grandfather is remembered as a local hero. In the 1940s, in this area devastated by war, he was the founder and headmaster of the local school, which offered both primary and secondary education and opened the gates to educational opportunity. During his headship, 100% of the graduates went on to university. Touchingly, he is now being remembered, 47 years after his death. A museum is being opened in his honor, and the main street of the village is to bear his name: Timofey Los Street.

During the opening ceremony, I stand on the podium in the village square. The school graduates who remember my great-grandfather are now all grey-haired men, and approach me each with a red rose. I gather an armful of roses. I am called upon to give a speech in Russian. Here is my small triumph: I manage fine. My great-grandfather, who studied in St. Petersburg University under the great linguist Baudouin de Courtenay, would approve. If my Ph.D. dissertation, a study of the linguistic theory of Baudouin's student Mikolaj Kruszewski, paid a debt to history, now another debt is being paid. I have not only succeeded in maintaining my Polish language and heritage, but I have somehow managed to maintain and reclaim all of my East European heritage, in its linguistic and cultural complexity. Dislocated in time and space, I have an ancestral home.

10 St. Benedict's, Shatin: September, 2000

I call it 'Benedict rock'. Our organist, Nora, brings her one-year old son Benny to rehearsal. Benny is inseparable from his mother: he will not be distracted, nor taken so much as a foot away from the organ. When he was a younger baby, the ladies in the English Community Choir used to play with him, and he could be distracted, but now any such attempt produces a loud intonement of that universal sound: 'Mama!' So while his mother plays the melody on the organ, he plays the base. Benedict rock. The little Benedict was named after St. Benedict, the patron of our church. This is the third church choir I have belonged to in my wanderings. The first was St. Thomas Moore, in Chapel Hill, where I was baptized. The second was St. James in East Setauket, Long Island, outside of New York City. And now, St. Benedict's in Shatin, one of the 'new towns' of sprawling Hong Kong.

The church brings me closer to the community. I am not only part of the university. I have a spiritual family. I have a Chinese goddaughter, who like me was baptized as an adult. I have many Filipino sisters in the choir, who work in Hong Kong as domestic helpers. One of them has become my own domestic helper – a surprise benefit of the Hong Kong lifestyle. However, her friends are my friends, and there is no social barrier. My future is not secure, in the sense that I do not know where I will spend the rest of my life. But I do know this: wherever I go, I am part of the human family. I have nothing to fear. Wherever I go, I will find love,

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and a sense of belonging. I know, because this has always happened to me in the past. Spiritually, if not materially, the future is predictable.

Monochrome/polychrome

To come back to the balance sheet, then, of my language acquisition: What has been lost, and what has been gained? Laying aside my 'other' languages, like French and Mandarin Chinese, which I do not claim to speak fluently, let me examine my three 'native' languages.

Polish

When I was a child, my native language was unambiguously Polish, and my sense of identity was unambiguously Polish. True, Russian was also spoken in my family, but it was not 'mine' in the same sense as Polish was; I thought of it as my great-grandmother's language, which others in the family had also learned how to speak, with varying degrees of fluency.

When I moved to London at age nine, I was very fortunate in that I was already completely literate in Polish and Russian. There began, on my family's part, a concerted effort to promote the maintenance of my native language. I enrolled in the Polish Saturday school at the Polish Embassy, where we would spend all day, from nine to five, studying all the academic subjects the children in Poland had covered in the space of that week. There were no frills – no P.E., no music, no art – only Polish, Russian, history, geography, mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology.... The curriculum was more advanced than in the British school at the same age level. During the rest of the week, I would go to the regular British schools, first primary, then a secondary comprehensive. To gain qualifications which, combined with my Polish Embassy school credentials, would count as the equivalent of a Polish secondary education, I took both the 'O' Levels and 'A' Levels in Polish and Russian. I also got the highest marks in my school in the 'O' Levels in English Language and English Literature. And yet, at this point, I did not think of myself as 'English', nor as British, nor of English as my native language. Polish still was, unambiguously, my native language. Our efforts at maintenance had succeeded. Nothing, it seems, had been lost.

English

My relationship with the English language had inauspicious beginnings. Ever since my attendance at a private kindergarten at Warsaw University, run by the wife of a French professor, my love had been French: the language of Fryderyk Chopin, Madame Sklodowska-Curie... I did not wish to move to England with my parents; I had no choice. And yet, there came a point when the English language grabbed me, through its great literature, and has not let me go. I remember that point rather precisely. It was in third form in secondary school, and we were studying Macbeth. In fact, we were studying Macbeth for the entire term, as our first contact with Shakespeare in the original! I got to know the play quite well, since we were paying so much attention to it, and I memorized all the famous passages. Then, the teacher set a term-paper: to write a character study of Lady Macbeth.

I was completely clueless how to go about this writing assignment. This took me by surprise, because I did know the play well. Then I had a heuristic idea. I went through the dictionary and copied out all the words which could pertain to character. I patiently considered them as labels which could or could not fit my heroine. 'Malicious,' 'malevolent.' Yes, yes. 'Malcontent.' Probably not. And so on. I do not remember how I managed to put this together into an essay, nor what mark I got. But there were two benefits, like breakthroughs in my brain. First, I came to love Shakespeare, and to crave reading literature in English. And second, some kind of connection was opened in my mental lexicon. I learned the technique of using language to write about literature, and to express my ideas precisely, finding *le mot juste*.

Given my strong start in Polish, it is ironic that I now feel most at home in English. English is my native language; I feel satisfied with nothing less than that statement. It is my language of optimal expression. The shift towards English as my preferred language was, perhaps, complete by the end of college, i.e., by age twenty. I majored in English to put the insecurity of being 'not native' to rest. And yet, emphatically, this was the gain of English, not the loss of Polish. Later, I would spend several years teaching both Polish and Russian at American universities. My Polish is equivalent to that of an educated native speaker. But my

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English is better, more spontaneous, more precise. My brain has been Englished.

Concomitantly with the growth of the English language in my brain, there have been two shifts of identity. The first was a shift from 'Polish living abroad' to 'Polish-American.' I feel comfortable with the label 'American', although I usually hasten to add that I am also Polish. In superficial social introductions, 'American' is the default identity; and 'Chicago' is the default answer to the question 'Where are you from?' The next step is to add: 'but I'm originally from Warsaw, Poland.' However, the complete answer is all the places I have lived: Warsaw, London, North Carolina, Long Island, Chicago, Nanjing, Hong Kong.

My preferred answer to the question 'Where are you from?' is to name the place where I am currently living. 'From Nanjing' raised eyebrows in China. 'From Hong Kong' goes over more naturally. This is the second, most recent, identity shift: I am from many places, irreducibly. My home is the planet. I have not lost my original home(s). But I keep gaining new ones. In this context, the native/non-native label in reference to the languages I speak has lost in importance. Language is a medium of self-expression,

'This identity is international. It is English-speaking. And it is multilingual.'

and I do not accept predetermined limits to self-expression. The brain may place a limit, because language acquisition is not easy. And yet any language I speak, whether natively or non-natively, is my own to some degree, and becomes incorporated into my sense of identity. This identity is international. It is English-speaking. And it is multilingual.

Russian

The shift from native Polish to native English, additive though it may be, would be a spectrum in monochrome were it not for the additional factor of Russian. My Russian is not quite as good as my Polish; and yet I feel that it is another native language. My identity is not so much 'Russian', despite the blood ties, as 'Russian-speaking'. One of the more recent Russian episodes in my life may serve as illustration. When I was teaching at Nanjing University, I became close friends with my colleague, the visiting professor of Russian, who was from Tajikistan. She had studied comparative literature at Moscow University, and remembered those years as the best of her life. One day, we were talking about Russia, and she said something which required local knowledge of Moscow, and which I did not understand. Seeing my puzzled face, she exclaimed: 'I keep forgetting you are not Russian!' Actually, in her eyes, I was more Russian than she was, since I was part-Russian, while she was Tajik. That is the paradox of being a Russian speaker – In the former Soviet Union, Russian was a multiethnic language. One does not have to be Russian to have an identity as a speaker of Russian. I am, most definitely, a speaker of Russian.

The monochrome of language acquisition is transformed into polychrome. Russian is another language which has captured me through its literature. Somehow, my spirit would be poorer if I could not read Pushkin in the original, just as it would be poorer if I could not read Shakespeare in the original. In a subtle way, the world feels different through the prism of each different language. The melody of the language, as exploited in poetic rhyme and meter, is different. The grammatical characteristics, too, offer differences in means of expression. Let me offer just one example. The Russian language distinguishes both a long form and a short form of adjectives; the latter form can be used predicatively. The short form is usually stressed on the last syllable, and, if the adjective is masculine, the last sound of the word is the consonant of the stem. Pushkin uses this form masterfully in his rhyme schemes, as in the following excerpt from *Eugene Onegin* (Book 1, verse 4; my free translation into English):

[...] Vot moy Onegin na svobode;
Ostrizhen po posledney mode;
Kak dandy londonskiy odet —
I nakonets uvidel svet.
[...] Chego zh vam bol'she? Svet reshil,
Chto on umyon i ochen' mil.

Behold, Onegin is set free;
How fashionable his coiffures be;
Dressed up for high society
He looks quite the dandy.
This is enough for everyone's deciding
He is so clever and so charming.

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The short-form adjectives in the Russian original are *odet* 'dressed', which rhymes with *svet* 'world, society' (cf. French *le monde*), *umyon* 'clever', and *mil* 'kind, charming', which rhymes with *reshil* 'decided'. The short forms are eye-catching (and ear-catching); correspondingly, the more frequent long forms would be *odetyi*, *umnyi*, *milyi*. The rhyme reinforces the meaning: he is dressed up for high society, and consequently, high society's verdict is that he is charming. Appearances count. The rhyme, just like Onegin, is dressed for the occasion. The English rhyme cannot adequately render this interplay of sound and meaning. In general, the morphological resources of Russian, especially in the great number of inflectional endings, make for a wonderfully rich medium for rhyme. Not having a rich inflectional system, English does not have this flexibility; after all, how many times can you rhyme *-ing* and *be* before the effect is worn? One could say that English has a great poetry in spite of itself, while Russian has a great poetry because of itself.

If I knew only English, I would only have one

> 'English mediates my international identity. Polish mediates my Polish identity. And Russian is simply a channel that I like to watch.'

feel and vision of the world, mediated through language: a vision in monochrome. But I have three languages (at least three). My vision of the world is in polychrome. For me, the difference between monolingualism and multilingualism is like switching from a black-and-white TV to a color TV. Or alternatively, the experience is like being able to flip the channels on the TV screen, to view different programs. Now the world on the Polish channel. Now on the English. And now on the Russian.

The analogy of code-switching to switching channels on the TV screen is perhaps appropriate. English, world-wide, is spreading through the media. Increasingly, we are all switching to the English channel. English, for me, has been the language of international integration: I have shifted, over the course of my life, from a homogeneously Polish identity to an identity which is non-homogeneous, and predominantly international. English mediates my international identity. Polish mediates my Polish identity. And Russian is simply a channel that I like to watch: I like the program. As long as all of these different channels are available to me, I am happy. I would be far less happy in a monolingual world, like the world of the single-channel black-and-white TV. Once you have tasted multilingualism, there is no going back. Once the language has not been lost, there is only gain.

The banyan tree

I am sometimes asked whether the loss has not been psychological, rather than linguistic. If one's sense of 'nativeness' is no longer firm, does one have a sense of home, of rootedness? Or is one, in fact, homeless and uprooted? I do think such a danger exists, and each individual should deal with it in his or her own terms. In my case, I have changed the metaphor of 'roots'. The original metaphor assumes the image of a tree which has a single trunk and a single set of roots, growing in one place, one spot on the earth. Such is, for example, the European oak tree, a prototypical firmly rooted tree.

However, I imagine that I am like a banyan tree. The banyan tree starts out growing in one place. But each new branch sprouts new roots, which hang down from the branch like tentacles, looking for a new spot of earth to inhabit. If they reach the ground, they take root, becoming another tree trunk, connected to the original one through the branches. Thus, a single tree can grow two, three, or even more trunks. Some old banyan trees can form an entire wood. Similarly, I think of myself as rooted in many places. I do not uproot my old roots; I sprout new roots. And I need not be insecure about this process. I know how to become rooted, over and over. I have learned this through my life experience.

The little toddler who once learned how to walk on a patch of wooden floor, in a flat in Warsaw, has grown up to be a banyan tree. ■

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