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**Monsters, myths and  
Multilingual Creativity**

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# Monsters, myths and Multilingual Creativity

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## Abstract

This article sets out the emergent sector of “Multilingual Creativity”, the innovative range of initiatives which engage with the complexity and huge potential of multilingualism amongst young people. Instead of seeing multilingualism as simply the coexistence of different languages within the same space, Multilingual Creativity explicitly focuses on hybrid linguistic practices referred to as “plurilingualism”. While dominant paradigms of language teaching (such as EAL, MFL and Community Languages) tend to envisage monolingual contexts for language use, the projects explored in this article allow for individuals’ broader linguistic repertoires to be enlisted within creative endeavours, much as they are within the purposeful interactions of real everyday life. Using examples from different projects, I show how Multilingual Creativity can challenge established dogmas about languages and how they should be taught. I end by highlighting the need for more projects which acknowledge the complexities of multilingual learning, as well as more practitioners with the skills to implement them.

In a primary school classroom in Brixton the pupils are drawing monsters. There are six groups working feverishly, and each table boasts a different beast. Some have horns and sharp teeth dripping with blood, others look quite cuddly. There’s a multi-limbed Cyclops-spider, a winged lizard with Prince Charles ears and a yeti-like creature with unexpectedly stylish hair. Filling the space around these fantastical sketches is a web of labels, describing the mishmash of body parts in a range of languages and registers. The lizard’s wings are tagged with “asa”, “ala”, “aile”, “kanat” and “ ”, and its fearsome teeth are “dents”, “chompers” and “diş”. The modish yeti has its left “arm” and “hand” labelled separately, but their counterparts on the right are encompassed by the one Russian term “pyka”. The eight “pattes” of the Cyclops-spider highlight another lack of direct linguistic equivalence, the French word taking in “foot”, “ankle” and at least part of “leg”, but ending somewhere short of “thigh”. This is all part of a Translation Nation workshop (more of which later), and it’s the stuff of Govean nightmares. The scribbled monsters may be imaginary, but the linguistic blurring and hybridity they represent are very real.

My journey to this workshop was not an obvious one. I started my career as a French teacher in a struggling comprehensive in Croydon, dedicating myself to drilling understandably unenthusiastic London teenagers in boulangerie etiquette. I moved onto work as a coordinator for English as an additional language (EAL) at a Lambeth school, responsible for ensuring that pupils who spoke another language at home could access the school curriculum and progress academically. The linguistic focus moved from ordering in shops and describing summer holidays to mastering the structures of classroom genres: the scientific hypothesis, the ethical debate and the increasingly convoluted short story which Maths exam questions have become. Another part of my job was “tracking”; analysing school attainment data broken down by different ethnic and linguistic categories in order to identify potentially underachieving groups. A big concern in the borough at the time was “Portuguese underachievement” and, one thing leading to another, I ended up accompanying a group of 16 pupils on a bilingual Portuguese-English creative writing residential run by Arvon. It was at

this rural retreat in West Yorkshire that my initiation into London multilingualism really began. Five years on, I'm undertaking a placement as "Researcher in Residence" at the Free Word Centre, investigating the emergent sector of "Multilingual Creativity", the innovative range of initiatives which engage with the complexity and huge potential of multilingualism amongst young people. In this article I want to set out some of the incredible projects I've come across, and use these to shine a light on the much misconceived notion of multilingualism.

As I said above, (M)Other Tongues, Arvon's series of bilingual creative writing courses supported by the Gulbenkian Foundation, was my introduction to the power of creative multilingual projects. Amongst the sixteen students I accompanied, the effect of the course was felt in sixteen different ways, making it a challenge to sum up, but it's really this multi-dimensionality in itself which is the main story. Spending a week living and working bilingually with a diverse group of Portuguese-speaking young Londoners exposed me to just how many things "bilingual" could mean. Back in school we had a database which recorded every pupil's "home language". But where did this leave the pupils who would reply in English when their parents spoke to them in Portuguese? What about those who spoke English at home but used Portuguese at school to communicate with pupils newly arrived from Portugal? What about the Madeiran girl who spoke Brazilian Portuguese at school with her Brazilian best friend? And where was the box for the girl who spoke Jamaican Creole with her mother and Portuguese with her Angolan father? The Arvon course gave a space for these more complex linguistic behaviours to find their way onto the page, and therefore into the explicit analytical gaze of those who employed them, often for the first time. It was these questions which led me to go part-time and begin studying for a PhD, looking at the ethnic and linguistic labels we use to monitor young people at school, compared to their actual language use throughout the school day. While in this space, with one foot in school and the other in academia, I found myself involved in Translation Nation and the workshop described above.

When I first heard about the multilingual monsters activity my objective-drilled teacher brain sounded a note of warning. What was the point of this? What vocabulary and structures were pupils supposed to pick up and how was the session constructed to facilitate this? I have since collaborated on a number of projects with Sarah Ardizzone, the award-winning writer and translator responsible for multilingual monsters, and we have come to understand and appreciate the different "teacherly" and "arty" hats we wear. Teachers tend to be very focused on building. We imagine the edifice of knowledge and skills a child needs, we ask what foundations they already have, and we design the scaffolding required to support the next bricks. The approach of arts practitioners can be quite different and often starts with an element of destruction. Those foundations a child has can be a prison of limited and limiting conceptualisations which stymie creative potential. Once this is exposed children are empowered to become architects as well as brick-layers.

Multilingual monsters works its creative destruction by challenging some basic ideas about language, and it does this in three ways. Firstly, the juxtaposition of languages and their different takes on something as apparently universal as body parts throws a spotlight on language as a particular perspective, not a value-free rendering of reality. This is more than cultural awareness, it is metalinguistic insight. Secondly, bringing in different registers alongside different languages highlights that this jostling of meanings between not-quite-equivalent "ways of saying" can take place within languages as well as between them. The implication is that any student, monolingual or otherwise, can be a translator. Finally, and most crucially, these insights are arrived at by channelling the existing skill sets within the

classroom. Such environments are not just multilingual in the sense of languages cohabiting within the same space, they cohabit and mingle within individuals and within the patterns of interaction between individuals. The Common European Framework or Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001) distinguishes between multilingualism as ‘the co-existence of different languages in a given society’ (p4) and ‘plurilingualism’ whereby individuals build up ‘a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of language contributes and in which languages interrelate and interact’ (p4). The latter certainly captures much more coherently the linguistic practices I have observed as a teacher and researcher. For many, this plurilingualism is a monster, an aberration, a threat to cultural coherence and an assault on linguistic standards and education. But as with most monsters, it is the myths surrounding it which stir us more than the reality: the convenient fables which give us a sense of proper place, and the cautionary tales which keep us awake at night. I want to set out some of these myths, and show that there’s far more to be excited about than afraid of.

### “Talking proper”

The preeminent myth feeding fears of plurilingualism is the notion that there is a “proper” way to speak a language, a standard form which is somehow superior to lesser “dialects” tied to geographical region and/or social class. The work of William Labov (1969) in the US and Peter Trudgill (1975) in the UK went a long way to debunk this myth but it lingers on. Snell (2013) writes:

These linguists demonstrated that, grammatically, non-standard dialects like Black English Vernacular (in Labov’s case) or regional varieties of British English (in Trudgill’s case) are as systematic, logical and rule-governed as standard English; they are just different dialects of English’ (p110)

However, Snell also highlights a flaw in this ‘different-but-equal approach to dialect variation’ (p111), pointing out that such neat, bounded dialects simply do not exist in practice. Instead, she advocates a “repertoire” approach’ (p111) to thinking about language which acknowledges a linguistic bricolage similar to that of plurilingualism but across the dialects available *within* a language. Translation Nation, a collaboration between Eastside Education and the Stephen Spender Trust, engages directly with this reality. The primary strand of this project entails 3 days of workshops, usually with Year 5 pupils, where stories are brought in from home in other languages and translated as a collective endeavour. Pupils work in mixed groups, perhaps only one of them with any knowledge of the original language of the story. It is this person’s job to explain the sense of the tale to the others, then they all have a role in finding the best ways to say this in English. The vast majority of the work is focused on this stage, articulating the story in English. Children discuss the appropriate tone and how to render the voices of particular characters. They pool their knowledge of a range of English registers, creating translations where a Chinese emperor may speak in the Queen’s English, or where a group of Egyptian children communicate in the repertoire of young Brixtonians.

The myth of “talking proper” also operates at a more international level. There’s an old adage of ambiguous provenance, well-known amongst sociolinguists, that ‘a language is a dialect with an army and a navy’. This captures the traditionally strong correlation between political power and linguistic recognition. Blommaert and Rampton (2011) highlight the relatively recent solidification into fixed “named” languages, describing these as ‘ideological

constructions historically tied to the emergence of the nation-state in the 19th Century’ (p5). In the aftermath of colonialism, the idea that bounded languages can be tied neatly to nation states is a particularly fanciful one. When schools then use labels like “Portuguese” to categorise the “home language” of a section of their pupils, this casts a wide net which takes in varieties from Brazil, mainland Portugal, Madeira and Lusophone Africa. There may be questionable validity in treating this grouping as a coherent category, but this is another case where schools have something to learn from the more critical approach of arts organisations. Becky Swain, Head of Learning and Participation at Arvon, believes that one of the key strengths of (M)Other Tongues is the way it provides a space for students to interrogate explicitly what labels such as “Portuguese” or “Yoruba” mean to them, exploring this alongside peers whose repertoires will both overlap with and differ from their own. When it comes to creative multilingual work with young people, Becky’s advice is that facilitators must approach any project as an enquiry. When the teacher, writer or translator is genuinely interested in the linguistic world of the students, they will identify this facilitator as a fellow learner and respond by engaging more deeply with writing as exploration and research.

### **“Mother Tongue” and “Native Speaker”**

This commitment to examining how individuals actually engage with language will quickly unravel another central myth: the notion that everyone is a “native speaker” of a “mother tongue”, their first and natural language, distinguishable from other “foreign languages” picked up subsequently. Blommaert and Rampton (2011) criticise terms such as ‘native speaker’ for carrying ‘*a priori* assumptions about the links between origins, upbringing, proficiency and types of language’ (p6, original emphasis). Instead they emphasise ‘linguistic repertoire’ as a more appropriate concept:

‘it refers to individuals’ very variable (and often rather fragmentary) grasp of a plurality of differentially shared styles, registers and genres, which are picked up (and maybe then partially forgotten) within biographical trajectories that develop in actual histories and topographies’ (p6).

One initiative which engages particularly successfully with this notion is Critical Connections, Goldsmiths University’s Multilingual Digital Storytelling project (MDST) supported by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation. This involves pupils from a range of language supplementary schools in the UK, as well as schools in other countries, creating and sharing short films, choosing their own topic under a suggested overarching theme. Within these, pupils draw on their full linguistic repertoires, blending English and the other language they are studying as they see fit. In the supplementary school setting pupils may be British-born with very little knowledge of the “community language”, recent arrivals in the UK and fairly new to English, or anywhere in between these poles. The open format of MDST allows them to engage fully both with the creative endeavour and with their broader linguistic skill set. Dominant paradigms of language teaching tend to envisage monolingual contexts: EAL is for accessing the school curriculum in English; MFL is for functional encounters with non-English-speaking foreigners; Community Languages often stake out a defensive space with the intention of equipping second and third generation immigrants to use their parents’ or grandparents’ language *instead of* English in family or community settings. Dr Vicky Macleroy at Goldsmiths sees MDST’s refusal to sit neatly within any one of these paradigms as its major strength. Rather than being a tool in the service of monolingual language acquisition, MDST puts the individual and their creative vision first. Linguistic repertoires

are then enlisted within this endeavour, much as they are within the purposeful interactions of real everyday life.

### **“Community Languages”**

I suggested above that “community languages” are often far more complex than this label implies, both in terms of the “community” of speakers, and the actual repertoires they have access to. The situation on the ground is far less neat than schools and some community language advocates would like to believe. Harris (1997) identifies a phenomenon which he terms ‘romantic bilingualism’ whereby ethnic minority students are assumed to have both fluency in and affiliation to their putative “community language”. In practice, Harris finds that “bilingual” ethnic minority pupils may profess a strong preference for English, particularly a ‘local vernacular English or multiethnic vernacular’ (p20), and claim little expertise and even ambivalence or resistance to the ‘putative community language’ (p21). I have certainly come across a broad spectrum of engagement with “community languages” through the London Wordscape Project, a series of multilingual creative writing courses I organised on behalf of the Gulbenkian Foundation. Many of the students enjoyed using their “community language” for interaction during workshops but felt much more able to express themselves in English when it came to actually writing. What often gave them the most satisfaction was engaging with the English registers normally barred from formal learning environments, and the anthologies they produced contained high quality writing which drew on the kind of local multi-ethnic vernaculars described by Harris. Dr Ana Souza of UCL, Institute of Education, London, and Director of ABRIR, a UK-Brazilian education organisation, stresses the need for “community language” education to engage beyond just communication with relatives in order to give it a wider relevance for students. Part of this is engaging with English in order to “meet young people half-way”, and Ana Souza encourages parents to acknowledge that English is an important part of these young people’s reality.

The notion of “community languages” can overlook local affiliations as much as it can simplify non-local ones. This was brought home to me in a vivid visual format during a London Wordscape course with Chinese students in a Haringey secondary school. The workshops were slotted into an existing after-school Mandarin GCSE course for six “native speakers” and I ran the sessions jointly with Lee Yee, a Mandarin and Cantonese language teacher. At the beginning of the second workshop I drew a large Venn diagram on the board, the left-hand circle labelled “English”, and the right-hand circle labelled “普通话” (Mandarin). I then provided each student with a series of different coloured post-it notes: three greens for them to label with the names of their three closest friends; three pinks for their closest family members; three oranges for their favourite singers, three blues for their favourite places, and so on. The idea was they then stuck these up on the appropriate region of the Venn diagram. If they generally interacted with or associated something or someone with English then it would go on the left, if Mandarin then on the right, if a mixture then in the cross-over section in the middle. The outside of the diagram was reserved for things or people associated with “other languages”. I had run this activity several times with other language groups and it always generated a lot of interest, typically showing that music was often an Anglophone thing while food definitely was not. Family members tended to drift from right to left as you moved down the generations. However, on this occasion a good half of the post-its ended up outside of the circles. When I asked the students about this it turned out that all of them were from the same city in China, Fujian, and they conducted a large part of their lives in what they called “Fujian dialect”. These students were also fluent in

Mandarin, and so were making the most of the GCSE course on offer, but it was a stretch to call this their “community language”.

This experience fits with what Vertovec (2007) calls ‘superdiversity’, the sheer complexity behind ethnic affiliations and linguistic practices which has emerged from more recent immigration and which is not accounted for in public policy. The needs of the “Chinese community” are imagined to be met by offering Mandarin and Cantonese GCSE, but this fails to acknowledge other relevant languages and dialects or engage in any way with the idea of complex linguistic repertoires. Vertovec writes of the need to consider ‘the conjunction of ethnicity with a range of other variables when considering the nature of various “communities”, their composition, trajectories, interactions and public service needs’ (p1025). While traditional multicultural approaches in the UK have sought to promote ‘tolerance and respect for collective identities’ (p1027), this has entailed an often essentialising perspective on different communities. Vertovec stresses both the demographic diversity within foreign-born groups, and the heterogeneity of transnational practices. Individuals do not belong to neatly bounded communities, and nor do languages. Rampton’s (1995a; 1995b) work on ‘crossing’ explores the phenomenon of people straying into languages which are not “theirs”. He writes:

‘Language crossing involves code alternation by people who are not accepted members of the group associated with the second language that they are using (code switching into varieties that are not generally thought to belong to them). This kind of switching involves a distinct sense of movement across social or ethnic boundaries and it raises issues of legitimacy which, in one way or another, participants need to negotiate in the course of their encounter. (Rampton, 1995b, p485)

This phenomenon is commonly identified in linguistic ethnographic studies, particularly with young people in diverse urban settings, and shows how linguistic repertoires can extend beyond languages picked up within the family or studied formally at school. Rampton (2011) also emphasises the social stratification within multilingualism, describing the more vernacular practices outlined above as ‘a key sociolinguistic dynamic within the globalised urban working classes’ (p1248), and contrasting this with ‘the new multilingual posh’, a more middle-class oriented ‘standard language’ multilingualism.

### **“Immersion works best”**

There is a pervasive dogma which crops up across different paradigms of language teaching stating that the best way to learn a language is to immerse yourself in it and shut out any interference from your “mother tongue”. I will set aside for a moment everything I have just described about linguistic repertoires and the mingling of languages within people’s real lives, to ask: immersion in what? How often does student-motivated communication within an MFL classroom extend beyond “Est-ce que je peux avoir un stylo, s’il vous plaît?” The interdiction of English is one model of immersion, another is to focus on how genuinely immersed – in the sense of gripped, captivated and excited – students actually are in what they are doing. This is the starting point for Rewrite’s Creative ESOL programme where courses for English beginners focus on language learning through drama and play and can involve creative activities such as puppet-making or face-painting. Eleanor Cocks, Rewrite’s director, stresses that it is task-focused urgency which creates a context for the most spontaneous and expressive language use. A similar approach is adopted by Coney with their

Adventures in Learning. These interactive, classroom-based projects are delivered largely by the classroom teacher and cast children as the participants in an adventure. Different curriculum-linked tasks are thrown up, but always treading a fine line between story and reality. Co-Director Tom Bowtell explains that Coney's approach to language activities is always to ensure that a genuine need for language skills comes to the fore, emerging from the fantastical situations created by the Adventure in Learning.

All of the projects mentioned in this article have three things in common: their impact on young people; their acknowledgement of the complexities of multilingual learning; and their finely tuned models dependent on the time and experience of highly skilled practitioners. The obvious question then is how this work can be carried forward and its reach expanded? While models of excellent practice exist, the knowledge and resources they rely on do not make them easy to replicate. In response to the shortage of practitioners equipped to carry out this kind of work, Translators in Schools was launched in 2013 in order to train translators to develop and deliver workshops in schools. This work is continuing with broader multilingual training for teachers as well as upcoming public events. In a wider development, this issue is now the focus of a major new initiative bringing together the Centre for Language, Discourse and Communication at King's College London, King's Cultural Institute (KCI), the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation and the Free Word Centre (FWC), as well as a host of other organisations across the cultural and education sectors. Under the banner of "Multilingual Creativity" next year KCI and FWC will jointly host a series of events to bring together interested parties from schools, universities, museums, libraries, publishers and arts, cultural and community organisations as well as freelance multilingual practitioners such as writers and translators. These events will provide a space for the sharing of research and best practice as well as the development of new and more impactful projects and, crucially, will raise the profile of plurilingualism. Translation will provide a key plank to all of this work, and its recent rehabilitation within the MFL National Curriculum comes at an ideal moment. Plurilingualism may be anathema to traditionalists within education policy but they will have their work cut out trying to square translation's intrinsically dual-language focus with "immersion" and the monolingual focus of current language teaching paradigms. Translation could yet prove to be plurilingualism's Trojan Horse.

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## Links

- Arvon (M)Other Tongues <http://www.arvon.org/schools/mother-tongues/>
- Londonwordscape Project <http://thelondonwordscapeproject.org/>
- Translators in Schools <http://translatorsinschools.org/>
- Translation Nation <http://translation-nation.herokuapp.com/>
- Goldsmiths: Critical Connections - Multilingual digital story-telling <https://goldsmithsmdst.wordpress.com/>
- Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation <http://www.gulbenkian.org.uk/>
- Paul Hamlyn Foundation <http://www.phf.org.uk/>
- King's Cultural Institute <http://www.kcl.ac.uk/cultural/culturalinstitute/index.aspx>
- Eastside Educational Trust <http://www.eastside.org.uk/>
- The Stephen Spender Trust <http://www.stephen-spender.org/>
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