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Strange and Wondrous Words

The exercises described below are based on those presented in a workshop at the NAWE 2010 conference. When we work in a language other than our own, we meet many creative possibilities. It makes us look at language differently. We become engaged with the sounds and the textures of word patterns of other languages and even if we translate back into our own tongue, what we thereby produce may be fresher and more effective than simply using the language we tend to overuse every day.

All of the exercises except one described below can be used regardless of what level you are in a foreign language. The one exception may still be used even if you only have a very small knowledge of that language.

Bi-lingual and monolingual dictionaries are needed for the exercises, but they don't have to be huge ones. Other written and recorded materials, in languages you would like to work with, are also useful. So, before you begin, it's an idea to assemble any such materials you have to hand. Use a variety of languages if possible. And if you have absolutely nothing ... try the Internet.

Paper and pen or pencil is assumed for each exercise.

Acrostics

For this you will need a monolingual dictionary. Think of a theme and write a word or phrase to do with that theme down the side of the paper. For example, you might write O T H E R L A N G U A G E S. Now look up words beginning with O, then T, then H etc. If you don't speak the language at all, don't worry about the words making sense. Choose them for their sound, if you know what it is, or their shape on the paper. If you find several words, play with them and rearrange them until they sound and / or look their best.

Now, turn your acrostic poem into English. If you don't know the language at all, let the sound or the appearance of the word suggest something. Even if you do understand the language, maybe the sounds and shapes of the words are more important than the meaning. Try to replicate those sounds and shapes in English. This is a simple way of engaging with another language, even if you know very little or none at all.

Haiku

For this exercise you need a bilingual dictionary. This usually works best with colour. Think of a colour. Now think, in English, of words to do with that colour. Look those words up in your bilingual dictionary. Write down all the ones you find. Keep going for at least twenty minutes.

When you have a collection of words, arrange them into your haiku. Remember the form is:

The first line has five syllables.

The second line has seven syllables.

The third line has five syllables.

You could also try out other themes, especially in languages that you know better, or other forms of poetry that depend on counting syllables. You could even make up your own rules about numbers.

This exercise works well for languages where you have just a little knowledge, but even if you know a language a little better it can be quite effective. Most participants are surprised at how creative they can be in this form in a language that is not their own.

A further surprise comes when you turn the haiku into English. It may still work. Even if it doesn't, as you adjust it, you may use a fresher choice of language than if you had worked in English from the beginning. Or you might have something that is very rich in English but doesn't fit the haiku form. At this point you may want to keep your words but abandon the form.

Opposite poems

Again for this exercise you need a bilingual dictionary. You may do this exercise even with only a little knowledge of the other language. Think of as many words and their opposites to do with a chosen theme as you can without the dictionary first. For example, your theme might be 'summer', so you would think of 'hot' and its opposite 'cold'. Now think, in English, of words to do with those words. Look up words associated with your chosen word in your bilingual dictionary. Write down all the ones you find. Spend twenty minutes on this.

When you have a good collection, write an opposites poem in your language – e.g. Hello swimming-pool, goodbye ski-slope etc. Don't worry if you don't know the words for "hello" and "goodbye" in your chosen language.

If you have very little knowledge of the language, just use words. If you have a little more language, write in sentences.

Then, translate your writing into English. Certainly, you will have words different from those that you would have chosen if you'd worked in English from the beginning.

Sign and Sound Language

This really does work best if you can do the exercise in the country where your chosen language is spoken. However, if this is not possible, there is plenty of material on the Internet that will allow you to hear the sound of words and see words in natural settings. Some links are suggested at the end of this article. A simple Google on 'free language lessons' also leads to all sorts of delights.

The exercise works whether you have a lot or a little of the other language, though the outcome will be different.

. Anywhere you go, you are surrounded by signs. Walk around with your note book for about twenty minutes and jot down words that you see, whether you understand them or not. If you are in China or Japan, this may be more challenging. However, consider whether you can see the pictures in the symbols or whether the symbols remind you of our letters. You may be able to force them into being words, perhaps taking extra clues from what the symbols seem to represent.

Also, you may be in a country that has a different alphabet but still writes in words where symbols represent sounds rather than meaning. Write them down as best you can. It doesn't matter if you get them wrong and you may even be acquiring a new skill.

Next, sit down somewhere particularly busy – cafés and bus stations are good. Write down all the words you hear in the next twenty minutes.

Now collage your words together in a way that pleases you and that captures some of the atmosphere you have just been enjoying.

The better you know the language, the more you may be tempted to force some sort of narrative into this. It doesn't matter if the words you use don't make sense to you or your reader. You are actually capturing the atmosphere of what you have witnessed here.

However, if you know the language, you might consider going for a full "writing with the senses" exercise, using the words that you see and the words that you hear as just a part of what you see and hear. Consider using a mixture of English and the words you have gathered to create a piece that captures the atmosphere that you have just experienced. The foreign words add a touch of the exotic and a test of your skill might be to make their meaning clear without explaining it. Alternatively, you may like to keep the mystery.

Grammar Games 1

For this you will need a grammar book about your chosen language or the grammar pages within a bilingual dictionary. There is also plenty of material on the Internet about the grammar of other languages.

Play with the sounds that grammar patterns make. It actually doesn't matter whether you understand what the words mean or not. Arguably, this is actually even more fun if you don't understand the words.

Here is an example:

German strong verb tables

These are really fun to read out loud. If you don't know any German, don't worry. You'll mainly get them right if you use English pronunciation for them and even if you get them wrong, they'll still sound good.

Try rearranging the ones that appeal to you.

These are some of my favourites: -

beginnen beginnt begann hat begonnen
bringen bringt brachte hat gebracht
denken denkt dachte hat gedacht
fechten ficht focht hat gefochten
ringen ringt rang hat gerungen
schmelzen schmilzt schmolz ist/hat geschmolzen
schwimmen schwimmt schwamm ist/hat geschwommen
singen singt sang hat gesungen
sinken sinkt sank ist gesunken
trinken trinkt trank hat getrunken

The French poet Jacques Prévert uses something very similar to this in his beautifully simple poem *Déjeuner du Matin*. This poem is almost a grammar lesson about the perfect tense.

If you know the language, or have a translation of the resources you are using, you might consider using the words you find in a way that leads to some meaning.

Consider giving the words you have encountered your own meaning and show that in a piece of writing.

Grammar Games 2

Grammar is the back bone of any language. Perhaps it is even its entire skeleton. Words alone are not enough – they do not say exactly who did what to whom and where and when they did it.

We all need to express the same grammatical ideas but sometimes a particular language will do that in an idiosyncratic way. For example, Welsh does not have a conventional perfect or pluperfect but uses a word that is similar for its word for “after”. So “I have been” becomes “I am after being” and “I had been” becomes “I was after being.” French expresses need by saying “It needs me to....” Rather than “I need to” and Spanish has a similar construction that actually means “It lacks to me (her, him etc)”. English can be idiosyncratic too: we say “I have been learning French for two years.” Most other people say “I learn French since two years”.

The following exercise delights in these idiosyncrasies.

Very good resources for this exercise are the free online language lessons that offer a little grammatical explanation, or you might again use a grammar book or the grammar pages within your bilingual dictionary.

Make some of these expressions the main thrust in a piece of writing in your own language. Here is one I did earlier. This relies on the future tense in German which is made up from the verb “to become”. It also picks up on German word order. I then adjusted it a little to give it some meaning and to make it slightly more palatable to the English reader.

Tomorrow

Tomorrow I become after breakfast to the sea going.

Tomorrow I become with my friends ice cream eating.

Tomorrow I become in the sea swimming.

And the sun becomes shining.

Experiment with mixing the grammatical idiosyncrasies of several languages.

Compare this with merely writing English as if it were, for example, Spanish.

Base a piece of writing on one grammatical point but use the idiosyncrasies from several other languages to give variety.

Translation Exercise 1

For this you need a piece of text in your chosen language, perhaps one of which you have little or no knowledge. Ideally, the text is printed in a large font, is well spaced and in a format that enables you to write on the sheet with ease. There are numerous free language lessons on the Internet. The reading material they provide is excellent for this exercise.

Read your text through once, pencilling in any words you understand. Read it through a second time, out loud if you can, and pencil in a few more meanings. You will probably notice that some of the words begin to sound like English. Read it through silently again and try and find a suitable meaning for some of the words you have not decoded. Don't spend too long on this. Part of the creativity comes from wild guesses. If you're really stuck, just move on. Now, write out the piece. Put the original to one side. Mould and sculpt your new text until it flows.

If you use a language you know reasonably, you will be getting into the realm of creative translation. You might also interweave a commentary between the lines of your new text.

As you complete the exercise, you may amass a collection of words you didn't manage to decode. What do they mean to you now? Give them a meaning and show that meaning as you include them in a new text written in your own language.

Translation Exercise 2

You don't need any particular equipment for this, but this is the one exercise when you do need some knowledge of a foreign language. It doesn't have to be a lot and you may be surprised at how well it goes even with one you've only been learning for a few weeks. It is also fine if you are quite fluent.

Write in your chosen language for twenty minutes. Give yourself a topic but if you can't think of one, write about where you are, or about a happy memory or retell a favourite story. Do not look up words you do not know. If you can't find the right word, skirt round it, even if you have to be ungrammatical. You may also use words from another language you know.

Then, translate what you have written into English. You will notice that you have written much more simply and probably also more effectively than if you had gone straight into English. Less is more. If you used a language in which you are fluent, you may have imported some interesting idioms, euphemisms or phrases that are clichés in the foreign language but are pleasingly fresh in your own.

You might even create a collage by cutting up your foreign language text and your translation. Write a similar text in English and cut that up. Now collage all three together.

Serendipity

For this you need a bilingual dictionary in your chosen language. Spend ten minutes doing this every so often – once a week, once a month or just once in a blue moon. Choose a letter of the alphabet. Read through that section of the dictionary looking for idiomatic and eccentric words. Collect some words and try to get them into your writing.

German is a particularly good language for this. For instance, a helicopter is a 'hopping screwdriver', a nurse is an 'ill-person's sister', an ambulance is a 'rescue car' and a mole is a 'gob throw'. French has some beauties as well: rat poison is 'death to the rats', bungee jumping is 'jump on elastic', a bat is a 'bald mouse' and the word for dustbin sounds like 'smells beautiful (female)'.

Use these new expressions in your writing.

Here is a piece of such writing I've used in a novel. I was in Holland when I wrote it. Dutch has similar "building-block" words to German.

'May I call eye-baller Thomant, who says the blamed watched Old Mother Gossipen struggle up the penty-slope from the provisions centre. He did indeed carry her holdy-all, but only as far as their path followed the same direction aim. He should have gone the extra mile to her living-in.' (*The Prophecy* 229)

You can also collect these words whilst in a country where people speak your chosen language or as you work on some of the other exercises described here. Once you're aware of them, you'll keep on seeing them.

You might consider also looking for proverbs and sayings from other languages. They are clichés in their own language but can sound fresh in another.

For example, when everybody suddenly stops talking, the French say 'It's an angel passing over'. In German, interfering people may be accused of putting their mustard on somebody else's sausage and rather than treading on people's toes, they tread on others' ties. A clever pun exists in Spanish because 'to be superior' to someone is to 'stay on top of them' and many a Spanish husband is very proud of being superior to his wife. But let's hope they didn't also eat the soup before mid-day because that

leads to pregnancy before marriage. The Greeks rather charmingly tell us that one swallow does not mean that *spring* has arrived.

Many of these exercises can also be used, of course, for teaching writing in other languages. Writers have less access to a language that is not their mother tongue so they are forced to be more creative with the small amount they have. They are asked to use effectively what they do know rather than worrying about what they don't know. Texts produced this way can be surprisingly fresh and cliché free, and are often very effective in their simplicity. Hopefully, the exercises described above enable writers to use work in other languages to bring the same freshness to work in their own.

Some useful links

BBC Languages Spanish Shopping. Retrieved 28 January 2011 from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/languages/spanish/talk/shopping/> Short movie clips, giving some atmosphere of the country and some grammatical explanation.

BBC Languages Spanish Mi Vida Loca. Retrieved 28 January 2011 from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/languages/spanish/mividaloca/> Short movie clips, giving some atmosphere of the country and some grammatical explanation.

Word 2 Word. Retrieved 28 January 2011 from <http://www.word2word.com/course.html> Free on-line language lessons.

Word Reference. Retrieved 28 January 2011 from <http://www.wordreference.com/> On-line language dictionaries

Vista Wide German Strong verbs. Retrieved 28 January 2011 from http://www.vistawide.com/german/grammar/strong_and_irregular_german_verbs.htm German strong verb patterns.

References

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Prevert, J. *Déjeuner du Matin*. Retrieved 28 January 2011 from <http://xtream.online.fr/Prevert/desespoirs.html> Jacques Prevert's "perfect tense" poem.