

Friday March 6, 2015,

[SACPAN](#) Plenary Session, University of British Columbia Asian Centre
Auditorium

Abstract

Languages our families brought from the old country, and that welled up from this land, whisper in the rhythms of our stories. Will you stumble or glide with this tool you've received, this English language so filled with biblical references, colonial constructs, and publishing conventions? Shauna discusses a few steps you can take to show the beauty and pathos of characters moving to unheard music.

Thank you, [Dr. Anne Murphy](#), for your warm introduction, and Good Evening everyone. I'm delighted to return to my alma mater, UBC.

Today let's talk about English, the language with which I mind-dance, read, dream and write stories. I'm going to make the very dangerous assumption that you're a lot like me, in that your private space is multilingual while the public space, especially your academic space is mostly monolingual -- or at best bilingual. That you need to write stories, and want to write in English.

A child of immigrants or a child native to this soil understands more than one language, even if the secret languages of her parents remain spoken only by them. In Canada, French and Punjabi are the most spoken languages after English, it's possible our kitchen vocabulary may at least be common.

Traditional language and customs can be closely guarded so it takes some work, reading and probing for second generation Canadians to figure them out. Still, even grandchildren and great grandchildren of immigrants retain rhythms and speech patterns of old country languages, and these shape experience.

My husband's Gaelic roots show in phrases like, "Oh, did you now?" and "Where might you be going?" My cousins in California tell me to "Close the Light," and

their “Achcha” with many more than fifty shades of meaning, passes for “gotcha.” A fellow traveler on my plane to Calgary gave me some untranslatables from Dutch: Chuda Bekompst, meaning: I’m fulfilled, satisfied. And “Ate Smaklich” meaning “Bon Appetit -- but not quite.” In North America we are all at least a teeny bit bilingual.

Raise your hand if you are fully bilingual.

Now raise your other hand if you have ever pretended you weren’t?

Look around. I recognize myself in you. Thank you.

So we in North America are so anxious to assimilate and learn English, we willfully lose our multilingual abilities by the second or third generation. The practice of sending children to residential schooling is gone, yet scorn and silence can still kill our ability to dream in our ancestral languages. And these days, Canada needs those linguistic skills -- not only to translate CICS taped conversations to prevent disasters like AI 182 -- but to truly participate in global trade.

Meanwhile in India, children respond in English when addressed in Punjabi, Hindi or Tamil. All around the old country, Indians try to practice their English on tourists. They sign up for online and DVD courses in English. Some show great disdain for the 360 vernacular languages of India, which they view as being in stasis. Ambition drives them to learn the dominant language, sixty-five years after a long independence struggle against England.

The result is English, and also Hinglish, a growing language now under academic study, an English littered with terms like -- thoroughfare, double carriageway, status quo – left behind from the 1940s, and added to literal translations from Hindustani.

Guru English is another growing creole, as India’s godmen and godwomen use it to rake in tax free “donations.” It contains terms like dharma, karma, shakti, the Self... now disparaged as New Agey terms in the American academy.

Sanskrit has been raised from the dead by state-controlled television in India, resulting in news incomprehensible to the common man. And alongside that, so many live Indian languages are dying from lack of patronage, love, sound, delight, and new words.

National Geographic says, "By 2100, more than half of the more than 7,000 languages spoken on Earth—many of them not yet recorded—may disappear, taking with them a wealth of knowledge about history, culture, the natural environment, and the human brain."

Writing is not a special preservative for dying languages, but bilingual writers can preserve that wealth of knowledge, history and culture, by bringing our stories, our philosophies and our predicaments, into English.

But much as I love the language, English is a minefield for those of non-Judeo Christian heritage.

Biblical and Shakespearian References

I went to convent school in India. I read in Church on Sundays. I know my Bible with a capital B. If I'm telling stories about Indian Christians, or Anglo-Indians, or Jewish Indians, I don't mind employing biblical references, with a lower case b. But the interior voices and experiences of non-Judeo-Christian characters often sound false or lesser when biblical references creep in.

Why should that be? People of Judeo-Christian heritage use such phrases in non-religious application – TV, radio, politics. Their very biblical illiteracy is a sign of the times.

A sign of the times -- That's from the King James Bible, Matthew 16:3 – "O ye hypocrites, ye can discern the face of the sky; but can ye not discern the signs of the times?"

Does it matter? What if my use of biblical references is like casting bread on the waters to get readers to read my stories, the price of using English? Oh dear,

that's from Ecclesiastes 11:1 - Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days. Maybe it's a peace offering made in advance? Up comes Leviticus 3:6 - And if his offering for a sacrifice of peace offering unto the LORD (the word springs to mind all in caps) be of the flock; male or female, he shall offer it without blemish.

I thought I was original, explaining the Sikh khanda as a double-edged sword, till I remembered Proverbs 5:4 – “But her end is bitter as wormwood, sharp as a two-edged sword.” Other biblical phrases creep in...Dust to dust (Genesis 3:19), Seeing eye to eye (Isaiah 52:8); Hearts desire (Psalms 21:2); Harden his heart (Exodus 4:21) – on and on. And if they are not Biblical, they're Shakespearian.

My dear friend [Satwinder Bains](#) made egg-bhurji for breakfast yesterday – a dish fit for the gods, in my opinion. But oh, that's Brutus' line in Julius Cesear. “And, gentle friends, Let's kill him boldly, but not wrathfully; Let's carve him as a dish fit for the gods... “ That line would evoke awful images for her delicious egg-bhurji.

Why do Indo-Canadians say, “all of a sudden?” instead of suddenly? Because Shakespeare did, in *The Taming of the Shrew*,” and because there was no copyright on Shakespeare, every child in India had to memorize these plays, even if the few shrews we had were pretty much upper caste or tamed. The 17th century phrase “all of a sudden” sounds more forceful than “suddenly.”

Mainstream politicians on the nightly news speak of “fair play”, and I'm sure few could tell you the term is Miranda's in *The Tempest*. But when someone like the Former Gov of Florida Bobby Jindal said it, it rang false, sounding dimly comprehended, rote learned from a foreign language. Non-judeo Christian speakers falter in English, because their cellular understanding of the language is still evolving. Bobby Jindal's cellular understanding may evolve, once this biology major suddenly allows himself to believe in evolution.

While writing *What the Body Remembers*, I needed to describe the blood-bath of Partition. I toyed with “a descent into Hell.” The phrase bothered me for days till I

changed it to “a descent into Bedlam,” Bedlam was once a mental hospital in England, and evoked the asylum in Sadat Hasan Manto’s famous short story, while Hell was so far out of my characters’ frame of reference that it would have been a betrayal of subject matter to use it.

I have made exceptions in the interests of getting my point across, on several occasions. The use of the word soul interchangeably with atman, in *The Selector of Souls* is workable, but as we say in computer science, not a perfect data mapping between the biblical and the vedantic.

We know human beings have universal experiences that can be expressed and described by the particular in the form of story -- so why is the mapping of cultural constructs and philosophy from one area to the other so very messy and inexact?

Are we just using different words and languages? Now that we’re all – even children in France – being taught English, and new generations are yearning not to be free, but to trade, can we dare to believe that if we just define our terms, we’ll stop misunderstandings? Maybe we’ll persuade Prime Minister Harper to actually read the books Yan Martel sent him between 2009 and 2012? Maybe we’ll eliminate domestic violence, maybe we’ll obey the resolutions passed by the United Nations...

Not likely. Differences matter. Not every conflict is a cultural misunderstanding. For instance, when we truly understood Hitler, we went to war.

Even as we are willingly or unwillingly swept into cultural homogeneity, our economics and history are still hybrid, our geography varied, and our resulting realities far from standard. More important, our eschatologies -- what we believe about the afterlife – often cause us to perceive and judge utterly differently.

Translation into English may be the Holy Grail for translators and storytellers, but an ultimate impossibility. During my MFA at UBC, I attended Professor Levitt's class on translation. He would give us "the bones", meaning the literal translation of the words, and ask us to present a "translated" poem. Not once did two students come up with the same poem. Reading more deeply after graduation, I learned this process had been used by monolingual colonial translators for several centuries. No wonder we need more contemporary translations by bilingual writers!

To translate is to transform. If we are to move past Orientalism and Occidentalism to a truly global and inclusive culture, we might do well to remember the words of the Prophet Muhammad, "that the ink of the scholar is holier than the blood of the martyr."

When my nani, my grandmother on my mum's side, became old, she switched from speaking Punjabi and English as she had all her life, to Hindi. Old age had claimed a little of her brain, but not all. It turns out, each language resides in its own area of the brain. Bilinguals have a backup language in our brains – all we have to do is keep it exercised. Canadian writer Mark Abley says, "Bilingualism...can make you less credulous. It can give you an extra line of defence."¹

With the advantage of bilingualism, comes great responsibility. A responsibility to use the languages we were raised with, and bring their metaphors, their beauty into public space. The responsibility to twist, push, and puncture the sanctity of English so it translates the experience of non-judeo-Christians. The responsibility to initiate others into our world, using English for our stories – yes English, that same bible-spouting, delightfully promiscuous hag who, over a few hundred years of colonization, has expanded her horizons, and turned wonderfully capacious and complicatedbut oh so very stuffily respectable.

¹ *Spoken Here: Travels Among Threatened Languages*. Mark Abley. Houghton Mifflin NY, 2003, p. 203

So how difficult is it to think about Indian metaphors and ideas in English? How difficult is it to mind-dance with this language as we tell stories about people who dream and speak not in the rhythms and metaphors of the Bible, but in those of the *Guru Granth Sahib*, the *Vedas* or the *Koran*?

The first assertions of independence from colonization are marked by artists **using native subjects** in visual art, and using native languages in poetry and fiction.

Toni Morrison and Alice Walker's refusal to allow a single non-black in their stories was in their time as revolutionary as writing a play with only Indian women -- no men at all! -- has been in mine.

Sometimes our characters challenge the very assumptions of the society they live in. Amit Basu does so with a linguistic scalpel in *Waiting for the Man*, longlisted for the 2014 Giller Prize. It begins with a successful advertising executive losing all interest in creating desire. My fellow Giller judges called it "new-agey" which engendered the usual chicken and egg discussion...but that's another story.

Writers who write about characters from non-Judeo-Christian traditions know how important it is to remain true to your subject matter. In *Love Enough* by Dionne Brand, a character points out "that Macbeth was a fiction, only a play." And another says "it had to be true first, for it to have become a fiction."

And yet....

Is it enough to use characters of your own heritage when you're mind-dancing with English, writing fiction for a global audience?

Would it be, as a character in Shani Mootoo's *Moving Forward Sideways like a Crab* says, "easier to change myself than to wrestle with society?"

In my opinion, we don't have a choice. To write our stories, we have to wrestle our metaphysics, philosophy, ideas, metaphors and concepts into North American society. Not for Euro Canadians to experience in performance, but for **ourselves**

to know, understand, adapted and enlarge for our time, for this continent. This must be done to truly claim our place here.

We who escaped the Universal Law of the Gospel are living proof that such a law was not universal. Historically, that law authorized that we be converted, ignored, slowly exterminated along with our languages, turned into performance artists, or killed by the irreparable violence of transplantation (as happened in Partition). We can now refuse all of the above options, re-examine history, and imagine lives with greater participation, linguistic expression and control. If we don't, we risk being embalmed in a cheerful stasis of the model minority.

We owe it to our parents, who struggled to make our lives better than theirs, to keep their language alive. Who knows? We may need it to communicate with them if English fades from their minds... We must speak and learn the language of our heritage. We can't walk away from thousands of years of culture, shutting off cousins, uncles and aunties in the old country. Nor can we pretend our differences from those of European heritage are just grist for Russell Peters' comedy.

Here let me pause and offer you a reading from *The Selector of Souls*, a passage in which you can hear some Indian words and a neologism.

<reading>

Verbal Elitism

Some book club members ask: why do you use so many Indian words? How can we read a book with so many Indian words? One book club member said she felt I was playing a game of Madlibs, or fill in the blanks with the reader. A book club in Washington DC assigned a member familiar with Hindi and Punjabi to write a glossary for the other members. She contacted me to fill her in on the Urdu words and I protested, "If I wanted readers to flip back and forth to a glossary, don't you think I would have provided one?" In fact, my publishers and editors have contractually agreed to omit a glossary. Unexpectedly, though, Indian readers have proved equally concerned for the delicate sensitivities of monolinguals.

Indian words in my novels are defined immediately after the word or by context in the para. For instance, in *What the Body Remembers*, "she slips her feet into her jutis" is the first occurrence of the word jutis - what else would a juti be but a kind of shoe? Flippers, snowshoes or skates -- in Punjab of the 1930s?

Unfamiliar words do not present undue problems to readers if defined in the text and/or understood from context. And here I have to thank my monolingual editors – Diane Martin, Laurel Boone and Anne Collins – who spent many hours making this a reality. My rule was to use Punjabi, Hindi or Urdu words only if there was no other language equivalent, and if I felt them to be so beautiful I wanted the reader to hear them, if only in her or his head. If *Star Trek* could use nonsense words in similar fashion, and did not distribute glossaries to their viewers, we could do it, too.

Since the books are so carefully edited to provide sense by context, the question shows the reader is stopping at each Indian word to panic, instead of taking in a para at a time. If you just retrain your eye to move past the word and take in larger chunks – a sentence at least after the word, you get it. The reading style required is similar to the whole sentence reading style needed for the works of Marie Claire Blaise, who shifts point of view after each sentence, and doesn't offer even a paragraph break or quote marks to show if a speech takes place internally or externally.

But North American readers of about 15 years ago were long-trained to block words from lower-power/denigrated languages for fear they might learn them. Maybe this is less true today. I hope so! We still need to fight publishing conventions that italicize words so they shout to the reader "foreign word! Skip over me!" Other publishing conventions: I have overridden wherever possible – Capitalized G for God but only for a Christian god. Capitalized L for Lord if he is meant to be the Christian Lord. Words like Rama, Shiva, Ganesha ending in an "a" because colonizers said they could not pronounce the aspirated consonant.

Language elitism also happens within English between Norman-root English words and Anglo-Saxon English words. As Alan Jay Lerner says in *My Fair Lady*, "This verbal class distinction by now should be antique."

But it isn't. Consider American Standard English vs Black English or Southern accented English. In Canada, consider the class distinctions between English and Joul. (After a year of living in Toronto I realized I was groping for French words, while living in a city with bilingual signs.)

When *What the Body Remembers* was published in 1999, I found myself defending the use of Indian words all over North America and Europe. The German publishers protested the most. The Italians were cool with it from the start. Strangely, although *The Tiger Claw* published in 2004 contains many French words, being set in France, I was never called upon to defend my use of French words. I conclude that French words have a higher standing than Indian words. Our Colonial past is still with us -- it's pretty depressing.

What's our recourse? What do I recommend?

Refuse to forget the languages of the old country; refuse to dumb down our lived experience to the requirements of a monolingual text. Our stories are ours; let's sing our chutney lives into chutney English. Let our words join those of Canadians from elsewhere to forge a new language, a Canadian English in which we all participate. Only then -- unlike the immigrant generation, torn between two homelands -- can we be fully integrated into this continent.

I'll close with a story told me by my professor, Brian Brett, when I was his student here at UBC. He said Leonard Cohen was once asked by a CBC interviewer to do an on-air reading from one of his novels, but leave out the bad words. Cohen replied, "There are no bad words."

Remember that, ladies and gentlemen -- or brothers and sisters as I would translate from Hindi -- There are no bad words.

All we have are words. Use the most appropriate ones to tell your stories. Use unfamiliar words if necessary. Use the words from your ancestral languages where necessary. I assure you English is more capacious, more hospitable, and more accommodating than we think.

And today nothing -- but nothing -- is foreign.

Thank you.

Shauna Singh Baldwin