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Bertacco, Simona

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A Review of Monolingualism and Linguistic Exhibitionism in Fiction, by Anjali Pandey

Simona Bertacco simona.bertacco@louisville.edu
Università degli Studi di Genova, Italia

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Monolingualism and Linguistic Exhibitionism in Fiction, by Anjali Pandey, is an interesting and engaging study, and marks an important contribution to the newly established corpus of books around multilingual textualities in world literature. It is also an audacious example of interdisciplinary scholarship: the author is firmly grounded in sociolinguistics, but explores and aptly uses the work produced in postcolonial and, to a certain extent, translation studies in order to build her argument on the forms of multilingualism in contemporary Anglophone fiction. The sub-field the author identifies for her own work is literary-sociolinguistics in order to “examine and analyze how multilingualism is in fact manifested in literature of the 21st century.” (p. 2) Literary multilingualism is explained via a Bourdieusian examination of the Realpolitik of languages in today’s publishing industry, dealt with in the first two chapters, through which the author identifies a generalized “cosmetic use of languages”, or “multilingualism-lite” (p. 7) as a recurring feature in prize-winning Anglophone fiction. What Pandey laments in her —mostly sociolinguistic— survey of the literature on the topic is the lack of a theoretical framework with which to read a wide array of texts that deploy multiple languages as part of their style, and this is the lacuna the book aims at filling. As for the corpus of texts taken into account, this is formed by four novels by authors from the Indian subcontinent who either won or were shortlisted for prestigious literary prizes in the years between 2003 and 2014: *The White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga (winner of the Man Booker Prize in 2008); *Brick Lane* by Monica Ali (selected among the “Best Young British Novelists” by the magazine *Granta* and shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2003); *Unaccustomed Earth* by Jhumpa Lahiri (winner of the Pulitzer Prize for the short story collection *The Interpreter of Maladies* in 1999 and of the Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award in 2000); and *The Enchantress of Florence* by Salman Rushdie (winner of the Booker Prize for the novel *Midnight’s Children* in 1981, of the Booker of Bookers Prize in 1993, and of the

Best of the Booker Prize in 2008). The analysis of these four writers and their novels provides the basis for the argument put forth in this book: “literary creations of the 21st century demonstrate a clear trending towards shallow multilingualism and re-Englishing” (p. 7) in the service of a predominant normative monolingualism in Anglophone fiction.

There is a lot to praise in Pandey’s book. The most valuable tool for readers of multilingual texts and the one that promises to be highly influential in the linguistic and literary fields is the spectrum-based model of analysis the author presents in chapter 3, which is the most engaging and lively chapter in the whole book and the one in which the originality of Pandey’s project shines in all its light as well as her mastery in cataloguing with extreme precision a vast array of linguistic behaviors—in both oral and written production. Pandey provides readers with a scalar, or “continuum-based” (p. 104) theoretical framework that goes from ‘abrogation’ (or non-translational) strategies to ‘appropriation’ (i.e. fully translational) strategies, to ‘Englishing’ (or multilingualism-lite) techniques. Through her expository model, Pandey adds an important page to the study of postcolonial literary language which has been traditionally studied through the paired concepts of ‘abrogation’ and ‘appropriation,’ and gives readers and scholars a sophisticated terminology (if compared to pretty basic descriptors such as ‘broken english’, ‘weird english’, ‘village english’, etc.) to talk about the artistry of authors who engage simultaneously with techniques of both abrogation and appropriation within the same text “to accomplish different literary outcomes”. (p. 104)

The linguistic analysis of the works taken into consideration is meticulous and informative, and it well exemplifies the blending of the macro- and micro-linguistic approach the author suggests as an essential tool to approach multilingual textualities. Special mention deserves Pandey’s excellent treatment of code-switching and code-mixing in literary texts. Distinguishing between the two forms when dealing with oral speech could be seen as hairsplitting, but when dealing with written texts, the issue becomes far more serious, as it “signals an ideologically distinctive engagement with multilingualism.” (p. 95) In literary uses of code-mixing, in fact, English becomes subverted to the linguistic structure of the other language which, in turn, changes its morphological and syntactic structure. Simply put, this is a godsend for all the literary scholars working on multilingual poetics, as it provides them with a clear and organized explanatory taxonomy of the many strategies of linguistic exhibitionism in contemporary literature.

Pandey’s assessment that “Textual innovation in the 21st century [thus] emerges in how writers deploy acts of linguistic exhibitionism” (p. 103) lays the foundation for a study that, as it proceeds, seems to illuminate one main concept: that we are all living in a “post-global” age (chapter 1), immersed in a “flat multiculturalism” (chapter 2) that is projected by the media of the cultural industry, and that the formula fiction we read gives us, at best, a “cosmetic” multilingualism that does not question the linguistic and cultural status quo (chapter

3). In other words, despite appearances, everything is not awesome in our world of prize-winning fiction even when it is marketed to look like it is. *Monolingualism and Linguistic Exhibitionism in Fiction* is praiseworthy in its effort to reveal the hidden truth—that, despite appearances, what we encounter is an avoidance of any engagement with real multilingualism in literature—however in its effort to prove its thesis, it does not do justice to the complexity of the subject matter it set out to explore. It is literature after all the author has chosen to focus her study on.

The frequent opposition between ‘real’ and ‘non-real’ in this book presents an unsurmountable problem for the literary scholar. When we read that “The White Tiger uses a real voice, a proletarian voice to critique every possible facet of modern India” (p. 125, emphasis added), or—about the same novel—“the question should not be judgments about whether the novel embeds a real Indianness per se, but rather, whether the novel itself is ‘real’” (p. 128), the promising premises of Pandey’s book start losing ground, and that is because a work of fiction is, by default, fictional, not real, and the novel as a text can only make sense if it is read as fiction, not reality.

To voice my discomfort with the lack of consideration given to the literariness of the texts under exam, I find myself returning to Jakobson and his study of the functions of language. “What makes a verbal message a work of art?” (Jakobson, 1987, p. 350) What differentiates literary discourse from non-literary discourse? The answer Jakobson provided in 1960 is that a focus on the message is what distinguishes literary language from ordinary language: “The Set (Einstellung) toward the message as such, focus on the message for its own sake, is the poetic function of language” (p. 356). Today we are certainly beyond the literary structuralism that Jakobson’s writings brought to literary studies, especially when considering postcolonial literary texts that are more often than not approached for the themes they bring forth rather than for their style. However, if the language of a body of literature is at the center of a study, we cannot possibly forget the question of literary value, or what is it that makes this verbal message a work of art?

Pandey’s book makes no concession to the major field implied in its subject matter: literature, and that is profoundly troubling. It explores the forms of contemporary literary language as well as the workings of the prize industry—at the center of many important studies that are entirely left out of the literature review—in ways that are either too simplistic (like the claim that linguistic exhibitionism is produced by prize-winning fiction), or simply revealing an intentionally biased reading of previous studies (like the very broad accusation that current literary studies use “the catch-all keyword[ing] of ‘hybridity’ as the new ‘buzz-word’ in relation to any and all uses of sighted multilingualism” (p. 275, emphasis added) without paying any attention to the types of literary analyses provided in those very studies. Given these premises, it is very hard to agree with the author’s final assessment that her “analysis of prize-winning novels demonstrate that there is a new linguistic formula at

work.” (p. 28). The linguistic analysis based on a corpus of four novels published in the span of 11 years does not and cannot give sufficient ground to generalizing statements about the forms —much less the formulas— of 21st century fiction, and even less to clear-cut comparisons between the ‘real’ multilingualism of the previous century —stated rather than analyzed— and the shallow multilingualism of our century. Where does Rushdie’s fiction fit in this comparison: with the previous century or with the current? And if prize-winning fiction makes up the corpus to be analyzed, why not analyze the only novel, i.e. Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, that has been awarded to date the Booker of Bookers as well as the Best of the Booker Prize, instead of a minor novel by the same author?

Despite my reservations, however, I remain convinced that this is an important book, in that it puts forth a usable theory in response to a clear trend present in contemporary fiction, a theory that literary scholars like myself could use to provide more nuanced and precise critical readings. A book such as this one could have been a ground-breaking and very timely intervention in a field that is burgeoning with activity, had it been co-authored with a scholar firmly grounded in literary studies. From where I stand, I see literary texts perform two operations at the same time: they mean something for somebody, and they show what it is to mean by way of their form. We cannot paraphrase a literary work and expect to have produced a literary work ourselves. We may have a good summary of its plot, but the meaning, or meanings, of the text cannot be grasped without scrupulous analysis of the way in which the story is told. In other words, the uniqueness of literature as a category of our knowledge has to do with the way in which language is used as intimately tied to the possibilities for new meaning that are opened by that specific use of language. The books mentioned in this book could provide, I believe, brilliant examples of this. But the analysis stops one step too short.

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Notes

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Author notes

Ph.D. in English, Università degli Studi di Genova, Italy,
Associate Professor of Postcolonial Studies, Department of
Comparative Humanities, University of Louisville
Mailing address: Louisville, KY 40292, USA, E-mail:
simona.bertacco@louisville.edu