

**MOTHER TONGUE AND
OTHER TONGUES**
Narratives in Multilingual
Psychotherapy

Edited by

Ali Zarbafi and Shula Wilson



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Introduction

Ali Zarbafi

All cultures are concerned with how we speak and communicate as this represents identity, history, and home. Communication is also essential for survival, emotionally and socially. The way we speak is a communication of care, concern, empathy, or distance and indifference. It is also a communication of a country, a region, a class, and an experience. Speaking a language is an emotional experience; it is very loaded and full of pleasure and pain. The speaking person is both an individual and part of a culture, or cultures, with dense collective and individual shapes. We are always faced with finding out about each other as well as hoping that we share similar assumptions. The issue of identity, which is a feeling of belonging, is essential, full of possibility and sometimes very uncomfortable as it touches the tensions between who we are and who we are becoming. This simple everyday sentiment sits next to more complex historical experiences and memories of languages and cultures being changed or lost or banished due to the colonial, imperial, and regional moves of powerful nations in search of conquest and economic gain.

We are now living in times where the issue of identity and difference has taken on a more defensive hue. The tide is turning towards

an inward looking nostalgia of sameness based on fear rather than understanding. The experience of hearing another language, the way it is spoken, and being faced with the image of the other is now more complex as it is imbued with projections of powerlessness, fear, terrorism, and survival. This is also because the so-called native speaker, especially in the Western world, has lost confidence in who they actually are historically and how they can speak from where they come from with some perspective. This is in part due to a world in which national and regional identities and communities are secondary to transnational politics and economics, and so the psychological consequences for national and regional communities are those of fear and feeling forgotten, which leads to a return to an imagined or idealised past.

Houses in search of a home

The Multi-lingual Psychotherapy Centre emerged in the 1990s out of a need to mine the creativity of multiculturalism and difference from a group of psychotherapists who came together weekly to read psychoanalytic papers. This group was ongoing for five years and eventually formed Imago-MLPC as it became clear that there was a common theme in the group related to being international both culturally and linguistically. Gradually a recurring theme began to emerge, not related to the psychoanalytic studies, posing the question of our identity; the group's identity. So we embarked on a social dreaming session. Social dreaming (Lawrence, 1998) is a method which allows individuals in a group called a matrix, within a certain time frame, to bring dreams and associations to the dreams. The dreams are seen as material thrown up from the human social world, rather than belonging to an individual dreamer and so can create new associations, conversations, and further dreams without the need to analyse or get anywhere. Social dreaming is about the centrality of the social world in the dreaming individual. Dreams do not "belong" to the individual. They are relational, with the other in mind. This method used in any group or organisational context tends to illuminate unconscious preoccupations not available on a more conscious thinking level.

The most powerful result of those sessions was that we all dreamt of houses: houses made of cardboard, corner houses, inside-out houses,

back-to-front houses, houses that were split ... houses in search of a home, a joint home, a common home, a shared home? Dreaming together was a turning point, as at that point we became a set of individuals who were dreaming about finding ourselves together in London but from different parts of the world. What sort of house was this that we were unconsciously sharing and living in? This house was obviously one of cultural and linguistic diversity, of immigration and emigration, of being lost and being found, of difference and otherness.

Our inaugural lecture entitled “Displacement: Psychotherapy in my father’s language” was given in December 1997. The series that followed became known as the Burgh House Lectures. We have had forty lectures since the first and organised three conferences in the last twenty years, and published a book (Szekacs-Weisz & Ward, 2004).

Our aim, initially ambitious, became modest in time with three lectures a year and a conference possibly every three to four years, as we are a skeletal executive committee doing this work voluntarily and always looking for new members. The executive committee is made up of psychoanalytic, Jungian, and integrative psychotherapists. Our meetings are always interesting as we are constantly remembering or discussing an aspect of the multilingual experience either in our clinical work or in culture, that is, films, plays, politics, and everyday happenings. The lectures over the years have thrown up many ideas and thoughts. The speakers are invited to share their experience and the audience to free associate and there is a general atmosphere of sharing and remembering, a semblance of home.

Some ideas and thoughts that emerged through the years

- a. How do we experience and use our mother tongue when we are living in a second learnt language? What happens to it and how does it affect our learning of a second language? Is our emotional compass always in our original language? How do we think about this clinically?
- b. What is the relationship between your clinical language and your original language, which may be different? How is intimacy spoken or represented in different languages?

- c. What do we do when there are no words in the new language, which we can easily find in our mother tongue? Are we faced with loss, limitation, creativity, or just an awareness of being outside?
- d. How do we live “in-between” languages, betwixt and between as one speaker put it? Neither here nor there, always between, always moving where there is no sense of belonging.
- e. Where is the language of the father and how is it different from the mother’s language? What happens to a child who lives in father’s country but has a mother who speaks a foreign language? What is this like for the child who learns the language of the father’s culture as a first language as she or he grows up?
- f. One speaker wondered why it was so easy to swear in a learnt second language and how difficult it was to swear in the mother tongue. Somehow the second language freed her up but was it that easy or was it to do with a lack of emotional attachment?
- g. Others spoke of how the mother tongue was the forbidden language, or the language they needed to get away from, as it was too limiting, or painful. They put themselves in exile but somehow still carried this with them and needed ultimately to return to and think about their own exile. Yet others spoke of feeling exiled in their own countries by having to adopt the language of the coloniser which was at odds with their cultural experience, distorting and disturbing their sense of control and meaning.
- h. Maybe exile provides new possibilities unavailable in your original country and emotional language. Maybe it offers you perspective and an ability to think about your emotional life.
- i. And yet there was always a thought that culture and language precedes us for many generations. We carry the emotional atmosphere of our culture of birth throughout our lives even though we move away and build new lives and create new cultures and learn and create new languages. Our generational heritage always accompanies us in our new perspective and learning and never actually leaves us despite our best efforts. This can sometimes be represented by the accent which has an emotional hue. Somehow words are only traces of something much more—a collective home that we know about in our cultural histories and to which we add, even though we may not be able to put it into words too clearly.

Language, culture, and exile

Marcello Vinar, a Latin American psychoanalyst speaking from Paris while in exile from Argentina says,

To speak in a language implies the knowledge of more than words but other things as well about the culture that produces it. One might be able to understand the dictionary and at the same time not know much at all. Alienation comes from not being able to interpret the meaning of the words but much, even more importantly, the meaning of gestures, references and social relations. It is an unforgettable experience ... (Hollander, 1998, p. 209)

This “unforgettable experience” is emotional and linked to how the mother interprets culturally the intimate space for the child, initially through sounds and gestures (“motherese”) which are accompanied by words, which the child starts finding after the age of one (Stern, 1985). The intimate space will be imbued with the cultural codes and fantasies about childhood and motherhood, which will have its limits and truths (Maitra & Krause, 2015). This is the seat of identity and the self, from which the child/adult will be able to read his or her world, which will be within a culture, but also be able to tolerate and be curious about difference, that is, other cultures through a collective notion of being human (Papadopoulos, 2002). The child will be able to develop a reflective ability where affect can be recognised as feelings and then made sense of by thoughts and words, and, by becoming aware of other minds, develop an ethical sense of right and wrong (Fonagy et al., 2004).

Exile from this cultural home is the beginning of a journey and immediately faces us with a loss of identity and an impoverishment of the feeling self, and an awareness of what we have taken for granted which is generally vast. There is trauma and alienation in this journey but also a need to survive which can promise renewal. The need to survive involves learning a new language in order to gain some control and power in the new culture. Some learn quickly to survive, to perhaps forget or park the trauma and find a new identity as soon as possible. Others learn very slowly as there is a resistance and guilt at betraying the mother tongue and culture (Hollander, 1998, p. 209). Others are unable to learn

a second language as they are emotionally frozen and unable to break out of feelings of terror, shock, and guilt until there is some form of empathic understanding of their feelings in the mother tongue (Zarbafi, 2020).

The second language offers a life raft to the psyche as it involves a form of distancing from the mother tongue which can be creative as it affords perspective and recovery. For some this life raft is a getting away from a toxic mother tongue, others will use it instrumentally to survive, whereas others will find a more comfortable bridge to the second language if their mother tongue was a good enough seat of identity and reflective capacity. Bollas (1978), speaking about our relationship to the language of the mother says:

If failure occurs, let us say, at the point of acquiring the Word, the Word may become a meaningless expression of the child's internal world. Words may feel useless, or, if the rules of the family prohibit words that speak the mood of the self, they may feel dangerous. (p. 390)

How one acquires the mother tongue, which has a cultural location, affects how one may experience a second language as well. Clare (2004) makes this point very well when discussing Beckett. Clare argues that Beckett needed to leave Ireland and his mother tongue in order to gain some much-needed distance from his mother. He went to Paris after a short analysis with Bion in London. It was only by gaining this distance that Beckett was able to write more than twenty pieces or books in French and then retranslate himself back into English. French was a form of life raft in which his unconscious could be explored before he could express himself more freely and clearly in his mother tongue.

Other writers such as Tesone (1996) and Antinucci-Mark (1990) elaborate this point about how the second language distances us from the overwhelming mother tongue. Tesone, an Italian analyst and Freudian, compares the use and learning of a second language which comes after the original mother tongue as a sort of detour and distance from the affect-ridden mother tongue. In looking at a detailed case study Tesone points out that the foreign language his patient used was “representative” and therefore carried an ambiguous connection to the overloaded mother tongue. The ambivalence enabled distance and perspective.

Antinucci-Mark hints at the inter-lingual space which exists between languages and in therapy, back and forth, which is enriching and new for both, and which is my experience of languages.

Clinically it is crucial to understand how language functions in the consulting room and this is generally available through one's counter-transference, as well as other clues such as how easily the patient may say something in the second language, which may feel inappropriate or at odds with what the therapist is feeling or lack the appropriate affect.

This is rather like Ferenczi's (Dupont, 1988) point about the difficulty of swearing in the original language. The second language enables clearer and more honest communication as it does not carry the emotional depth and consequences of the first language.

Language however, exists in a cultural context. The innatist view of language was put forward by Chomsky in 1957 in which he proclaims that we have a language gene and below all languages there is a universal grammar. This has been under serious question for many years (Everett, 2017). Chomsky's is still the dominant view which presumably also influences psychological and psychoanalytic theories where culture is always seen as secondary to the psyche, which Stolorow and Atwood (1992) call "the myth of the isolated mind" proclaimed by drive theory and object relations theory (Stolorow & Atwood, 1992, p. 7). The mind is social and cultural and always exists in relation to an "other" or a group and so is part of a larger cultural context (Coleman, 2013). For Chomsky, language is the same everywhere ultimately, whatever the culture (Deutscher, 2011). Obviously psyche and language exist everywhere but the point is that these deep parts of ourselves exist within, and informed by, a broader cultural context which shapes and limits what can and cannot be said or represented in words, or what can and cannot be thought and felt (Everett, 2017).

Cultures are transgenerational and emerge as systems of meaning to make sense of a particular environment, context, and history and so will have nuanced complexities. Language is a necessary and subtle system of communication to do with survival between self and other (Lichtenberg, Lackmann, & Fosshage, 2002). This system of communication exists in a cultural home, which has a past, a present, and a future (Papadopoulos, 2002). The idea that somehow language or psyche are pure structures and that culture is secondary has traces of a colonial and orientalist view

of culture which is seen to belong to “others” and is not of any real value (Said, 1978). In the West we are keenly aware of this even in the way English, for example, is spoken and felt in the UK or the United States or Australia. It is the same language but affected deeply in meaning and use by the cultural context which is historical. As Durkheim puts it, “Language is a product of collective elaboration. What it expresses is the manner in which society as a whole represents the facts of experience” (Lander, 1966, p. 149).

Contributors to this book

The theme of culture, language, and exile and the internal and external journeys taken is traversed in all the chapters in this book through personal narratives, literature, film, and clinical thinking and vignettes. The authors, who are all psychotherapists, have had to think about internal homes, external homes, and new homes, represented by a variety of languages, senses, and places and how this has impacted on their work. There is a sense of resilience which comes through these chapters in the authors’ attempts to reflect and make sense of their journeys away from home and back again and how this has impacted and created new identities, languages, and senses of self.

The chapters track journeys from Germany, Israel, France, Japan, Zimbabwe, and Iran to countries in the West—England, the USA, and Canada. All have their nuances and shapes, with some being enforced exiles and others being exiles by choice through getting away from toxic experiences.

In our first chapter Esti Rimmer, having initially left Israel for the USA, thoughtfully explores the meaning of internal and external exile through stories and literature, clinical thinking and vignettes. Using the phrase “the uncanny” and the image of the fish caught in the sands who manages to survive, she explores exile as the wish to forget and the fear of forgetting.

In the second chapter Ali Zarbafi explores his journey of exile from his English mother tongue to Iran, the language of his father, and back again. Working with a childhood nightmare, Ali adopts the idea of writing out his nightmare into many languages, that is, dreaming, politics, psychotherapy, and the refugee experience, to create meaning out of his journey of exile and living in between languages.

Natsu Hattori movingly speaks of her loss of her Japanese language and culture in the new world of Canada where Japanese was spoken inside and English outside. Where faced with being metaphorically deaf in English when she first arrived, she learnt to speak the English language eloquently, culminating in a PhD in English literature, but somehow felt illiterate and young in Japanese. Natsu uses stories and clinical thinking and vignettes to illustrate her journey.

Patricia Gorrige, in contrast, discusses the lack of comfort and meaning in the second language and the importance of the physical as a language of communication when there is no second language to learn. Having to flee from Zimbabwe where she spoke English, she found the English language in the USA barren. She was faced with the terror of speaking and she explores the importance of this experience through clinical thinking and detailed clinical vignettes with two patients.

Monique Morris discusses her accents in her generational story of loss and abandonment from Algeria to a grim post-war Paris to London, where she ponders her identity and how her French accent eventually faces her with her roots and need for a new identity. She offers a thoughtful meditation on the meaning of Pygmalion, being French in England, and her return to France and how her accent meant that she belonged to both and neither.

Cédric Bouët-Willaumez, having left France, speaks eloquently about his internal conversation between his Dutch mother tongue, his French father tongue, and his other more liberating tongues of English and music. Charting his inner journey, from a research project with psychotherapists, his readings, and his clinical work, he discusses Abdallah, a character in *Tintin* who has great power and wealth yet is motherless. He suggests that a new language is a new representation of mother.

The theme of discarded languages is continued by Edna Sovin where she explores her relationship to German. Edna was born of a German Jewish family and came to England before the war at a very young age. Speaking German with her parents was taboo and shameful and so she learnt English and was unaware of her extended family until later on in her life when she returned to Germany to speak of her feminist grandmother who she discovered through letters.

Giselle China continues this theme of shame around the German language and how she disavowed it when she moved to England. Her English voice allowed her to speak and transform her sense of silence

around being German. She describes English as a language she was reborn in, the language of life and not death, and goes on to describe the wound of silence surrounding being a second-generation German and not wanting to look back to Germany in a horrifying historical period.

The final chapter in the book fittingly returns to the theme of home by Shula Wilson. Shula explores the meaning of home as an idea and in Hebrew as an internal and external space which has intimacy, feeling, and belonging in it. The lack of this internal feeling of a secure space can lead to a search for home which she illustrates with a clinical vignette. Finding home is something we do when we are witnessed and feel met by the other, and in this way we can feel part of a culture and a language where we can start to reflect on our life and journey.

One of the themes that emerged out of all the talks on which these contributions were based was the importance of the discussion after the talk, where the multicultural and accented audience discussed their own journeys, cultures, and languages. The language of psychotherapy was only one language in the room which enabled thinking, but it was also being culturally informed by the different ways in which we can translate ourselves internally and externally. It was an enriching, open, and generous experience not framed or dominated by any one language of understanding. The speaker was only one storyteller in a room surrounded by many stories rich in feelings informed by generational histories, of not knowing and discovery.

As you read this book you are invited to engage with the tradition of our lectures, where the papers—now the chapters—can be read as stand-alone reflections, memories, and stories which in themselves give a glimpse of the multilingual journey we have been exploring for over twenty years.

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