
Comment Dire: A Neurolinguistic Approach to Beckett's Bilingual Writings

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Recent studies from the field of neurolinguistics and psycholinguistics suggest that bilinguals and multilinguals are in many ways fundamentally different from monolinguals, a difference that starts with a different cerebral structure for language. This difference will constitute the point of departure for my paper: If multilingual people are intrinsically different from monolingual people, it should follow that multilingual writers must be intrinsically different from monolingual writers. Samuel Beckett's bilingualism was the governing force of much of his writing and has received ample critical attention. Yet this article will examine a hitherto neglected aspect of this topic: the way Beckett's bilingualism may have inflected his writing in the first place. It will call on some of the research in neuro- and psycholinguistics to illuminate Beckett's constant back and forth between English and French and the importance this may have had for his writing as well as to show how Beckett's bilingual background is organically connected to the writing.

Describing Vladimir Nabokov's multilingual works, George Steiner (1976) wrote, "I have no hesitation in arguing that this polylinguistic matrix is the determining fact of Nabokov's life and art" (p. 7). I think the same may be said about Samuel Beckett. I would suggest that Beckett's bilingualism was the governing force of much of his writing. Through analyses of the manuscript of Beckett's novel *Watt* (1940-1948), of a number of the recently published letters written by the author between 1929 and 1956, and of the final bilingual poem(s), "What is the Word"/ "Comment dire" (Beckett, 2002), written a few days before his death, I will attempt to show that his bilingualism is organically connected to the works.¹ It should be noted that bilingualism is a complex concept without a widely agreed upon definition.² For my purposes in this paper, I follow the definition of François Grosjean (1982), who defines bilingualism as "the regular use of two languages" (p. viii), which is apt to Beckett's specific linguistic situation.

BECKETT'S FRENCH

The story of Beckett's bilingualism is well known. Beckett's relation with the French language started early, beginning in kindergarten at the age of five.³ In preparatory school, he

¹ Beckett was, of course, fluent in more than two languages: he was also articulate in German and Italian, and these languages left traces in his writing as well. However, in this article I will focus on English and French, the two languages that were most important in the actual crafting of his works.

² See Grosjean (1982, p. 2) and Ball (2005, p. 37).

³ My account of Beckett's French studies largely rehearses James Knowlson's detailed description in *Damned to fame: The life of Samuel Beckett* (1996), with a view of serving my discussion. Although the focus of this excellent

studied French with the former French master and semi-native Alfred Le Peton. He continued his studies in boarding school at Portora Royal, where a former classmate remembers that “he was already very good at French” (Knowlson, 1996, p. 23).

So when, at the age of seventeen, Beckett started studying French at Trinity College in 1923, he had already been exposed to the language for twelve years. At Trinity, he chose French, together with Italian, as his honors subject and his French professor, Thomas Rudmose-Brown (himself a poet writing both in English and in French) recalls that Beckett was the best student in his year, both in French and in Italian. According to Rudmose-Brown, Beckett spoke and wrote French “like a Frenchman of the highest education” (Knowlson, 2006, p. 77).

Beckett received his Bachelor of Arts in modern languages in 1927, placing first in his class, and moved to Paris to take up an exchange lectureship at the *École Normale Supérieure*. There he stayed two years, consolidating his spoken French, and then returned to Trinity to become a lecturer in French literature. That this lecturing was not a success is well-known. Less well-known is the fact that this period led to Beckett’s first creative writing in French. In November 1930, he gave a humorous talk in French to the Modern Language Society at Trinity. Entitled “*Le Concentrisme*” the talk discussed the life and times of Jean du Chas, a fictional French poet (later to reappear in Beckett’s *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (1992)). It parodied the “learned literary lecture” (Knowlson, 1996, p. 124) and, according to Ruby Cohn, was written in the spirit of a Normalian hoax, inspired by Beckett’s two “Parisian” years at the *Ecole Normale Supérieure* (Beckett, 1983, p. 169).⁴

Having decided that an academic career was not for him, Beckett roamed around Europe for a few years. He lived in London, spent some time in Germany, and often travelled back to Ireland. In 1937, he finally settled permanently in France, which continued to be his home for the next 52 years.

Shortly after moving to Paris, Beckett started writing articles and poetry in French and, as he wrote to Thomas MacGreevy, he anticipated that “any poems there may happen to be in the future will be in French” (quoted in Knowlson, 1996, p. 270). During these early Paris years, Beckett also translated *Murphy* into French, together with Alfred Péron. Moreover, as Knowlson points out, a letter from the fall of 1938 to George Reavey shows that he had started translating his story “Love and Lethe,” from *More Pricks than Kicks*, into French as well (Knowlson, 1996, p. 676, note 160). At the same time, he continued writing prose in English.

Thus, not only did Beckett start learning French at a much younger age than is usually recognized, but he also wrote his first piece of French fiction while still living in Dublin and started writing poetry in French almost immediately upon his settling permanently in Paris. In Paris, Beckett also met and moved in with Suzanne Deschevaux-Demesnil, creating, as it were, a French home for himself as Suzanne spoke no English and showed little interest in learning the language. In this way, French became the language of his everyday life, and Beckett gained an increasingly intimate relation to the language.

biography is not on Beckett’s linguistic development, Knowlson’s book is nevertheless the most exhaustive source on the topic. See especially pages 43, 49, 57, 63-69, 77, 79, 96, 123-125.

⁴ Ann Beer suggests that it parodies not just any “learned lecture” but Beckett’s own. Beer shows that the talk cites phrases from Beckett’s monograph on Proust almost verbatim and that he recasts them in the comic tone of *Le Concentrisme*. Thus, whereas in Beckett’s *Proust*, “Swann is the cornerstone of the entire structure”, in *Le Concentrisme* Jean du Chas declares in one of his “cahiers” that “Le concierge ... est la pierre angulaire de mon édifice entière.” (Beer, 1994, p. 211).

Reports on Beckett's fluency in French are mixed and sometimes contradictory. Most people who knew Beckett in Paris were impressed with his French, which they reported as being "virtually accentless" (Cronin, 1997, p. 440). However, there are also dissenting accounts. Josette Hayden called Beckett's French "deplorable" (Cronin, 1997, p. 440), and the writer Nathalie Sarraute, who sheltered Beckett and Suzanne for a few days while they were on the run from the Gestapo, recalls: "Beckett had a very, very strong accent in French. Indeed, he did not speak French particularly well or write French well at that time" (Knowlson, 1996, p. 83). It is possible that Beckett had something of an accent in his French, and an accent often makes people judge someone's fluency negatively,⁵ but it seems unlikely that Beckett did not speak French well at this time. In fact, it is probable that Sarraute's personal dislike for Beckett colors her memory somewhat here: The interview in which she describes her recollections of the time Beckett and Suzanne stayed with her and her family is very bitter. Sarraute admits that they "got on badly" (Knowlson, 1996, p. 83) and accuses Beckett of being ungrateful and "badly brought up" (Knowlson, 1996, p. 83) (which may well be true but has little to do with his fluency in French).⁶

During the war, Beckett joined the French resistance. When his cell was betrayed, he fled Paris with Suzanne and spent the last two years of the war in Roussillon, in the South of France. After the liberation of France and after finishing *Watt* (1953) Beckett wrote his first "extended piece of prose fiction" in French, the short story "Suite," later to be called "La Fin" (1955). It is interesting to note here that Beckett started writing the story in English: he wrote twenty-nine pages then drew a line "a third way down the page and wrote the remainder of the story in French" (Knowlson, 1996, p. 325).

This would become a stratagem that Beckett continued to use throughout his career: when stuck with writing in one language, he would start again in the other. Mark Nixon demonstrated this well at the Modern Language Association convention in Seattle in January of 2012. In his paper, entitled "Faux départs: The Textual Genesis of Beckett's *All Strange Away* and *Imagination Dead Imagine*," Nixon showed how Beckett used a change in language to get things going when he was stuck with his story "Imagination morte imaginez" ("Imagination Dead Imagine"), which he started in English and then continued in French. Discussing his struggle with the story in an unpublished letter from January 30, 1965 to Lawrence Harvey, quoted by Nixon, Beckett wrote: "Started again in French again" (Nixon, 2012).

⁵ Erroneously: linguists point out that an accent says nothing about competency. One can be fluently bilingual and still retain a heavy accent. The psycholinguist François Grosjean cites Conrad as an example of this phenomenon: "There is a longstanding myth that real bilinguals have no accent in their different languages. Joseph Conrad and many other bilinguals, in all domains of life, show how unfounded this myth is. Having a 'foreign' accent in one or more languages is, in fact, the norm for bilinguals; not having one is the exception. There is no relationship between one's knowledge of a language and whether one has an accent in it" (Grosjean, 2011). (In fact, linguists call this "the Joseph Conrad phenomenon" (See, for instance, Michael Lucas' article (1998).) For a more detailed analysis of differing attitudes towards foreign accents, see Dewaele & McCloskey (2014).

⁶ What is probably relevant, too, is the fact that Sarraute herself is of Russian Jewish descent and that she had, from a very young age, a complex relation to both French and Russian, a consequence of her parents' divorce. Claire Kramsch (2009) explains: "In *Enfance*, the French writer Nathalie Sarraute, of Russian origin, recounts the traumatic and endless train rides she used to make between her family in Russia and her family in France and her feelings of being torn between the two" (p. 81).

The reasons for Beckett's famous "switch" from writing in English to writing in French have been the subject of many decades of critical interpretation and speculation.⁷ It is frequently connected with the by-now famous letter Beckett wrote from Dublin to his German acquaintance Axel Kaun on July 9, 1937. As Ruby Cohn writes, it is indeed a for Beckett "unusually explicit" statement about language (Cohn, 1983, p. 170). However, it goes perhaps too far to see it as a manifesto, as Sinéad Mooney has (2011), who calls it a "Beckettian manifesto" (p. 5). It is a letter (in fact, it is the draft of a letter), later dismissed by Beckett to Cohn as "German bilge" (Cohn, 1983, p. 170) and not a linguistic mission statement. Although it has been quoted profusely by critics,⁸ it is nevertheless worth citing here as it throws interesting light on Beckett's bilingualism. In this letter, Beckett claims that he would like to eliminate language, or, failing that, that he would at least like to contribute to its falling into disrepute:

Es wird mir tatsächlich immer schwieriger, ja sinnloser, ein offizielles Englisch zu schreiben. Und immer mehr wie ein Schleier kommt mir meine Sprache vor, den man zerreißen muss, um an die dahinterliegenden Dinge (oder das dahinterliegende Nichts) zu kommen. Grammatik und Stil. Mir scheinen sie ebenso hinfällig geworden zu sein wie ein Biedermeier Badeanzug oder die Unerschütterlichkeit [sic] eines Gentlemans. Eine Larve. Hoffentlich kommt die Zeit, sie ist ja Gott sei Dank in gewissen Kreisen schon da, wo die Sprache da am besten gebraucht wird, wo sie am tüchtigsten missbraucht wird. Da wir sie so mit einem Male nicht ausschalten können, wollen wir wenigstens nichts versäumen, was zu ihrem Verruf beitragen mag. Ein Loch nach dem andern in ihr zu bohren, bis das Dahinterkauernde, sei es etwas oder nichts, durchzusickern anfängt – ich kann mir für den heutigen Schriftsteller kein höheres Ziel vorstellen. (Beckett, 1983, p. 52)

[It is indeed becoming more and more difficult, even senseless, for me to write an official English. And more and more my own language appears to me like a veil that must be torn apart in order to get at the things (or the Nothingness) behind it. Grammar and Style. To me they seem to have become as irrelevant as a Victorian bathing suit or the imperturbability of a true gentleman. A mask. It is to be hoped the time will come, thank God, in some circles already has, when language is most efficiently used where it is most efficiently misused. Since we cannot dismiss it all at once, at least we do not want to leave anything undone that may contribute to its disrepute. To bore one hole after another into it, until what lurks behind it – be it something or nothing – begins to seep through; I cannot imagine a higher goal for a writer today.] (Beckett, 1983, p. 172)

The concept of boring holes in language is pertinent in light of Beckett's bilingualism, inasmuch as bilingualism can expose "holes" in language. Words and concepts from one language "do not neatly map onto" the words and concepts from another language (Pavlenko, 2007, p. 77), thus exposing gaps in language – gaps that were not evident before,

⁷ "Switch" is, in fact, not quite the right word. Genetic studies of Beckett's work have shown that Beckett never renounced English to write exclusively in French, or vice versa. Rather, he continued to move to and fro between the two languages throughout his writing career.

⁸ Cohn comments, justly, that "[a]lmost every critic has cited this letter in connection with Beckett's postwar writing" (2001, p. 89).

and are not evident to monolingual speakers of the languages. As one subject, a Greek-English bilingual, remarked in a recent study on emotion terms and multilingualism:

‘Frustration’ is such an amazing word, the lack of it in a language is so amazing because it carries with it the word ‘frustrate’ to stop to block ... so the outside force is carried in that word, it’s not just what you feel it’s the way you feel because an outside force is blocking you and you don’t have that in Greek. (Pavlenko, 2007, p. 77)

The discovery of such lexical gaps, “lacks” or “holes” in language inevitably leads to a more tangible awareness of the arbitrariness and inadequacy of language, something that Beckett will increasingly exploit in his fiction.

The comments Beckett himself made regarding his decision to start writing in French are sporadic, contradictory, and oblique. “I just felt like it” is one example (Fletcher, 1976, p. 213). Some other reasons Beckett gave for his “switch:” to an American journalist Beckett said, in 1956, “[it] was a different experience from writing in English. It was more exciting for me, writing in French” (quoted in Forster, 1970, p. 87); in answer to a Swiss critic Beckett said, “Parce qu’en français c’est plus facile d’écrire sans style” (quoted in Forster, 1970, p. 87). Elsewhere, Beckett explained that French provided him with “the right weakening effect” (Cohn, 2001, p. 59), and with the ability to “impoverish” himself: “À la Libération, je pus conserver mon appartement, j’y revins, et me remis à écrire – en français – avec le désir de m’appauvrir encore davantage. C’était ça, le vrai mobile”; or, as he said in deliberately broken French, he wrote in French “[pour] faire remarquer moi” (Cohn, 1962, 95). All these “mobiles” probably contain some (or much) truth, yet none tell the whole story and they have not been much help in shedding light on his move to French. That he never talked about his own bilingualism, or only briefly, would indicate that his motivation might not have been clear even to him.⁹ It is here that some of the insights of linguistics could be enlightening.

JE SUIS UNE BONNE POIRE: FRENCH VS. ENGLISH

Cross-linguistic studies have shown considerable cognitive advantages to bilingualism.¹⁰ Bilingualism seems to promote metalinguistic awareness, and other “aspects of cognitive performance may then benefit from this increased level of metalinguistic awareness in bilinguals” (de Groot, 2011, p. 390). This can happen “indirectly through superior linguistic abilities, or directly, for instance because attention to structure is beneficial for cognitive functioning in general” (de Groot, 2011, p. 390). Neuro- and psycholinguistic research has demonstrated that the neural substrate involved in language changes throughout a person’s lifetime. The various languages in the multilingual language system all interact, and the overall language system is in ongoing flux. This means that the cerebral organization for

⁹ Alan Astro suggests that a reason Beckett wrote in French can also be found in his name: “Que cet Irlandais choisisse le français pour s’exprimer est moins surprenant qu’on ne l’a dit, puisque son nom laisse entendre dans cette langue un organe associé à la parole (le *bec* d’un oiseau) et à l’écriture (le *bec* d’une plume)” (Astro, 1990, p. 748).

¹⁰ In the literature on bilingualism and multilingualism, multilingualism tends often to be used as an overarching term, which includes bilingualism, or the two terms are used interchangeably. As the linguist Li Wei writes, “[more] research is needed to understand how bilingualism and multilingualism differ from each other” (2000, p. 8).

language changes depending on how much languages are used, causing languages to grow more or less accessible to the speaker – to such a degree that even a first, or native language can become inaccessible if it is gradually being replaced by a second language. It might be thought that one’s first language enjoys a privileged status and is therefore immune to forgetting, but this is not the case: “the active use of more than one language affects the processing of all of the languages concerned, including the L1 [or native language]” (de Groot, 2011, p. 361). The first language is “as susceptible to loss (or inaccessibility) as” a second language (de Groot, 2011, p. 353): “true bilingualism or multilingualism, in which the different translation equivalent words for one and the same concept all remain accessible, requires that all languages, including the L1, are maintained permanently. If an earlier language is neglected it will be overwritten or suppressed over time by the new language” (de Groot, 2011, p. 356).

Emine Sevgi Özdamar, a German writer of Turkish origin, plays with this concept of first language attrition in her short story “Mutterzunge” (1998), the title story of the (somewhat auto-biographical) collection that bears the same name, which centers around the idea of losing one’s “Mother tongue.” The title of the tale already indicates bilingual tension: the word “Mutterzunge” does not exist in German; in German, “mother tongue” is “Muttersprache.” “Mutterzunge” is a literal translation from the Turkish word “anadil” (“ana” meaning mother, and “dil” tongue). As the narrator puts it: “In meiner Sprache heißt Zunge: Sprache” (Özdamar, 1990, p. 9) [“In my language, ‘tongue’ means ‘language’”] (Özdamar, 1994, p. 9).¹¹ And in the story, the narrator tries to discover at which point exactly she lost her mother tongue, hoping that this discovery might then lead her to get it back: “Wenn ich nur wüsste, wann ich meine Mutterzunge verloren habe” (Özdamar, 1990, p. 9) [“If only I knew when I lost my mother tongue”] (Özdamar, 1994, p. 9), a sentence that keeps recurring, in different variations, throughout the short story: “Wenn ich nur wüsste, in welchem Moment ich meine Mutterzunge verloren habe” (Özdamar, 1990, p. 11) [“If I only knew exactly when I lost my mother tongue”] (Özdamar, 1994, p. 11-12). Thus, Özdamar gives an acute form to the gradual and painful loss of her mother tongue, made extra painful because she is a writer.

De Groot (2011) proposes that the forgetting of the first language is “directly related to second language acquisition or, more generally, that any change in the language system as a whole affects the rest of the system” (p. 353). This is because “the acquisition of a translation equivalent of a word known before has the effect of rendering the earlier word for the same concept less available, up to the point that it cannot be retrieved again when it is not re-used once in a while” (de Groot, 2011, p. 354). Thus languages can obstruct each other; a second language can, as it were, prevent access to the first language, and this has consequences for a bilingual writer. The Chilean writer Ariel Dorfman (2004), who writes both in Spanish and in English, has commented on the struggle between his two languages as he tried to start writing his memoir *Heading South, Looking North: A Bilingual Journey*: “But no sooner did I start to write the first sentences of that autobiography in one of the languages, say English, than the Spanish misbehaved abominably, blocked those words as if they were alien, an in flagrante case of linguistic adultery” (p. 207).

¹¹ This is the case not just in Turkish but in many languages. For instance, French “langue,” Italian “lingua,” Spanish “lengua,” Irish “teanga,” and Russian “ЯЗЫК” all mean both “language” and “tongue.” And of course, “Zunge” is used to denote language in German too, albeit in poetic sense.

The research of the linguist Aneta Pavlenko (2007) draws similar conclusions as that of Annette de Groot; in her study of “Second Language Learning by Adults,” Pavlenko notes: “Not surprisingly, [the] intense process of second language learning is often accompanied by gradual attrition of the native language” (p. 9). She gives the example of, among others, Jan Novak, a bilingual and an American writer of Czech origin, who wrote: “... my Czech had begun to deteriorate. There were times now when I could not recall an everyday word, such as ‘carrot,’ ‘filer,’ or ‘sloth.’ I would waste the day probing the labyrinthine recesses of my memory because to get help from the dictionary seemed only to legitimize the loss...” (Pavlenko, 2007, p. 9).

The Polish-Canadian writer Eva Hoffman recounts a similar experience. After moving from her native Krakow to Vancouver in her early teens, she found that English slowly replaced Polish as her dominant language. In her memoir *Lost in Translation: Life in a New Language*, she wrote: “Polish, in a short time, has atrophied, shriveled from sheer uselessness” (Hoffman, 1990, p. 107). Her personal experience echoes de Groot’s finding that the active use of a second language affects the processing of the first language. “When I speak Polish now,” Hoffman writes, “it is infiltrated, permeated, and inflected by the English in my head. Each language modifies the other, crossbreeds with it, fertilizes it” (Hoffman, 1990, p. 273). Hoffman tries to capture in words a neurological process for which she has no vocabulary, and yet her description is apt.

In Beckett’s case, it is likely that French was becoming stronger and thus more dominant during the two years he spent in Roussillon. These years were a determining time in Beckett’s linguistic development. First of all, Beckett’s prolonged stay in the countryside gave him access to a different French from what he had known before. Dan Gunn (2011), one of the co-editors of *The letters of Samuel Beckett*,¹² has observed: “During the War years Beckett is immersed in a France, and a French, that is very different from the world of Paris intellectuals he knew” (Gunn, 2011). Working for a family of local tenant farmers, the Audes, in order to obtain food for himself and Suzanne, Beckett greatly increased his range of French, acquiring agricultural expressions and country proverbs.¹³

More importantly, Beckett spoke French almost exclusively during this period, since Suzanne knew no English and the local people they befriended did not either. Thus, French quickly became the language of his every day life and gradually started to compete with English as Beckett’s dominant language. The manuscript of his last English language novel, *Watt*, illustrates that this was the case (1940-1948). Beckett had started writing *Watt* in Paris, before the war, and continued working on it in Roussillon – as he said himself, to ward off boredom. Ann Beer’s excellent examination of the manuscript of *Watt* argues that by the later stages of the novel, Beckett had started thinking in French about his own English writing. Beer points to a number of instances where, next to the English text, we find

¹² Two volumes of the letters have appeared at this point: *Volume I: 1929-1940* (2009), and *Volume II: 1941-1956* (2011). Two more volumes are scheduled to come out in the future.

¹³ On page 190 of *Watt* notebook 3, Beckett writes, for instance, “Et les caisses se touchent dans la vigne (Aude – Sept. 29, 1943)” (“And the crates are touching in the vines”). Knowlson (1996) comments: “This sentence, which sounds like a secret radio message intended for the ears of members of the Resistance, was actually used as an expression of misfortune by M. Aude, his son explained, when the ground was too sodden for the crates full of grapes to be dragged out from the vines by horse and sledge; they then had to be manhandled, ‘with the help of Sam’” (p. 296). His noting down of this phrase shows Beckett’s interest in recording – and remembering – these types of sayings.

marginal comments and instructions in French and concludes that “the Ms [manuscript] bears witness to the growing dominance of French in Beckett’s mind” (Beer, 1985, p. 50-51).

After studying the *Watt* manuscript myself, I have come to a slightly different conclusion. I believe that the instances where Beckett can be seen “thinking” in French are not evidence of shifting dominance, in the sense that French progressively replaced English as the dominant language in his mind. Rather, they indicate *competing* dominance, where the two languages exist increasingly side-by-side in Beckett’s brain. More and more, French might have been becoming the language of his every day life and the language in which he starts to think, but the writing of *Watt*, in English, kept English actively present as well. This is borne out by the manuscript, where notes to himself in French and in English alternate.

In fact, it is interesting to see how gradual the process is in which French becomes progressively present in his mind. In the first notebook, “Begun evening of Tuesday 11/2/41” as Beckett has written on the first page, there seem to be no notes in French at all. Notebook two, also written while Beckett was still in Paris, features the draft of a short letter in French (Ms. A2, 2)¹⁴ and a doodle of a man with a dog, gazing lustfully at a woman’s behind, with “Pitié pour l’aveugle” written underneath (Ms. A2, 26). From the third notebook onwards, written partly in Paris, partly while Beckett and Suzanne were fleeing from the Gestapo and partly in Roussillon, the French increases and we occasionally find Beckett, as it were, talking to himself in French. In notebook three, for example, the arrival of *Watt* is indicated by the words “Watterise selon p. 81,” (Ms. 3, 67). In notebook four, written entirely in Roussillon, we find little prompts or directions to himself in French: “A insérer p. –44” (Ms. 4, 127) and “K – à insérer p. 46” (Ms. 4, 127). Similarly, on the cover of notebook five, written when Beckett was back in Paris, he wrote: “*Watt*, Suite [et Fin]. 18.2.45. Et début de l’Absent → *Malone Meurt*. Novembre – Janvier 47/48” (Ms. 5, cover). This is a nice contrast with the first notebook, the start of which, as we saw, Beckett still announced in English.

However, instructions and reminders in English continue as well. In notebook three, Beckett wrote “Insert 83. A” (Ms. 3, 170); in notebook four he announces that “*Watt* tells 4 before 3” (Ms. 4, 139); about half way through notebook five, he writes “End of ? of *Watt* continued in notebook VI” (Ms. 5, 99); and on the next page we find “Beginning of *Malone Meurt*, originally entitled *L’Absent*” (Ms. 5, 100). Similarly, towards the end of notebook five and after many pages written of the draft of the French *Malone Meurt*, we find in English: “End of I part of *Malone Meurt* continued in separate notebook. S.B.” (Ms. 5, 180), and a few pages after this there are some notes for *Watt*, all written in English (for instance, “Insert that *Arsene*’s declaration came back little by little to *Watt*” (Ms. 5, 182).

Thus, although French did become ever more present in Beckett’s mind, it did not take the place of English. Rather, the two began increasingly to exist side-by-side and continued to do so, competing for dominance in Beckett’s writing and his thinking.¹⁵ This is probably

¹⁴ These notebooks were written between 1940-1948. I refer to the notebooks as Ms., followed by the notebook number and page number.

¹⁵ Thinking in both languages, sometimes in the one, other times in the other, is a common feature in bilinguals. François Grosjean reports that most bilinguals will think, and talk to themselves, in both their languages, depending on the situation, and can even alternate languages in the same “thought,” or utterance to themselves. He gives the example of a German-English bilingual living in Canada, who describes “having heard herself say, as she was preparing a meal: ‘Salad...mit einem Ei...why not?’ When looking at houses for sale in the newspaper, she said to herself: ‘Hundertneunundzwanzig tausend Dollar – for a three bedroom bungalow?’” (Grosjean, 1982, p. 276). Derek Walcott has written: “I think the ultimate question to a writer is:

as much a reason for Beckett's starting to write in French after the war as the reasons he gave himself, or the reasons literary critics have pointed out so far.

The manuscript of *Watt* seems to support this, and so do the two volumes of Beckett's recently published letters. In these letters, occasional small mistakes gradually start slipping into his English – for example, sometimes he wrote “half” for “have” (Beckett, 2009, p. 657), or “sea” for “see”, or he wrote “Shall of course send you ... whatever else what you want” (Beckett, 2011, p. 376). At times English appears overwritten by French – when he writes “consider” as “considerer”, from the French “considérer” (Beckett, 2011, p. 403) or when he uses “sympathetic” in the French sense of meaning “kind” or “friendly” (Beckett, 2009, p. 630), not a mistake necessarily, but also not exactly idiomatic English. At the same time, there are small slips in the French as well. For instance, he writes “d'une” for “une,” “au” for “aux” (Beckett, 2009, p. 177, 179), “coincide” for “coïncide,” “ballader” for “balader,” “diffusée” for “diffusé” (Beckett, 2011, p. 684) et cetera. And in a short postcard to George Reavey, in which Beckett corrects Reavey's French (“The verb is S'EMMERDER”) he makes a mistake himself when he writes “Pardit” for “Pardi” (Beckett, 2011, p. 344).

The letters are also filled with instances of code-switching, the seemingly arbitrary alternation of two (or more) languages within the same conversation, or even within a single sentence.¹⁶ This is something that “affects practically everyone who is in contact with more than one language or dialect” (Gardner Chloros, 2009, p. 4). In the letters written in English, words, expressions and whole sentences are included in French. Beckett writes, for instance, “I'm very sorry to hear that you are laid up again: at the Corneille, n'est-ce pas?”; “Won't you keep me au courant” (Beckett, 2009, p. 69); “All very deliberately agreeable & faute de mieux” (Beckett, 2009, p. 154); “Je suis une bonne poire” (Beckett, 2011, p. 72); “I am returning to France as (tenez-vous bien) interpreter-storekeeper to the Irish Red Cross Hospital Unit in Normandy” (Beckett, 2011, p. 15); “Geer has les yeux qui foirent dans la sciure, something wrong with the tear ducts” (Beckett, 2011, p. 376); “A la rigueur, if you wish” (Beckett, 2011, p. 431); “I am writing to Combat to-day to abonner you” (Beckett, 2011, p. 531); “he asked me to be his témoin” (Beckett, 2011, p. 555); “Will you explain if you see him and lui faire mes amities” (Beckett, 2011, p. 661). Towards the end of volume two of the letters, Beckett also start addressing his friends in French, so we read, for instance: “Bien chère Nancy” (Beckett, 2011, p. 611); “Cher vieux Barney” (Beckett, 2011, p. 620); “Bien cher Tom” (Beckett, 2011, p. 623); “Bien chers Con & Ethna” (Beckett, 2011, p. 661).

These examples of code-switching in Beckett's letters illustrate the increased presence of French in Beckett's mind and the ease with which he moves between them. Long regarded

‘What language do you think in?’ I think in English; I do not think in French Creole. I imagine if I had a dream, the conversation that I would dream in would be in English, unless the dream was particularly about a certain thing. So if I think in English, my instinct is to write in English because that is the language of my thoughts” (quoted in Ch'ien, 2005, p. 29). Yet people, and writers, in a bilingual situation will not always think in just one language, or the language in which they think might shift, back and forth, and so the question of which language to write in is perhaps not always as clear-cut as Walcott puts it.

¹⁶ In fact, there are many different definitions – Penelope Gardner Chloros (2009) writes that code switching “can mean whatever we want it to mean” (p. 11) and cautions readers to be aware that it is not “an entity which exists in the objective world but a construct linguists have developed to describe their data” (p. 10). That said, this is the most common one, as well as the most common-sense one.

as something negative, an indication of a bilingual's laziness, incompetence, or both,¹⁷ code-switching is now generally regarded as a sign of fluency: research has shown that only fluent bilinguals will engage in code-switching.¹⁸ Moreover, it is considered an inevitable consequence of bilingualism. Penelope Gardner-Chloros (2009), in her groundbreaking study *Code-switching*, explains that “[m]uch research has now shown that bilinguals can never totally ‘switch off’ one of their languages” (p. 120). Second, code-switching is not generally regarded as an inevitable consequence of bilingualism. Penelope Gardner-Chloros (2009), in her groundbreaking study *Code-switching*, explains that “[m]uch research has now shown that bilinguals can never totally ‘switch off’ one of their languages” (p. 120).

De Groot detects something similar: “when bilinguals are conversing with their interlocutors in one of their languages the mental system that stores the other language is not completely at rest.” She describes “a bilingual linguistic system that is noisier than the language system of monolingual language users because, during both language comprehension and language production, linguistic elements of both linguistic subsystems are activated,” resulting in an “extra fierce mental rivalry” (de Groot, 2011, p. 279). As a consequence, code-switching “affects practically everyone who is in contact with more than one language or dialect” (Gardner Chloros, 2009, p. 4). Gardner-Chloros cites R. Tracy, who considered, “from a psycholinguist’s point of view, that the coactivation of dual systems represented by CS [code-switching] was nothing unusual in itself, and that an aspect of bilingual ability was being able to suspend the requirements of monolingual grammars” (Gardner Chloros, 2009, p. 169). In sum, I take the examples of code-switching in Beckett’s letters as a sign of his complete command of French.

It is clear that Beckett enjoyed this switching between languages, the crossing of linguistic borders. The letters show an increasing willingness to play with language and create multilingual puns. This punning is often accomplished by means of literal translations between English and French. “Tant pis,” which Beckett uses often, becomes “so much piss” (Beckett, 2009, p. 124), and “au courant,” which he uses frequently as well, becomes “Keep me in the current” (Beckett, 2009, p. 73). To the recently married Con and Ethna Leventhal, he writes, “hope to hear soon you have hung the pot-hanger with all due solemnity and jollity” (Beckett, 2011, p. 661), giving a literal translation of the French “pendre la crémaillère,” or “to arrange a housewarming party.” George Craig gives two nice examples of Beckett’s linguistic playfulness. In a letter to Thomas McGreevy, Beckett writes “fucking the field,”¹⁹ “where he brings to life a dead French metaphor – the long familiar colloquialism ‘foutre le camp’ even then meant little more than ‘to leave suddenly,’ ‘to get away’ – in a deliberately grotesque English version” (Craig, 2009, p. xl). Similarly, to Georges Duthuit (“Mon cher vieux George”) Beckett writes: “Assez de ce vous garou, veux-tu?” (Beckett, 2011, p. 126) Craig explains:

¹⁷ François Grosjean (1982) explains: “Monolinguals have long had a very negative attitude toward code-switching, which they see as grammarless mixture of two languages, a jargon or gibberish that is an insult to the monolingual’s own rule-governed language [...] this negative attitude toward code-switching has been adopted, at least overtly, by many bilinguals,” who see it as “done mostly out of laziness,” “embarrassing,” “dangerous,” or “not very pure” (p. 146-147).

¹⁸ See for instance Shana Poplack’s article “Sometimes I’ll start a sentence in Spanish Y TERMINO EN ESPAÑOL: Toward a Typology of Code-switching” (1980).

¹⁹ This letter is not included in full in the published volumes, but quoted by George Craig (2009, p. xl).

A literal rendering is impossible: this invented piece of French takes off from a familiar word, ‘loup-garou’ (werewolf; the ‘bugbear’ of stories told to children). As Beckett senses an increasing closeness to Duthuit, he makes a verbal move toward making it: a change from the earlier, formal ‘vous’ to the intimate ‘tu’ ... However, rather than simply making the change, Beckett proposes it by way of this extraordinary formula, banishing as it were for ever the ‘big bad ‘vous,’ and hoping for Duthuit’s favorable reaction. (Craig, 2009, p. xxxvi)

There are two other interesting things that these first two volumes of Beckett’s letters show. First of all, code-switching happens only in the English letters. The French letters remain “pure,” devoid of English interference. This is perhaps because, as a foreigner writing in French, Beckett felt compelled to show his fluency and was afraid that using English would be seen as a sign of diminished competence (as it probably would be, not just because the French are rather particular about their language, but because, as we saw above, code-switching is often regarded negatively by monolinguals and bilinguals alike). It might be a sign, not of diminished competence, but of Beckett’s being less at home in French. He was completely fluent in French and the language was firmly ensconced in his mind, but he did not yet feel comfortable enough to play with it in the same way he did in English. There is, of course, a good chance that in the later letters, as Beckett’s reputation as a French writer grows, he will feel less bound by the boundaries of French and that here we will find him engaged in code-switching in French letters too, but we will have to wait and see when the next two volumes of the letters come out.²⁰

Secondly, the code-switching happens almost only in letters to good friends, people like Thomas MacGreevy, George Reavey, Pamela Mitchell, Con Leventhal and others, to whom he feels close and with whom he can turn off, as it were, his inner censor. This is also illustrated by the fact that in letters to such friends, his language in general becomes more playful and relaxed, as exemplified by the fact that he uses more abbreviations. To give just some examples: to Thomas MacGreevy, Beckett writes “taking it as easy as poss” (Beckett, 2009, p. 594) and “she is anxious to get in touch with you at earliest op” (Beckett, 2009, p. 580), and to George Reavey, “Ne demande pas mieux but shn’t have the price” and “don’t know what effect it wd. have on my lit. situation in England” (Beckett, 2009, p. 604). It is in (English) letters to intimate friends that code-switching occurs most frequently. This shows, I think, that the code-switching in English is something that comes naturally, that it is, or has become, his natural way of thinking, speaking and writing. In fact, Knowlson (1996) reports that in conversations too Beckett would glide easily between English and French (p. 427). It seems as though Beckett has to make a conscious effort, when writing in English, to inhibit his French when he feels it would be inappropriate to play too much on the boundaries between the two languages.

In short, the letters corroborate what the *Watt* manuscript shows as well: French is securely established in his brain, increasingly competing for dominance with his English, yet it did not take the place of English. This might have been an important motive for Beckett’s decision to start composing fiction in French after the war: It might just have become easier to write in French than in English – or in any case, less easy to write in English than it was before. As Beckett writes in an unpublished letter to Cyril Lucas, “my English is getting rusty” (Craig, 2009, p. xxxv).

²⁰ In fact, volume three came out in November of 2014 but unfortunately that was not in time for this article.

QUEL EST LE MOT: BECKETT'S TIP-OF-THE-TONGUE PHENOMENON

The competing dominance between Beckett's English and French might shed some light on his practice of self-translation. Almost everything Beckett wrote in English he immediately, or eventually, translated into French and vice versa. Many critics have wondered why Beckett "bound himself to the servitude of writing each of his works twice" (Beaujour, 1989, p. 174), especially since, from his letters, it appears that he loathed doing these self-translations. By translating many of his works in the other language, by continuously moving back and forth between French and English and combining his efforts between the two languages, he ensures, as it were, maximum frustration.

James Joyce once told Beckett, "I have discovered I can do anything with language I want" (Ellmann, 1965, p. 661-662).²¹ Describing the difference between his own work and that of Joyce, Beckett, conversely, observed to a *New York Times* critic in 1966:

The kind of work I do is one in which I'm not master of my material. The more Joyce knew the more he could do. He's tending toward omniscience and omnipotence as an artist. I'm working with impotence, ignorance. I don't think impotence has been exploited in the past. (Graver & Federman, 1979, p. 148)

Few things can guarantee feelings of impotence as surely as moving back and forth between two languages. Of course, all writers accept the struggle with language; it is "a given of their trade", as Beaujour (1989) puts it (p. 40), yet this struggle becomes considerably more intense when there are two, or more, languages among which to search for the right word.

Recent psycholinguistic studies have shown that bilinguals suffer more often than monolinguals from what is known as the "tip-of-the-tongue phenomenon." The linguist Peter Ecke (2009) explains that the tip-of-the-tongue phenomenon is a "very peculiar kind of slowed down and interrupted word retrieval" in which "semantic and syntactic information of the desired word has been specified, but phonological encoding fails or is realized only in part" (p. 185). Ecke describes that this is not due to a general processing deficit in bilinguals compared to monolinguals. Rather, it reflects an increase in processing complexity for concepts that can be mapped on two or more phonological forms in the bilingual lexicon. The data from research of tip-of-the-tongue phenomena suggest "that bilinguals are disadvantaged in lexical retrieval simply because they use words specific to each language less frequently than monolinguals" (Ecke, 2009, p. 195). They use individual

²¹ This remark by Joyce calls to mind Humpty Dumpty who, in chapter six of *Through the Looking Glass*, rebukes Alice, after she objects to his making up new meanings for words ("But 'glory' doesn't mean 'a nice knock-down argument'"): "When I use a word' Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.' 'The Question is,' said Alice, 'whether you *can* make a word mean so many different things.' 'The question is,' said Humpty Dumpty, 'which is to be master – that's all' Alice was too much puzzled to say anything, so after a minute Humpty Dumpty began again. 'They've a temper, some of them – particularly verbs: they're the proudest – adjectives you can do anything with, but not verbs – however, I can manage the whole lot of them. Impenetrability! That's what I say!'" (Carroll, 1875, p. 123-124).

word forms less often than monolinguals use them in their single language and this “reduced frequency of individual word use results in relatively weak form-meaning connections that can become susceptible to incomplete lexical activation” (Ecke, 2009, p. 203). De Groot (2011) explains: “having two words for one and the same concept and using both implies that bilinguals use each single word less often than monolinguals do. As a consequence it has been less well learned” (p. 389). As a consequence, “the simple act of retrieving a common word is more effortful for bilinguals” (Bialystok, Fergus, Craik & Luk, 2012, p. 241).

One might think of it in this way: if you were to cut a path through a dense wood and frequently walked across it, back and forth, the path would remain open and easily traversable. But if you were to cut two paths, and sometimes you would walk on the one path, and other times you would walk on the other, both would become slightly less open and unobstructed. They would both still be navigable, and it is of course a great advantage to have two paths at one’s disposal instead of just one. Occasionally, however, you might run into minor obstacles, like overgrowing branches and protruding roots.

Things work similarly in the case of our cerebral organization for language. The “abstractions we describe as ‘languages’” (Matthews, 2003, p. 115) consist in fact of a complex linkage of brain centers through direct and indirect nerve connections and neural pathways. In a bilingual brain, more neural pathways are set up, because for each concept there will usually be at least two words. But those individual pathways will be used less often, because sometimes you will use the pathway to the word in, say, French, and other times the one to the word in English.

This has evident interest for understanding Beckett’s writings. Through his self-translations, Beckett kept toggling between both his languages in his mind, ensuring that he continued to actively use both French and English. As we saw before, the active use of two languages affects the processing of all languages concerned. Because a bilingual’s two languages are always active, certain cognitive skills are honed in a bilingual brain. Having constantly to exert inhibitory control, suppressing or ignoring one language in order to be able to speak the other, they become better at what in neurolinguistics is called “control of selective attention” (de Groot, p. 393). This is also known as the “executive control function,” the system responsible for attention selection, inhibition, shifting and flexibility that are “at the center of all higher thought” (Bialystok & Barac, 2013, p. 193). Ellen Bialystok et al. (2012) explain: “lifelong experience in managing attention to two languages reorganizes specific brain networks, creating a more effective basis for executive control and sustaining better cognitive performance throughout the lifespan” (Bialystok et al., p. 241-2). Or, as Bialystok describes elsewhere: “if you have two languages and you use them regularly, the way the brain’s networks function is that every time you speak, both languages pop up and the executive control system has to sort through everything and attend to what’s relevant in the moment” (Dreifus, 2011, p. D2). In general, this is an advantage. Since, as we saw, bilinguals use this executive control system more it becomes more efficient, creating a cognitive system with “an increased ability to attend to important information and ignore the less important” (Dreifus, 2011, p. D2). For a writer, however, this might present difficulties that make the search for “le mot juste” utterly frustrating.

The struggle for the right word became one of the determining symbols of Beckett’s work, and this is beautifully expressed in his poem “Comment Dire,” or “What is the Word,” the last thing he wrote before his death. This poem centers around the phrase “comment dire” and seems almost a poetic rendition of the “tip of the tongue phenomenon;” in fact, Cohn (2001) has shown that in an earlier draft the search for words is

rendered as “quel est le mot” (p. 383), literally “what is the word.” Through dashes, repetitions, and elisions, Beckett represents and explores the frustrating bilingual search for the right word. The poem starts like this:

folie-
 folie que de-
 que de-
 comment dire-
 folie que de ce-
 depuis-
 folie depuis ce-
 donné-
 folie donné de que de-
 ...
 comment dire-

And it ends like this:

comment dire-
 vu tout ceci-
 tout ce ceci-ci-
 folie que de voir quoi-
 entrevoir-
 ...
 folie que d’y vouloir croire entrevoir quoi-
 quoi-
 comment dire-

comment dire (Beckett, 2002, p. 112-114)

In Beckett’s English translation this becomes:

folly -
 folly for to -
 for to -
 what is the word –
 folly from this-
 all this-
 folly from all this-
 given-
 folly given all this-
 ...
 what is the word-

 what is the word -
 seeing all this -
 all this this -
 all this this here -

folly for to see what -
glimpse -

...

folly for to need to seem to glimpse afaint afar away over there what -
what -
what is the word -

what is the word (Beckett, 2002, p. 113-115)

What this poem underscores, together with the *Watt* manuscript and the published letters, is that the tensions, interactions and cross-fertilizations between Beckett's English and his French govern the very substance of his writing. Thus, an understanding of Beckett's bilingualism, of the competing dominance between his languages, is essential for a complete appreciation of his works.

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