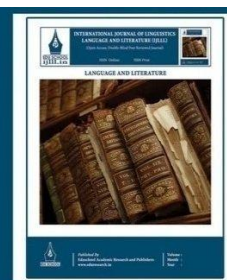




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Acquired Tongues: Language Acquisition and the Bilingual Literary Imagination

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Abstract

This essay argues that the neurobiology and timing of bilingual language acquisition leave a discernible formal signature on translingual literature. Drawing psycholinguistics and literary criticism into dialogue, it contends that the maturational asymmetry between early and late bilingualism, the difference between an entrenched, automatic first system and an effortfully monitored later one, corresponds to two distinct translingual poetics. Writers who acquired their languages within the plastic window of childhood tend toward a poetics of plenitude: an exuberant code-meshing that treats English and the vernacular as one continuous repertoire. Writers who acquire a literary language in adulthood tend toward a poetics of estrangement, marked by restraint, literalism, and metalinguistic self-consciousness. Building on recent accounts of the neurobiological, cognitive, and social differences between childhood and adult learning, and on scholarship analyzing code-switching in South Asian Anglophone writing, the essay reframes the established categories of translingual practice and the translingual imagination as acquisition-sensitive. It proposes that literary form remembers the conditions under which language was learned, and that critical-period research offers literary studies a principled vocabulary for distinguishing kinds of multilingual creativity rather than collapsing them into a single celebratory figure of hybridity.

Keywords:- Translingualism, Bilingualism, Language Acquisition, Critical Period, Code-Switching, Code-Meshing, South Asian Anglophone Literature, Diaspora Writing, Translingual Imagination

Introduction

Literary criticism has grown comfortable with the figure of the bilingual writer as a cosmopolitan virtuoso, a border-crosser whose hybrid idiom resists the tidy nationalism of monolingual canons. Yet the celebratory vocabulary that surrounds translingual authorship tends to flatten an important distinction: not all bilingual writers acquired their languages in the same way, at the same time, or under the same neurological conditions, and these differences are not incidental to their art. A novelist who absorbed English and a South Asian vernacular simultaneously in early childhood does not stand in the same relation to language as a mature novelist who deliberately apprentices herself to a foreign tongue in her forties. To treat both as undifferentiated instances of "hybridity" is to ignore what the psycholinguistics of

acquisition has been telling us for half a century: that the timing of language learning reshapes the brain, the felt texture of fluency, and the writer's relationship to the resources of expression.

This essay proposes that the science of language acquisition and the criticism of translingual literature have more to say to one another than either field has acknowledged. Specifically, it argues that the maturational asymmetry between early and late bilingualism leaves a formal signature on the literary page. The argument unfolds in stages. It first reviews the temporal architecture of acquisition (the critical period, neuroplasticity, and the cognitive and social factors that distinguish childhood from adult learning), drawing on P. M. Chitra's comprehensive synthesis of that research. It then reframes the dominant theories of translingualism, Suresh Canagarajah's translingual practice and Steven Kellman's translingual imagination, as categories that become sharper when read through acquisition. Finally, it tests the resulting hypothesis against three South Asian or South Asian–descended writers, Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, and Jhumpa Lahiri, whose divergent acquisitional histories, I contend, produce two recognizably different translingual styles: a poetics of plenitude and a poetics of estrangement.

The Temporal Architecture of Acquisition

The premise that the age at which a language is learned matters profoundly has its modern origin in Eric Lenneberg's claim that the capacity for effortless, native-like acquisition is bound to a maturational window closing around puberty (Lenneberg). The critical period hypothesis, in its strong form, holds that the neural substrate for language is maximally plastic in early childhood and that the lateralization and consolidation of the brain after puberty render native attainment increasingly improbable. Subsequent research has tempered the absolutism of this account, since the window is now better described as a gradient of declining plasticity than as a slamming door, but the core empirical observation has proved durable. As Chitra documents in her synthesis of the neurobiological, cognitive, and social differences between childhood and adult learning, early acquisition recruits implicit, procedural memory systems that encode grammar automatically, whereas later acquisition leans on explicit, declarative learning that remains effortful and metalinguistically conscious (Chitra 98). The child does not study a language; the child grows it. The adult, by contrast, builds a second system atop an entrenched first one, monitoring its output with a vigilance the native speaker never needs.

This asymmetry is not merely quantitative, a matter of more or less proficiency. It is qualitative, a difference in the kind of knowledge the speaker possesses. Chitra emphasizes that childhood and adult acquisition differ along neurobiological, cognitive, and social axes simultaneously, and that these dimensions interact rather than operate in isolation (Chitra 100). Neurologically, the young brain's synaptic exuberance permits the parallel installation of two phonological and grammatical systems without the interference that besets the adult; cognitively, the adult's mature analytic faculties offer compensatory strategies (rule learning, conscious comparison, mnemonic scaffolding) that the child neither needs nor uses; socially, the contexts of childhood immersion and adult instruction differ in motivation, affect, and the stakes of error. Stephen Krashen's influential distinction between subconscious "acquisition" and conscious "learning," and his hypothesis of an affective filter that can impede uptake when anxiety is high, belongs to the same intellectual lineage: it formalizes the intuition that the adult learner labors under a metalinguistic and emotional burden from which the native child is largely free (Krashen). The adult, in Krashen's terms, can amass conscious knowledge about a language (its rules, its exceptions, its registers) without that knowledge ever fully descending into the spontaneous fluency that acquisition supplies; the result is a permanent, low-level monitoring of one's own output that the native speaker simply does not perform.

It is worth stressing that the modern consensus has softened Lenneberg's strong claim into a more nuanced picture, and that this softening, far from weakening the present argument,

strengthens it. The relevant difference between early and late bilingualism is not that adults cannot learn languages, for manifestly they can, sometimes to extraordinary levels, but that they learn them differently, recruiting different memory systems and arriving at a different phenomenology of fluency. Chitra's contribution is precisely to resist a reductive, single-cause story in favor of a multidimensional one, in which neurobiological plasticity, cognitive maturation, and social context jointly shape the outcome (Chitra 97). For a theory of literary style, this multidimensionality is essential: it means that the mark of acquisition on a writer's prose will be not a single feature but a constellation: rhythm, lexical confidence, syntactic risk, and the felt distance between the writer and the word.

What does this architecture have to do with literature? The answer becomes visible only when we recall, with Lev Vygotsky, that language is not merely a medium of communication but the very instrument of thought, the means by which inner speech organizes consciousness (Vygotsky). If, as Vygotsky argued, word and concept develop together through social interaction, then the language acquired in the formative years is not one tool among many but the scaffolding of the writer's earliest cognition. The early bilingual thinks in an interwoven system from the outset; the late bilingual grafts a new branch onto a thought-structure already grown in another tongue. The literary consequences of this difference, namely what it feels like to compose, what can be taken for granted and what must be wrested into being, are the subject of the readings that follow. The point to register here is that acquisition is not a neutral preliminary to literary art but a condition that shapes the writer's available relation to words.

From Competence to Practice: Translingualism Reframed

If acquisition science describes how speakers come to possess languages, translingualism theory describes what multilingual speakers and writers do with them. Suresh Canagarajah's foundational account displaces the monolingual assumption that languages are discrete, bounded codes that one either masters or fails to master. In its place he proposes translingual practice: the premise that multilingual speakers possess an integrated repertoire from which they draw strategically, negotiating difference and asserting agency rather than switching between sealed systems (Canagarajah). For Canagarajah, the competent translingual is not someone who has perfectly internalized two grammars but someone skilled in the social labor of alignment, accommodation, and creative recombination. Li Wei's theory of translanguaging extends this insight, arguing that the boundaries between named languages are themselves ideological constructs and that the multilingual mind operates within a single, undifferentiated meaning-making capacity (Wei). In educational terms, Ofelia García and Li Wei describe translanguaging as the deployment of a unitary linguistic repertoire without regard to the socially imposed labels of "English" or "Bengali" (García and Wei).

These frameworks are indispensable, but they tend to bracket the question of acquisition. By treating the multilingual repertoire as a flat resource available for negotiation, translingualism risks implying that all repertoires are constituted alike, that the integration Canagarajah celebrates is achieved by the same means whether one learned both languages at three or one of them at forty. The neurobiological evidence suggests otherwise. An integrated repertoire built through simultaneous childhood acquisition is integrated at the level of automatic processing; an integrated repertoire assembled through adult learning is integrated through conscious effort and remains, at the phenomenological level, a coordination of distinguishable systems. Both can produce translingual writing, but the writing they produce need not look the same. This is where Rakhi Ramachandran's analysis becomes valuable. Examining South Asian Anglophone literature, Ramachandran shows that code-switching in these texts is not a lapse from standard English but a deliberate aesthetic and political strategy through which writers inscribe vernacular identity into the colonial language (Ramachandran 71). Her account of code-switching as purposeful literary technique invites the further question

this essay pursues: whether the manner of switching is conditioned by how the switcher acquired the languages in play.

Ramachandran observes that South Asian writers mesh English with vernacular lexicon, syntax, and rhythm to claim ownership of a language inherited through empire, converting an imposed medium into an instrument of cultural assertion (Ramachandran 72). This is precisely the "translingual practice" Canagarajah theorizes, realized on the literary page. But Ramachandran's examples are drawn predominantly from writers for whom English coexisted with Indian languages from childhood, writers whose bilingualism is the early, simultaneous kind. The exuberance she describes, I will argue, is characteristic of that acquisitional history. It is not the only translingual aesthetic available, and it is not the one a late bilingual is likely to produce. To see why, we must turn to the writer who has most explicitly theorized the difference: Steven Kellman.

The Translingual Imagination and the Question of Belatedness

Kellman's study of authors who write in more than one language, or in a language not their first, supplies a taxonomy that acquisition science can deepen. He distinguishes between ambilinguals, who write authoritatively in more than one language, and monolingual translinguals, who write in a single language that is nonetheless not their native one (Kellman). The distinction is, at bottom, an acquisitional one, though Kellman frames it in terms of literary output rather than developmental history. The ambilingual's facility across languages typically reflects an early, deep, plural acquisition; the monolingual translingual's chosen estrangement, that is, writing in an adopted tongue, reflects the belatedness of an adult arrival. Kellman's central insight, that writing in a non-native language can be an act of liberation as much as of constraint, a deliberate shedding of the mother tongue's automatisms, is most fully realized precisely by those who came to their literary language late.

The phenomenology of belated acquisition is what gives the monolingual translingual's work its peculiar charge. Because the adult learner's second language never becomes wholly transparent, never sinks fully beneath the threshold of attention into the automaticity Chitra associates with early procedural encoding, every word retains a slight resistance, a residue of the effort by which it was acquired (Chitra 102). For most language users this resistance is a deficit. For the writer it can be a resource. The defamiliarizing friction that the native speaker has long since lost, the capacity to feel a common word as strange, to weigh it as an object rather than reach through it to its referent, is restored to the adult learner by the very incompleteness of acquisition. Here the neurobiology of late learning and the literary value of estrangement converge. What the critical-period literature registers as the adult's failure to attain native automaticity, the translingual imagination can convert into a heightened, deliberate, almost sculptural relation to words.

This convergence yields the hypothesis that organizes the remainder of this essay. If early, simultaneous bilingualism produces an integrated repertoire processed automatically, it should tend to generate a translingual poetics of plenitude: a confident, maximal code-meshing in which the vernacular floods into English without apology, because for such a writer there was never a firm border to cross. If late, sequential bilingualism produces a coordinated repertoire processed with conscious effort, it should tend to generate a translingual poetics of estrangement: a restrained, exacting style alert to the materiality of each acquired word. These are tendencies, not laws; individual writers complicate them. But as heuristics grounded in acquisition science, they let us read translingual form as a trace of acquisitional history. I test them against Rushdie and Roy on one side and Lahiri on the other.

Code-Meshing of Plenitude: Rushdie, Roy, and the Early Bilingual

Salman Rushdie's prose is the paradigmatic literature of the early bilingual repertoire.

Raised in a Bombay household in which English and Urdu and the polyglot babel of the city coexisted from infancy, Rushdie writes an English that has never known a sealed border with the vernacular. *Midnight's Children* does not so much insert Hindustani words into English sentences as dissolve the distinction between them, generating a "chutnified" idiom in which the rhythms of Indian speech, the interjections, the reduplications, the headlong run-on syntax of oral storytelling, become constitutive of the English itself (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*). This is code-meshing in the fullest sense Ramachandran describes, with vernacular and colonial language fused into a single expressive instrument rather than alternated between (Ramachandran 71). The exuberance is possible because, for the writer of this acquisitional history, English is not a foreign acquisition to be handled with care but a native possession to be played with at will. The plenitude of the style is the literary expression of an integrated, automatic repertoire.

Rushdie's own reflections make the connection between displacement and language explicit without reducing it to lament. In *Imaginary Homelands* he famously redefines the migrant condition through the etymology of translation: "The word 'translation' comes, etymologically, from the Latin for 'bearing across.' Having been borne across the world, we are translated men" (Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* 17). The pun is only available to a writer for whom both the Latinate resources of literary English and the lived experience of South Asian migration are equally near to hand. Notably, Rushdie does not present his English as a burden imposed from without but as territory to be repossessed and remade, the very gesture of ownership that Braj Kachru theorized when he argued that non-native Englishes are legitimate, creative, nativized varieties rather than deficient imitations of a metropolitan standard (Kachru). Rushdie's chutnification is the literary apotheosis of Kachru's "Indianization" of English: a confident appropriation that presupposes the writer's full, early citizenship in the language.

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* offers a subtler but equally instructive case. Roy too is an early bilingual, and her novel's most striking formal feature, its rendering of a child's apprehension of language, depends on an intimacy with the acquisitional process itself. The twins Estha and Rahel experience English as a thing to be turned over, reversed, capitalized, read backwards, played with; the prose mimes the child's delight in the materiality of words precisely because its author retains unmediated access to the structures of early acquisition (Roy). Where the adult learner must work to recover the strangeness of a familiar word, Roy reaches it from the inside, by ventriloquizing the child who is still acquiring. Her neologisms, her idiosyncratic capitalizations, her fracturing and recombining of standard syntax constitute a code-meshing not primarily between English and Malayalam but between adult standard English and the half-formed, exuberantly rule-bending English of the acquiring child. This is plenitude of a different register from Rushdie's, but it springs from the same source: a writer for whom the early-acquired language is so fully owned that it can be dismantled and rebuilt without anxiety. Both writers exemplify the social dimension Chitra identifies, in which early immersion instills an affective ease with the language that conscious adult learning rarely matches (Chitra 104). That ease is audible in the sheer velocity of their prose, in the willingness to coin, compound, and contort without the hesitation that betrays a borrowed instrument. The early bilingual does not pause to ask whether a construction is permissible, because the construction arrives already sanctioned by a grammar internalized before the faculty of doubt matured. Their syntactic risk-taking is the obverse of the late learner's caution: where Lahiri weighs, Rushdie and Roy plunge, and the plunge is licensed by the automaticity that early acquisition alone confers. The freedom to break a rule presupposes the unconscious possession of it, and that unconscious possession is the gift, and the limit, of the critical period.

Code-Meshing of Estrangement: Lahiri and the Adult Convert's Idiom

Jhumpa Lahiri presents the instructive opposite. Lahiri grew up bilingual in Bengali and English, but the language that produced her late, transformative work is one she acquired deliberately in adulthood: Italian, taken up in her forties and made the medium of *In Other Words*, a memoir composed in Italian and rendered into English by Ann Goldstein because Lahiri refused to translate herself (Lahiri). The book is, among other things, a sustained meditation on adult language acquisition as both ordeal and emancipation, and its style enacts the poetics of estrangement that the neurobiology of late learning predicts. Lahiri's Italian prose is spare, exact, almost austere, the antithesis of Rushdie's flood. It proceeds by short declaratives, by careful, even tentative, placement of each word, by a metalinguistic self-awareness that never lets the reader forget that the writer is operating in an acquired medium. Where the early bilingual takes the language for granted, Lahiri foregrounds the labor of possession.

This austerity is not a failure of artistry; it is the artistic harnessing of the very resistance that Chitra's account attributes to adult acquisition. Because Lahiri's Italian was learned explicitly, through conscious study rather than implicit absorption, it never achieves the frictionless automaticity of a first language, and Lahiri turns that friction into a principle of style (Chitra 99). She has written movingly of the freedom that incompleteness confers, of how writing in a language she has not fully mastered liberates her from the burden of expectation that attended her English. This is precisely Kellman's monolingual translingual: the writer who chooses an adopted tongue as an act of self-refashioning, shedding the automatisms of the native language in order to recover a deliberate, weighed relation to words (Kellman). Her decision not to translate her own Italian back into English, ceding that task to Goldstein, is itself a refusal to let the early-acquired language reassert its dominion; the gap she preserves between herself and English is the structural counterpart of the gap that adult acquisition preserves between her and Italian.

The texture of estrangement is visible even at the level of the sentence. Where Rushdie's clauses proliferate and braid, Lahiri's stand apart, each one tested and set down with the care of someone who cannot rely on the language to carry her unawares. The very limitations of a smaller acquired vocabulary impose a discipline that reads, on the page, as a style: simplicity becomes a virtue because complexity is not freely available. This is the paradox at the heart of the late bilingual's art: constraint, the neurological residue of effortful acquisition, is reconceived as form. The affective filter Krashen describes, ordinarily an obstacle to fluency, is here transmuted into an aesthetic of deliberateness (Krashen). Lahiri does not overcome the foreignness of her medium; she writes from within it, making the condition of the perpetual learner into a literary stance. The estrangement is doubled. Lahiri estranges herself from her native English by writing in Italian, and the Italian itself remains productively estranging because it is, neurologically, a guest in a mind shaped by other languages.

The contrast with Rushdie clarifies the stakes of the acquisitional argument. Both writers are translingual in Canagarajah's sense, negotiating across languages and asserting agency through that negotiation (Canagarajah). Both might be gathered, in a coarse criticism, under the single banner of diasporic hybridity. But their translingual practices are formally opposite, and the opposition tracks the difference in how they acquired their literary languages. Rushdie's plenitude is the signature of an integrated, automatic, early repertoire; Lahiri's estrangement is the signature of a coordinated, effortful, late one. The translingualism of plenitude meshes codes by fusing them; the translingualism of estrangement meshes codes by holding them in deliberate tension, each word kept slightly at arm's length. To read these as two points on a single spectrum of hybridity is to miss the developmental logic that

distinguishes them, a logic that acquisition science, and Chitra's synthesis in particular, makes legible.

Acquisition as Literary Memory: Toward an Original Position

The readings above support a claim that neither psycholinguistics nor literary criticism has fully articulated on its own: literary form remembers the conditions under which language was acquired. This is the original critical position this essay advances. Translingual style is not simply a function of an author's politics, their diasporic positioning, or their theoretical sophistication, though all of these matter. It is also, and more deeply, a function of the developmental history by which the writer came to possess the languages they mesh. The neurobiological distinction between implicit early acquisition and explicit late learning, the distinction Chitra anatomizes across its neural, cognitive, and social dimensions, reappears, transposed, as a distinction between two translingual poetics (Chitra 101). Form is acquisition's afterlife.

Reframing translingualism this way has consequences for how we read. It cautions against the homogenizing impulse that treats every code-meshed text as a uniform gesture of resistance. Ramachandran rightly insists that code-switching in South Asian writing is purposive rather than accidental, an assertion of identity through the colonial language (Ramachandran 73); the present argument adds that the purpose is realized through different formal means depending on whether the writer's bilingualism is early or late, simultaneous or sequential. It also enriches Kellman's taxonomy by grounding his literary categories, ambilingual and monolingual translingual, in the developmental science that explains why those categories exist (Kellman). And it extends Canagarajah's translingual practice by insisting that the "repertoire" from which the practitioner draws is not a flat inventory but a structured deposit of acquisitional history, integrated or coordinated according to when its languages were learned (Canagarajah). Even the translanguaging tradition's claim that named languages are ideological fictions can be reconciled with this view: the unitary repertoire that García and Wei describe is real at the level of meaning-making, yet its internal processing architecture still bears the maturational imprint of acquisition (García and Wei; Wei).

There is a final, Vygotskian dimension to the claim. If language is the instrument through which thought is socially constituted, then the language acquired in childhood furnishes the original scaffolding of the writer's cognition, while a language acquired in adulthood is built upon, and partly against, that prior structure (Vygotsky). The early bilingual's plenitude expresses a cognition whose very foundations are plural; the late bilingual's estrangement expresses a cognition reaching toward a structure it did not grow from within. The translingual imagination, in short, is not one faculty but at least two, distinguished by the developmental moment at which its languages entered the mind. Critical-period science gives literary studies a principled vocabulary for honoring that difference rather than dissolving it into an undifferentiated celebration of the hybrid.

Conclusion

The bilingual literary imagination has too often been theorized as though the timing of language acquisition were irrelevant to it, as though the writer who grew two languages in childhood and the writer who apprenticed herself to a third in middle age were doing fundamentally the same thing under different flags. This essay has argued the contrary. The neurobiology and timing of acquisition, as synthesized in Chitra's account of the differences between childhood and adult learning, leave a formal signature on translingual literature, distinguishing a poetics of plenitude from a poetics of estrangement. Rushdie's chutnified abundance and Roy's child-grammar exuberance arise from early, integrated, automatic repertoires; Lahiri's austere, deliberate, metalinguistically vigilant Italian arises from a late,

coordinated, effortful one. Read through Ramachandran's account of purposive code-switching, Canagarajah's translingual practice, and Kellman's translingual imagination, these styles emerge not as variants of a single hybridity but as the literary afterlives of distinct developmental histories.

To say that form remembers acquisition is not to reduce literature to neurology. It is to recover a dimension of translingual creativity that the celebratory rhetoric of hybridity has obscured, and to give criticism a more exact instrument for describing what bilingual writers actually do with the languages they hold. The reward of bringing psycholinguistics and literary studies into conversation is not the colonization of one field by the other but a mutual sharpening: acquisition science gains a demonstration that the consequences of critical-period effects extend into the highest reaches of verbal art, and literary studies gains a principled account of why the translingual imagination speaks in more than one voice. The writer who was borne across the world, in Rushdie's phrase, carries the manner of that bearing in the very grain of the prose, and learning to read that grain is learning to read acquisition itself.

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