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Chantal Crozet
RMIT University, Melbourne

L'ÉQUILIBRISTE (TIGHTROPE WALKER)

Abstract:
In this auto-ethnographic account, I reflect on my journey as a multilingual academic researcher and writer, focusing primarily on my experiences with French and English which have become my first two languages. To a lesser extent, I also tell and reflect on my experience with Spanish and Sanskrit, my third and fourth languages, which are part of me too. I reflect on how I have lived and experienced the shaping of a hybrid academic identity, with and beyond two primary languages and cultures. My reflection shows that it is my relationship to language, or, for a better word, my positioning towards language, rather than my relationship to a particular language per se that ultimately matters in my experience of multilingualism.

Keywords: multilinguality ◆ interculturalism ◆ hybridity ◆ renouncement ◆ expansion

Language has tickled my consciousness for a very long time, inviting me to think, feel and question so much about myself and the way others perceive me. I first became aware of its power when my high school teacher in France contested my use of the conjunction 'malgré' ('although') before the subjunctive form of a verb. I was simply reproducing what I heard at home, and without knowing it unveiling my working-class background. Beyond awakening my taste for linguistic conscientization, secondary schooling also gave me access to a new world of words in my first language, as well as access to a new type of 'high' French culture (through the reading of literary texts) that I had not encountered before. It was a time of linguistic and cultural capital extension, though only semi-consciously so, as I had not encountered those concepts as yet then.

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As a late baby boomer, historicity eventually caught up with me. The 1968 youth movement I went through in France as a teenager contributed no doubt to my questioning of the limitation of not only monocultural French republican formal education, but also of the power dynamics between language, culture, class and gender within French society. Getting involved in (extreme) left-wing politics was not enough. Like many of my peers at the time, I needed new outer and inner landscapes. Consequently, I travelled extensively and worldwide (Asia, North and South America) for a few years, experiencing my first real contact with cultural and linguistic alterity, as well as new systems of belief and thought, whilst learning and practicing English and Spanish on the go, aided minimally by the very basic foreign language education I had managed to acquire in secondary schooling. Those early years of initial feelings of linguistic and cultural cracking I experienced in my psyche, as well as of a sense of inner expansion, would intensify later on in my life in more substantial ways.

It took moving permanently to Australia and completing a first tertiary degree majoring in both French and Spanish studies with a minor in Linguistics (in English), to really face the pains of multilingual *being* (in the existential sense of the word). One of these first challenges occurred when I submitted the first chapter of my MA thesis (my first significant writing in academic English) to my supervisor, who told me that my English sounded too French, that I had to change the way I expressed myself. I was far too direct, I didn't reference enough, or not enough in the English way. I had been living and studying in Australia for a number of years by then, and I still didn't fit in… would I ever fit in? I was furious, feeling that I was being asked to fit in a foreign-language frame that would necessarily deform my thoughts and very sense of self, or so I thought at the time. Class had been a problem when it came to expressing myself; now my very French background had become one too in my burgeoning academic life in an Anglo-Australian environment.

However, despite my initial resistance, I did learn the rules of academic English writing (by osmosis mainly, having never been taught directly how to do it), and even ended up liking writing in English. What happened next surprised me. As time went by, having completed my tertiary education in English in Australia (BA, DipEd, MLitt and PhD), and after having lived with English for what turned out to be the greater part of my professional and personal life, it became increasingly difficult for me to relate to French as my first language. It had become rather a background language. In my personal life English dominated, though my children attended a French-English bilingual school in which I was quite involved as a parent, and I communicated in French with my family in France. In my professional life, I have always used and continue using French for teaching in my position as a lecturer in French studies (this includes academic and non-academic reading in French). I now also use English as a lecturer in Intercultural Communication. I use English in supervising postgraduate students, who are mainly speakers and writers of English

as a second or third language. This involves exploring with them the judicious use of a process I know too well and which Noorani (2013) refers to as 'soft multilingualism'.[1] He defines this new concept as 'linguistic leveling and homogenization' aiming to cancel 'many of the hard edges of linguistic differences and rendering living languages increasingly congruent and mutually transparent' (Noorani 2013: 7–8). In many ways I am in a better position than my MA supervisor was to help multilingual students navigate through their multilingualism—having walked, still walking that path myself, and also now helped by recent literature which articulates what I have always felt. In this sense, both the experience of multilingualism and theoretical understanding of it are great resources for helping others on the same journey.

As an applied linguist trained in Australia, I write and publish mainly in English, with sporadic publications in French. However, I read in both English and French for my research, increasingly more so in French as time goes by. This is where delving deeper into my practice of academic multilingualism becomes complex and not easy to pin down, as this practice amounts to a meshing / melting of languages and cultures that is not conscientiously willed.

1. Writing in multiple languages

For the sake of clarity, I will separate my reflection on *writing* in multiple languages from *researching and reading* in / with multiple languages and cultures. I will reflect first on writing in English and in French, and then more briefly on co-writing in Spanish and on my relationship to Sanskrit only to the extent that it helps make more salient the common thread I am trying to weave throughout this auto-ethnographic account. I will reflect then on researching and reading in multiple languages and cultures. This will lead me to delve further into the impact of multilingual / pluricultural researching and reading on meaning-making and academic voicing in my writing.

1.1 Writing as a multilingual in English and French

My academic self and persona developed in, with and through writing in English much more so than writing in French. As it became the main language of my academic practice and voice, English felt like it had become a second first language to me. I remember though that after not having written in academic French for many years, when I ended up writing and publishing an article in French I was surprised at first that writing in French had come to me so naturally, as naturally as writing in English had become. However, I noted an unexpected difference. I felt that my writing in French was more 'poetic', for lack of a better word, and pondered why. I quickly noticed that French expression or words I found to be untranslatable into English could give rise to this poetic feeling in me. For example, the expression 'meaning-making', commonly used by applied

[1] On the topic of "soft multilingualism", see also Gramling (2016).

linguists, translates in French as: 'la mise en scène du sens'. To me, 'meaning-making' in English has a very straightforward, succinct and dry meaning: 'the making of meaning through language'. Whereas, 'la mise en scène du sens' conveys the rich, fluid and complex webs which produce meaning beyond cognition: webs made of context, culture and individuals' affect and unique choices of language use. 'Mise en scène du sens' also evokes a theatre stage ('scène') where meaning-making is played out to an audience. It has an unboundedness about it, which gives it that poetic feel to me which 'meaning-making' does not convey in English. I feel the same towards the French word 'esprit' which has no satisfactory word in English for me. None of the words 'mind', 'spirit' and 'soul' quite grasp the symbolic / mythical effect 'esprit' has on me.

I have had more significant dilemmas in my experience of academic writing in both English and French, notably when having to respond to what I call 'the tyranny of the native-speaker reviewer'. I have experienced this tyranny both ways, from English as well as French native speakers who have reviewed my work, in instances when I felt that they had overcorrected my academic writing style, not allowing any room for my multilingual linguistic habitus in written expression in both languages, including in French, my supposedly native language! It may be that I have become a hybrid writer in both English and French with traces of mild incorrectness in both languages; again I am not sure. What I know is that walking the multilingual tightrope in academia is not always an easy ride. That uneasiness I sense may have to do with no longer experiencing the comfort of feeling complete ownership of expression / style in any language, the kind of ownership monolingual native speakers can assert and that I did feel when I was one myself. I am not sure if this uneasiness is caused by an actual erosion of my first language, or if it is more about having to get used to a different sense of being in the world.

My use of a third language in academic writing is more limited but is nonetheless interesting to consider for the different light it sheds on my experience of multilingual practice.

1.2 Writing as a multilingual in Spanish

I have always felt a deep affinity with Spanish, from the time I started to learn it in France in high school, and throughout my studying of it at university, first in Spain and later in Australia as part of my first degree. I now speak Spanish almost daily with my Spanish and South American colleagues. Recently, I started co-researching (reading in both English and Spanish) for the co-writing of an academic article in Spanish with a colleague who is a native speaker of Spanish, something I had not done before. I wrote the first draft of my contribution to the article directly in Spanish which was later reviewed and corrected by my colleague. I had the strong experience of being a witness of my own writing, much more so than when I write in English or French. I had to surrender my thought process to Spanish, letting the language tell for me in words I did not always feel I completely owned, feeling a loss of control, leaving me with a sense of both renouncement

and expansion. It is then that it dawned on me that my relationship to *language* is more important than my relationships to any of the languages I know. It is the opportunity that multilingual practice gives me of experiencing *language* for its own sake in its unlimited creative power that I cherish most. In other words, it is the opportunity of linguistic and cultural detachment, hence a sense of inner freedom and space, that multilingual practice and being provides. I guess it is similar to the kind of freedom a tightrope walker would feel when walking across outer-space! I will end this section commenting briefly on my relationship to Sanskrit, my fourth language.

1.3 Sanskrit

Sanskrit is part of my multilingual self, albeit as a silent language, as I am far from being able to write and read fluently in it. I only learnt Sanskrit for four years. I do not actively use it in the way I use English, French and Spanish. My interest in Sanskrit is intimately linked to my long-term interest in Indian philosophy. Both have provided me with concepts and access to an alternative (non-Western) system of thought which have greatly influenced my current understanding of *mind* and *self,* in short, my understanding of the essence of subjectivity, of what it is to be human.[2] This is where culture kicks in in my practice of multilingualism, which I cannot separate from my practice of pluri- and interculturalism when it comes to researching and reading as part of my academic work.[3] I explore those connections further in the next section.

2. Researching and reading in multiple languages and cultures

At first, training in Applied Linguistics in Australia implied reading literature mainly in English, though from scholars with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds (like myself). Over time I started reading in French in my sub-area of interest (Language and culture education) within my field and beyond. I read (and still read) French scholars, in French, whose works have not always been translated in English. I tend to read key French scholars such as Foucault, Bourdieu, Barthes, Kristeva and Ricoeur in either French or English depending on my purpose for reading them. As background reading, I tend to go for French to see what their thoughts really sound like in French. If I know I am likely to want to quote them in some academic writing I am working on in English, I go for English translations of their work, making it easier to later quote them if needed. I have always read and still read Indian philosophy in English from both Indian and Western scholars.

[2] For clarity: note that I am not capable of reading full Indian philosophical text in Sanskrit; this would require many more years of studying this language. I use English and French translations which often quote core concepts and verses in Sanskrit, followed by their translation.

[3] See Crozet (2006), Crozet (2012) and Crozet (2015), which support this claim.

I have experienced two kinds of challenges, not with the language(s) I read in, but the cultures my references come from.

My first challenge was to dare 'coming out' using references from Indian scholars (unknown or little known in the West) when I wrote on identity- and self-related issues within language-and-culture education.[4] Globalisation has impacted academia positively, in the sense that scholars around the world meet and mix more than ever before, but the actual practice of global academia is still largely Western knowledge-based and happens in English. I had to fight my own demons around legitimacy. I questioned whether, as an Australian scholar with a French background quoting Indian philosophers, I would be taken seriously. Yet, I could not ignore where my sources of inspiration came from.

The second challenge I still experience today is dealing (again) with reviewers of my publications, this time regarding my choice of references. For example, I have been required by one reviewer of an article I had submitted in French to a journal in France, to add more French references to it even though I had been writing on French language and culture teaching in an Australian context and there were no existing French references that could support my argument any further than my English ones already had. On another occasion, a reviewer of an article I submitted in English to an American-based journal on a study of religious media in France hinted that I ought to have quoted more non-French scholars. I wondered if my reviewer did not know the French scholars I had quoted and felt his expertise challenged by this very fact. I do not know for sure, but the thought crossed my mind that pluriculturalism in academia was far from being a *fait accompli* when it came to the practice of it.

When I thought of a metaphor that would represent my overall experience of academic writing as a multilingual, the French word 'équilibriste' (tightrope walker) came to my mind as I pictured one I had once seen walking across the river La Saône in my home town Lyon in France. Since then, I always wished I had the balance, single-pointedness, as well as the courage that tightrope walking requires. The practice of multilingualism is a bit like that. It involves balancing thoughts and feelings coming to one's mind in different languages and knowing how to carve a single and authentic voice out of them to carry across. So far, I have not experienced my multilingualness as paradoxal, because it is not based on a sense of divided self. If anything, it has nurtured in me a stronger desire for 'cultural negative capability' or the freeing experience of being an 'impersonal self' (Hoffman 1989: 121), of existing beyond any linguistic and cultural conditioning. The experience of multilingual practice of that kind encourages more self-knowledge. It is in this sense that each multilingual crossing exercise is a kind of courageous act, at least for me.

[4] See Crozet (2006), Crozet (2012) and Crozet (2015).

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