

CANNIBALINGUISTICS

On polyglot desires

Ayesha Manazir Siddiqi, *The Centre* (Picador, 2023)

« Catch a young swallow. Roast her in honey. Eat her up. Then you will understand all languages. » In his 1996 co-authored book, *The art and science of language learning*, Swedish polyglot Erik Gunnemark joked that people could use this recipe, which he'd found in an old book of black magic, to avoid the hard work of learning a new language.

I don't think Gunnemark ever roasted a sparrow himself. In a typewritten letter he wrote me, before he died in 2007, that he spoke six languages fluently, seven fairly well, and fifteen at a « mini » level. Presumably he did so via some art, some science and some considerable swotting. Contemporary language learning, on gamified platforms like Duolingo and by language-learning coaches, offers a lot in the way of motivation boosting and « brain hacking ». But it never invokes supernatural forces like



Gunnemark's swallow-roasting spell — there are no shrines or temples, no patron saints, amulets, magical salves, prayers, or rituals devoted to language learning. I'd expect this sort of thing because folklore contains tales of heroes learning to speak to animals thanks to magic. The Norse hero Sigurd learned the language of the birds after tasting dragon flesh, for example, while ancient Greek myths prescribe the cooking and eating of snakes, or having a bee touch the ears. Perhaps Gunnemark's spell wasn't for human languages at all.

There's something impenetrably mysterious about expressing yourself to others in *their* language, not just to complete a transaction but to really connect. In modern times, the stakes are high: employment, a visa, a deepened personal

relationship. Thanks to my own vestigial Catholicism, in which speaking in tongues and miraculous cures were regular features, I'd expect some appeals for divine intervention to solve a woe like monolingualism. But in the contemporary imagination of learning a new language, the divine apparently has no role. The famous language-learning celebrity Cardinal Giuseppe Mezzofanti (1774-1849) did once credit God with giving him the power to learn his 45 (or more) languages, but even Mezzofanti cited his own memory as the key to his success in retaining them.

Where I live in the south of the Netherlands, people who need to make fast, fantastic progress with a new language say they have to « go to the nuns », meaning the Language Institute Regina Coeli in Vught, which was founded by the Sisters of the Holy Order of St. Augustine in 1963. (« Go to the nuns » can also refer to a similar immersion program in Spa, Belgium, which, unexpectedly, involves no nuns.) But one « goes to the nuns » not because the nuns will intercede with God on your behalf. Rather, the discipline required to learn a language so quickly calls for being locked up, which fits well with a convent's austerity. At the Middlebury Language Schools in the United States, learners take a vow to only use the target language during the program, which has been trademarked as « the Language Pledge » and parallels a monkish vow of silence. These sorts of programs, which are expensive and elite, acknowledge that language learning involves not just disciplining the mind, but also mortifying the body — or the very self.

Language as self, language learning as magic, the mortifications of the flesh: these themes run through *The Centre*, a debut novel by British-Pakistani writer and translator Ayesha Manazir Siddiqi. Its narrator, Anisa, is a Pakistani translator of Urdu living in London, grappling with tensions of her immigrant identity and cosmopolitan desires. Yes, she had achieved her dream of moving to England but dislikes the cold and the myriad forms of casual racism she encounters. She complains that living outside of Pakistan has tainted her Urdu

” off she goes to the nuns “

(her mother tongue) with Hindi words, and she resents the fact that she uses Urdu merely to translate Bollywood film subtitles — as opposed to the great literature she admires. To top it off, her other language, French, is mediocre. « Not like French-person French, » she complains to a friend.

One day, at a translation conference, she overhears a young white man speaking Mandarin, Russian and French. At first she resents him, especially after watching Chinese students marvel at his fluent Mandarin. « It's always been like that, I thought, so much gratitude and admiration when a white person speaks a non-white language and only contempt and indignation for non-white people who don't speak English. » But this resentment melts into amazement and then attraction. What's the secret of Adam's linguistic success? Neither aptitude nor a cosmopolitan upbringing, it turns out, but ten-day stints locked in at an invite-only language school in the countryside south of London, after which the visitor is released — now as fluent as a native speaker in their chosen language.



With his eleven languages, Adam works as a very high-end freelancer, Anisa learns, without any apparent personal or cultural friction alternating between working for « a Japanese aeronautical engineering company, a Farsi news agency, and an Italian research institute ». What does the Centre do with you during those ten days? Anisa demands to know. « I can't explain how it works, » he says. « It's kind of like ... you just sponge [the language] in. » She wrangles an invite from him, and off she goes to the nuns.

At an inn.	In einem Gasthofs.
I wish to see a medical man, I am unwell.	Ich wünsche einen Arzt zu sprechen, ich bin unwohl.
Will you send for one, and send for him immediately, if you please.	Wollen Sie nach einem senden, und zwar sogleich, wenn es gefällig ist.
Have you a doctor, who speaks English? If he understands French, that will do.	Haben Sie einen Arzt, der englisch spricht? Es genügt, wenn er auch nur französisch versteht.
What fee should I give him? Is that enough?	Wie viel Honorar soll ich ihm geben? Ist das genug?
Where is there an apothecary's shop?	Wo ist eine Apotheke?
I want some medecine, some salt, rhubarb, calomel, blue pills. Have you fresh leeches? These do not bite. Please to change them for others	Ich brauche Arznei, etwas Salz, Rhabarber, Calomel, blaue Pillen. Haben Sie frische Blutegel? Diese beissen nicht an. Tauschen Sie sie gefälligst gegen andere aus.
Can I have a warm bath?	Kann ich ein warmes Bad bekommen?
Have you baths in the house? Bring me a tovel.	Haben Sie Bäder im Hause? Bringen Sie mir ein Handtuch.
Have you a thermometer?	Haben Sie ein Thermometer?
Bring me some soap.	Bringen Sie mir Seife.
Did you tell the hairdresser to come to dress my hair? to cut my hair?	Haben Sie den Friseur bestellt, dass er mich frisire? mir die Haare schneide?
Give the razors to the cutler to get them set.	Geben Sie diese Rasirmesser dem Messerschmied zum Schleifen.
Call me at six o'clock in the morning.	Wecken Sie mich um sechs Uhr morgen früh.
Will you give a loud knock at my door at a quarter before five to-morrow	Klopfen Sie morgen früh ein Viertel vor fünf Uhr stark an meine Thüre, um mich

Dans un hôtel.	In un albergo.
Je suis indisposé, je désire voir un médecin.	Desidererei parlare con un medico, sono alquanto indisposto.
Envoyez en chercher un tout de suite, s'il vous plait.	Vorreste avere la bontà di farmene chiamare uno, e tosto.
Avez-vous un médecin qui parle anglais? S'il parle français, cela suffira.	Conoscete un medico che parli inglese? Basterebbe che capisse il francese.
Combien faut-il lui donner? Est-ce assez?	Quanto gli debbo dare? Basta così?
Pourriez vous m'indiquer une pharmacie?	Potreste indicarmi una farmacia?
J'ai besoin de quelques médicaments, de quelques sels, de rhubarbe, de calomel, de pillules bleues. Avez-vous de bonnes sangsues? Celles-ci ne veulent pas prendre. Ayez donc la bonté de les échanger.	Voglio comprare alcune medicine, un po' di sal (solfato di soda), del rabarbero, del calomelano, bleu pills. Avete sanguisughe fresche? Queste non s'attaccano, abbiate la bontà di cambiarle.
Pourrais-je avoir un bain chaud?	Potrei avere un bagno caldo?
Y a-t-il des bains à l'hôtel? Apportez-moi un essuie-main.	Avete i bagni in casa? Recatemi un asciugamani.
Avez-vous un thermomètre?	Avete un termometro?
Apportez-moi du savon.	Portatemi un po' di sapone.
Avez-vous dit au coiffeur de venir me coiffer? me couper les cheveux?	Avete detto al parrucchiere che venga a pettinarmi? tagliarmi i capelli?
Donnez ces rasoirs au coutelier pour qu'il les repasse.	Portate i rasoi all'arrotino per farli affinare.
Éveillez-moi demain matin à six heures.	Domattina mi sveglierete alle sei.
Frappez fortement à ma porte pour m'éveiller demain matin à cinq heures	Domattina alle cinque meno un quarto fate bussar fortemente all'uscio della mia



It used to be thought that learning a language as an adult involved packing words and grammar into a finite space in the brain, where multiple languages would jostle each other for room. The language faculty belonged to a specific region of the brain, in much the same way that languages were seen as rooted in homelands and thus as expressions of their geopolitical essence. Contemporary neuroscience has amended these ideas. We should think of languages as stored, processed and produced across broad swathes of the brain's geography, running in networks of neurons across the surface of both hemispheres of the brain and connecting to deeper structures here and there. (There's obviously a metaphor for global flows of information to be mined from this image, but let's not go there.) When a new language is learned, these networks are altered, strengthened and made to metabolize energy more efficiently. To alter these networks in a way that produces fluent linguistic behaviors, an adult must put in considerable time and effort. Success at the business of language learning varies between people — not just because levels of motivation, need or opportunity differ, but also because people's language networks in their mother tongues are variably connected (though evidence for this idea is disputed.) These networks form a critical substrate for later learned languages.



If language scientists were to devise a mysterious, cutting-edge accelerant for a language learning cult (as the Centre turns out to be), it would focus on the brain. It would likely involve directing electric pulses through the skull in order to stimulate the growth of neurons. This technique, otherwise known as « transcranial direct-current

” The cannibalism is more than a plot point. ◀

stimulation », has shown some promise as a therapy for a host of neurological conditions. Another technique could involve a yet-to-be-developed RNA-based brain plasticity enhancer, again focusing on the ability of the language networks to be reshaped at the neuronal level.

This brain-in-a-vat approach is understandably stifling. In Siddiqi's story, the technique involves clients at the Centre sitting in a room alone for hours, listening to a recording of a person telling their life story. So far, so Berlitz. But not what happens next: clients also consume sumptuous gourmet meals that turn out to be made with the flesh of the recorded person. The client doesn't know; the recorded person *does* know, having given their consent before death. The Centre's founders (amusingly, four aging male academics) describe this process through the sacramental terminology of « reception ». « Transformative elements » are incorporated into learners' diets; the result is an « energetic exchange ». Move over, Duolingo.

I haven't spoiled the novel here, because the cannibalism is more than a plot point; it's the wonderful fantasy at the novel's heart, in which language is a medicine that heals the body and the soul. Any such medicine that you possess doesn't have to be buried with you but can sustain other lives, too — your languages, and your self, are recycled for future generations. Sure, the new digested language is a commodity. But it's also a spirit, an incarnation, a mystery, which can arrive in you as a whole, not bit by bit as pulverized verb paradigms and choreographed tongue positions, not piecemeal as the fifteen cases of Finnish, the six tones of Vietnamese, the one thousand most frequent words of Dutch — but as the essence of the bounded, impermeable individual self that possesses it. To achieve the transfer, you must ingest the material stuff of a person, their language and their flesh.

All of this is revealed to Anisa after she has flown to Delhi with Shiba, the daughter of one of

the founders. Anisa meets them, learning it was the anthropologist of the group, an American, who « first uncovered the heart of the process », as Shiba tells her. « To substitute the body for the spirit or indeed, the intellect, is a genuine trope, » she goes on. « At a remembrance meal for a friend, we enjoy, with daring, sensual imagination, his flesh in every bite, his blood in every gulp. » Because the method was developed in India, the first language to be passed along was Hindi, taken from indentured laborers. « We tried to pick elderly ones, since we wanted to get the process moving quickly, » explains Shiba's father, Arjun, without irony. « You'd be surprised how difficult it is to find older laborers. »

Anisa's first reaction is to panic and feel sick to her stomach. She's ingested two people herself, a German speaker named Peter and a Russian speaker named Anna — a former Centre employee, whom Anisa met. The day after the revelation, her appetite has returned, she makes a few jokes about cannibalism, and imagines herself as a source of sustenance. « I hoped I wouldn't be all bone and grit and chewy leather, but not too creamy or saccharine either. » Now that she's initiated, the founders share their plans openly in her presence, which she finds satisfying. « It started to feel as if I'd entered the place where the *real* things happened, as if I had pushed through a tear in the fabric of the world and could now see the invisible mechanisms setting everything in motion. » Perhaps this was her hunger after all: not for fluency but for power.



But the novel does end up spinning the « energetic exchange » as horror. While hanging out with Shiba on her second visit to the Centre, long before she knows what actually goes on there, Anisha goes rogue and wanders around — only to be intercepted by Centre security, who drug her and erase her memory. She eventually

“ ‘I hoped I wouldn't be all bone and grit and chewy leather, but not too creamy or saccharine either.’ ”

recovers the memory of a gruesome discovery in the Centre's kitchen: a human leg on a butcher's hook. It's a jarring, slightly awkward break. By that point, the novel has worked admirably hard — via its crypto-Catholic sacramental talk about flesh, blood and unfairly maligned ancient mystical practices — to bring us into its transgressive premise, to make the ingestion of a human and therefore their language sort of ... make sense. And it does make sense, in a way — after all, don't we learn our first languages while drinking our mother's milk? And isn't that ease wasted on children, who can't grasp the value of a language as a commodity anyway? Only when that ease is lost does it become valuable. It gleams even more brightly when touched by taboo.

So it's a bit disappointing that the novel falls back on squeamishness. By no means do I advocate cannibalism, even with consent. But I wanted the story to embrace this revel of linguistic accumulation fully and enthusiastically, and to show how we might use it to accomplish our work in the world, free from the drudgery of learning or the accidents of birth. Other attributes that are associated with power and success — beauty, wealth, intelligence, strength — have their own narrative traditions about how they can be acquired, magically or otherwise. Stories about gaining linguistic competence — not through aliens or technology but via some arcane practice involving supernatural forces — are rarer. That's what Siddiqi has given us.

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Clients go to the Centre for ten days — about two weeks. This span of time is, curiously, a recurring theme in accounts of polyglot lives, as it's

A lady at her toilet.	Eine Dame bei der Toilette.
<p>My wife wants a gold chain, a pearl necklace, ear-rings, bracelets, and a watch set with diamonds; but she will come and choose them herself.</p>	<p>Meine Frau bedarf eine goldene Kette, eine Perlen-schnur, Ohrringe, Arm-bänder und eine mit Dia-manten besetzte Uhr; sie wird indess selbst kommen und sich auswählen.</p>
<p>I will do all I can to suit her taste. In the mean time I beg you to present my respects to her.</p>	<p>Ich werde mich bemühen, sie nach ihrem Geschmacke zu bedienen. Unterdessen bitte ich, mich ihr gehor-samst zu empfehlen.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">A lady at her toilet. (see p. 180.)</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Eine Dame bei der Toilette. (siehe S. 180.)</p>
<p>Clean that looking-glass a little, it is quite dull. I look very ill this morning; I did not sleep well last night.</p>	<p>Putzen Sie den Spiegel, er ist ganz blind. Ich sehe diesen Morgen übel aus; ich habe diese Nacht nicht gut geschlafen.</p>
<p>On the contrary, Madam, your complexion is very good, and your eyes are quite lively.</p>	<p>Im Gegentheile, gnädige Frau, Sie haben eine sehr frische Gesichtsfarbe und lebhaft Augen.</p>
<p>Nothwithstanding I have a very bad headache.</p>	<p>Dessenungeachtet habe ich heftige Kopfschmerzen.</p>
<p>Do you wish me to dress your hair? Shall I curl it?</p>	<p>Soll ich Ihre Haare machen? Soll ich die Locken machen?</p>
<p>Yes; but you must first comb my hair well; it is all entangled.</p>	<p>Ja; aber vorher muss mein Haar gehörig ausgekämmt werden; es ist sehr verwirrt.</p>
<p>Take the open comb first; and then a fine one to clean my hair.</p>	<p>Nehmen Sie zuerst den weiten Kamm und dann den engen, um meinen Kopf zu reinigen.</p>
<p>Do you wish me to put a little pomatum on your hair?</p>	<p>Soll ich etwas Pomade in Ihre Haare einreiben?</p>

Une dame à sa toilette.

Ma femme a besoin d'une chaîne d'or, d'un collier de perles, de boucles d'oreilles, de bracelets et d'une montre garnie de diamants; mais elle viendra les choisir elle-même. Je m'empresserai de la servir à son goût. En attendant, veuillez bien lui présenter mes respects.

Une dame à sa toilette.

(voyez p. 181.)

Essuyez un peu ce miroir, il est tout terne. J'ai bien mauvaise mine ce matin; je n'ai pas bien dormi cette nuit.

Au contraire, madame, vous avez le teint frais et les yeux vifs.

Cela ne m'empêche pas d'avoir un grand mal de tête. Voulez-vous que j'arrange vos cheveux? Voulez-vous que je fasse vos boucles? Oui; mais il faut d'abord me bien démêler les cheveux; ils sont tout mêlés.

Prenez le démêloir; après vous prendrez un peigne pour me nettoyer la tête.

Voulez-vous que je mette un peu de pommade dans vos cheveux?

Una dama all' apparecchiatotojo.

Mia moglie ha bisogno di una catena d'oro, di un vezzo di perle, d'orecchini, di smaniglie, e di un oriuolo tempestato di diamanti; ma verrà a sceglierli essa medesima.

Mi farò premura di servirla a suo genio. Frattanto le faccia i miei saluti.

Una dama all' apparecchiatotojo.

(vedi p. 181.)

Forbite un poco questo specchio, è tutto appannato. Ho cattiva cera stamane; questa notte non ho dormito bene.

Anzi, signora, ella ha la carnagione fresca, e gli occhi vivaci.

Ciò non toglie che non abbia un gran dolor di testa. Vuole che le acconci la testa? Vuole che le faccia i ricci?

Sì; ma prima bisogna che mi sviluppate bene i capelli; sono tutti arruffati.

Prendete il pettine raro; poi vi servirete del pettine folto per nettarmi la testa.

Comanda che le metta ne' capelli un po' di manteca?

“ linguistic desires are more evanescent than speech itself ”

short enough to be amazing and long enough to seem plausible. A biography of Mezzofanti¹ by C.W. Russell from 1858 mentions that a woman once asked him if he could hear the confession of her Sardinian-speaking maid; give me two weeks, Mezzofanti said. According to a biographical sketch² of German hyperpolyglot Emil Krebs (1867-1930), he used a French newspaper given to him by a teacher to learn to speak French in that amount of time; later, as a diplomat posted in Beijing, he overheard two men speaking a language that turned out to be Armenian, whose grammar Krebs learned in — you guessed it — two weeks.

Hyperpolyglots like Gunnemark, Mezzofanti and Krebs are interesting, not so much because of their methods (which can be fairly banal — in the public library in Bologna, Italy, I discovered what I think were Mezzofanti’s flashcards), but because they manifest an intense form of what I call a will to plasticity, or the desire of all living things to grow and change. In contemporary life, it’s manifested by biohacking podcasters as well as anyone who touts a « growth mindset ». Tracing the *will to plasticity*, when it takes a linguistic form, would be a good way to tell the history of multilingualism. The linguistic abilities of a population would become more than static, demographic facts, fixed by circumstances of birth or geography and knowable only because speakers had been tallied by the state. They’d be dynamic and alive, full of human idiosyncrasy and striving — the same sort of striving that sends Adam and Anisa to the Centre in the first place.

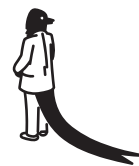
People have long used overlapping linguistic

1 C.W. Russell, *The Life of Cardinal Mezzofanti; with an Introductory Memoir of Eminent Linguists, Ancient and Modern* (1858).

2 I got this anecdote from Wilhelm Matzat, « Emil Krebs (1867-1930), das Sprachwunder, Dolmetscher in Peking und Tsingtau. Eine Lebensskizze. » *Bulletin of the German China Association*, 1, 31-47. (2000)

varieties that weren’t bounded or standardized, and thus weren’t countable in the modern sense. I can distinctly recall when I added other languages, or parts of them, to my personal repertoire, but for most of human history people probably didn’t see themselves engaging with a discrete linguistic system, so much as shifting their linguistic habitus. They wouldn’t have measured their linguistic desires by tallying all of the languages that they add to their repertoire (or, as in Siddiqi’s novel, counting the selves they have consumed) but perhaps by the places they could do business or the texts they could read.

You’d get an entirely different story of, say, the American colonial era if you told it by recounting who was learning whose languages, European and indigenous, for what reasons, and how they did it. This isn’t the story of whose words for which things filtered into the common lexicon, but of how linguistic competence was distributed in a particular place, and how people imagined new social roles for themselves.



The history of these sort of phenomena is difficult to write, as linguistic desires are more evanescent than speech itself. But in *Learning Languages in Early Modern England* (2019), historian John Gallagher provided a model for such a history. The overall fact was, as he points out, that the English in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had to learn other languages because no one was yet learning theirs. « Without a sense of how little-known and little-respected the English language was outside England for most of the early modern period, the importance of language-learning does not come easily into focus, » Gallagher writes. His lively book tells the story of how several centuries’ worth of English people pursued linguistic competences across class, gender and geography. Such a history would be richer if ordinary lives were better represented

“ European intellectuals were obsessed with finding out what language God had given to Adam; this obsession birthed philology, which then begat historical linguistics. ◀◀

in the archives in general, and if what people do with language could be more assiduously observed, but Gallagher pushes the archives to their limits. Apart from formal study, people traveled to learn languages or sought tutors before a trip; if they were female or especially wealthy, the tutors might see them at home. Foreign nannies and servants were hired; an advertisement in 1696 looked for a servant who « speaks Dutch and understands French ». In cities, private language schools boomed, and some individual teachers even became famous. Claude Mauger and Claudius Hollyband were two such teachers, taking advantage of an emerging print-based celebrity culture to make sure that their French books and manuals advertised which fashionable section of London their schools were located in and which desirable area of France they'd learned their French. Separated by sixty years or so, they weren't direct competitors, though a Restoration-era costume drama about dueling French teaching empires could be entertaining.

The action wasn't only in French — learners also relied on conversation manuals in languages such as German, Italian, Portuguese, and (less commonly) Malay or Narragansett. From the number of editions information about hierarchies of languages can be gleaned; by a huge margin, the greatest number of manuals for English speakers were for French. English students made it a point to travel to or hire teachers from the places where the « best » French was spoken: in the seventeenth century, it was the cities of the Loire valley (which were cheaper than Paris). Leipzig was the destination for German;

Valladolid and Seville for Spanish. Gallagher's book is a glimpse of what a worldwide history of language learning could look like, telling the story of how people have directed their cognitive energies in some ways over others, and how they experienced the limits of those energies.

The hyperpolyglots figure usefully in a dynamic history of multilingualism, too. The polyglottism of people like Mezzofanti and Krebs was culturally desirable in the first place due to factors that were unique to the West, given that the study and translation of the Bible required literacy in multiple languages. European intellectuals were also obsessed with finding out what language God had given to Adam; this obsession birthed philology, which then begat historical linguistics. By contrast, elites elsewhere, such as in China, appeared to have no distinctive polyglot desires. People with educations, time and resources were probably using their cognitive resources to learn to write thousands of Chinese characters. Traders, mariners, soldiers and others in China picked up bits of the languages they encountered, obviously, but only to the degree that such bits were useful. People like Mezzofanti and Krebs accumulated languages for their own idiosyncratic reasons in a cognitive potlatch that consumed most of their lives.



Hyperpolyglots did require institutional contexts in order to thrive: Mezzofanti gained early experiences while tending to wounded soldiers of the polyglot Austrian army, then moved to the Vatican, specifically the *Propaganda Fide*, where young men came from all over the world to learn the evangelical arts. There Mezzofanti found public occasions to show off, flitting among a dozen languages, « hardly ever hesitating, or ever confounding a word or interchanging a construction, » as Russell, his biographer, put it. Similarly, Krebs joined Kaiser Wilhelm's diplomatic corps in Beijing in 1893, where he became

Engaging a servant.	Mit einem Lohnbedienten, den man in Dienst nehmen will.
three months he was in this town.	der drei Monate, die er hier zubrachte.
How long have you been in the habit of acting as servant?	Treiben Sie schon lange das Geschäft eines Lohnbedienten?
It is now fifteen years, and I have travelled almost all over Europe.	Es sind jetzt funfzehn Jahre und ich habe schon fast ganz Europa durchreist.
Have you characters from the masters you have served?	Haben Sie Zeugnisse von den Herren, die Sie bedient haben?
Are you given to drinking? I like a glass of wine very well, but I never get drunk.	Sind Sie dem Trunke ergeben? Ich liebe wohl ein Glas Wein, betrinke mich aber nie.
How old are you? I am thirty-five years old, Sir.	Wie alt sind Sie? Ich bin fünf und dreissig Jahre alt.
Are you married? No, Sir; a man who, like me, always keeps moving, should never marry.	Sind Sie verheirathet? Nein; ein Mann wie ich, der keinen festen Wohnsitz hat, sollte nie heirathen.
Can you ride? Yes, Sir, nobody can ride post better than I can.	Können Sie reiten? Ja wohl; es kann Niemand besser Courier reiten, als ich.
Can you take care of a horse?	Können Sie ein Pferd besorgen?
Yes, Sir; and even two or three if necessary.	Ja, mein Herr; selbst zwei oder drei, wenn es sein muss.
Are you well acquainted with the coins, weights and measures of the different countries of Europe?	Sind sie mit Münzen, Maass und Gewicht der verschiedenen Länder Europa's wohl bekannt?
Yes, Sir, perfectly.	Ja wohl; ganz vollkommen.
What wages do you ask? Five francs a day. But you have not always had so much as that.	Wie viel Lohn fordern Sie? Fünf Franken für den Tag. So viel haben Sie doch nicht immer bekommen?

Avec un domestique de louage, pour le prendre à son service.

mois qu'il a passés dans cette ville.

Y a-t-il longtemps que vous exercez la profession de domestique de louage?

Il y a maintenant quinze ans: j'ai parcouru presque toute l'Europe.

Avez-vous des certificats des maîtres que vous avez servis?

Vous grisez-vous?

Je bois avec plaisir un verre de vin; mais je ne me grise jamais.

Quel âge avez-vous?

Monsieur, j'ai trente-cinq ans.

Etez-vous marié?

Non, monsieur; un homme qui, comme moi, roule continuellement, ne doit pas se marier.

Savez-vous monter à cheval?

Oui, monsieur; personne ne court la poste aussi bien que moi.

Savez-vous panser un cheval?

Oui, monsieur; et même deux ou trois, s'il le faut.

Connaissez-vous bien les monnaies, poids et mesures des différents pays de l'Europe?

Oui, monsieur, parfaitement.

Quels gages demandez-vous?

Cinq francs par jour.

Mais vous n'avez pas toujours gagné ce prix-là.

Con un servitore di piazza, per prenderlo a servizio.

mesi ch'egli è stato in questa città.

È un pezzo che fate il mestiere di servitore di piazza?

Sono ormai quindici anni: ho girato quasi tutta l'Europa.

Avete de' benseruiti dei padroni al servizio dei quali siete stato?

Avete il vizio di bere?

Beo con piacere un bicchier di vino; ma non mi ubriaco mai.

Quanti anni avete?

Signor mio, ho trenta-cinque anni.

Avete moglie?

No, signore; un uomo che va girando di continuo, come io faccio, non dee ammogliarsi.

Sapete cavalcare?

Sì, signore; non v'è nessuno che corra la posta a cavallo bene al pari di me.

Sapete governare un cavallo?

Sì, signore; ed anco due, e tre, quando bisogna.

Siete pratico delle monete, dei pesi, e delle misure dei varj paesi d'Europa?

Sì, signore, ottimamente.

Che salario chiedete?

Cinque franchi il giorno.

Ma voi non avete sempre guadagnato tanto.

a frequent visitor with the Empress Dowager Cixi, who admired his Mandarin prowess.

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Only recently has global capitalism given hyperpolyglots new job opportunities, given that they tend to possess a long tail of relatively low levels of language proficiency in many languages. I reported on this once, talking to one modern polyglot with a Wall Street job inspecting corporate governance documents from multilingual regions, as well as another overseeing online communities that operated in multiple language markets. In both jobs, the ability to scan and gist was key. In *The Centre*, Adam takes advantage of modern-seeming freelancing arrangements to flit among companies — though doing what exactly isn't clear. In this light, Anisa's ambitions to become a literary translator are profoundly old school. Eventually she translates an obscure German novel (made up for *The Centre*), *The Quiet of the Songbird*, into English and Russian.

The Centre's rather daring approach to how language *learning* could work, contrasts with its somewhat conventional ideas about language itself. Its characters fetishize native speakers, for instance. Languages are spoken, never signed. A client of the Centre gains the ability to write the language at the same time that they learn to speak it, though spoken and written forms aren't necessarily linked. (In the real world, you'd have no hope of becoming literate in Mandarin or Japanese, just from knowing how to speak those languages.) And after consuming the native speaker, the client acquires a pitch-perfect standard version of the language, unmarked by regionalisms or social register.³ If I devoured someone and thereby absorbed their language,

3 The thing we know as one « language » is really an aggregation of numerous idiolects or local varieties, loosely tied together in a society and herded into an unruly, somewhat homogeneous form by teachers, editors and grammar scolds, like an attempt to make cats perform ballet.

“ ‘If only I had the mouth and tongue of an Italian, and the hand of one as well.’ ”

I'd expect to be stuck with the intricate vocabularies of that individual's occupation and personal obsessions — a remarkably rich lexicon about yarn gauge, for example, or model train terroir, or dahlia genetics. I'd expect to have that individual's verbal tics and over-learned locutions, all of it marked by the inevitable depredations of age.

The novel also doesn't flex its own linguistic fantasy as fully as it could. What happens in a world where learning a new language is so frictionless, bound only by the number of people willing to be « received »? What would code-switching and language play look like among people who share the same massive repertoires? Would there still be endangered languages, and if so, which ones? Might there even be linguistic rebellions, where instead of learning standard languages people would pick up idiosyncratic conlangs or symbol sets from ape language experiments? (Do chimps reared with human language have a self that can be exchanged?) How would languages change and spin off in new directions, given that the learnability of a language isn't a factor in its evolution anymore? Could one receive hundreds of languages by ingesting a hyperpolyglot who ingested another hyperpolyglot?



In one regard, Siddiqi's novel does parallel another novel development in the language sciences — one that looks at how language involves the body, not just the brain. Though the brain controls everything, language in face-to-face interaction is performed with the entire body — not just with the mouth and tongue (as

with spoken languages) and fingers (as with signed ones), but also eye gaze, gestures, facial expressions and even body posture. We nod, blink, move our lips, make a hand gesture that looks like the thing we're talking about. All of these phenomena can influence how quickly we interpret signals, whether in spoken or signed languages. They help resolve ambiguity and tell us whose turn it is to signal. This corporeal habitus is determined by biological factors, such as the speed of the nervous system, but it's also culturally shaped. Learning a language thus involves learning to use your body as a fluent user of that language does.

The language learners in early modern England that Gallagher describes understood this too. They strove to learn proper gestures and other physical performances that would be — or would look like — a social performance that would allow them to fit in. If only, one learner quoted by Gallagher moaned, I had the mouth and tongue of an Italian, and the hand of one as well. We understand his metonymic complaint, that his pronunciation and handwriting were still too inflected with his foreignness, but it reads much differently in the context of *The Centre*, where one could find actual tongues and hands (and other « palatable regions », as one of the founders calls them) of Italians as part of the curriculum. « Our bones and muscles, they carry unimaginable wisdom, immense capability, » Shiba says. Meanwhile, the sparrows fly freely, happy not to be embroiled in our desires.

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To hire, or buy a horse.	Ein Pferd zu miethen oder zu kaufen.
<p style="text-align: center;">To hire, or buy a horse.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Ein Pferd zu miethen oder zu kaufen.</p>
<p>I wish to hire a horse, to take a ride through the town and its environs; have you one to let out? If I like it, perhaps I may buy it.</p>	<p>Ich wünsche ein Pferd zu miethen zu einem Spazierritt durch die Stadt und die Umgebungen; haben Sie eins zu vermieten? Wenn es mir gefällt, kaufe ich es vielleicht.</p>
<p>Yes, Sir; I have chesnut horses, white-spotted, dapple-gray, bay, grey, spotted-grey, black, white, dun, spotted, piebald and cream-coloured.</p>	<p>Ja, mein Herr; ich habe Rothfuchse, weiss gefleckte, Apfelschimmel, Braune, Graue, Grauschimmel, Rappen, Schimmel, Isabel-len, Gefleckte, Schecken, und Falben.</p>
<p>I have some of all kinds. What colour would you wish your horse to be?</p>	<p>Ich habe deren von allen Arten. Von welcher Farbe soll Ihr Pferd sein?</p>
<p>I care little about his colour, provided he has not a bald face and is handsome and tractable.</p>	<p>Darauf kommt mir wenig an, vorausgesetzt, dass es keine Blässe hat, und sonst hübsch und lenksam ist.</p>
<p>Here is a horse five years old, perfectly well broken in.</p>	<p>Hier ist ein Pferd von fünf Jahren, welches sehr gut geritten ist.</p>
<p>Mount him and make him trot and gallop; I must see if he has no defects.</p>	<p>Besteigen Sie es, und setzen es in Trab und Galopp; ich will sehen, ob es keine Fehler hat.</p>
<p>He is a spirited horse, and has neither faults nor vices.</p>	<p>Es ist ein muthiges Thier, welches weder Fehler noch Untugenden hat.</p>
<p>Bridle and saddle him; I will mount him myself, to try him.</p>	<p>Lassen Sie es zäumen und satteln; ich will es selbst besteigen, um es zu probiren.</p>
<p>Very well. The stable-boy will put on his bridle and saddle, and you shall mount him.</p>	<p>Sehr wohl. Der Stallknecht wird Sattel und Zaum anlegen, und Sie können es dann besteigen.</p>

Pour louer un cheval, ou pour l'acheter.	Per prendere un cavallo a nolo, o per comprarlo.
<p>Pour louer un cheval, ou pour l'acheter.</p>	<p>Per prendere un cavallo a nolo, o per comprarlo.</p>
<p>Je voudrais louer un cheval pour me promener dans la ville et dans les environs; en avez-vous à louer? Peut-être l'achèterai-je, s'il me plaît.</p>	<p>Vorrei prendere a nolo un cavallo, per andare a spasso per la città e nei contorni; ne avreste voi uno? E fors' anco lo comprerò, se sarà di mio genio.</p>
<p>Oui, monsieur, j'ai des chevaux alezans, mouchetés de blanc, gris pommelés, bais, gris, gris mouchetés, noirs, blancs, isabelles, mouchetés, pies, et aubères.</p>	<p>Si, signore, ho cavalli sauri, balzani, pomellati, baj, leardi, rovani, neri, bianchi, isabelli, stornelli, pezzati e falbi.</p>
<p>J'en ai de toutes les qualités. De quel poil le souhaitez-vous?</p>	<p>Ne ho d'ogni qualità. Di che pelame lo bramerebbe?</p>
<p>Peu m'importe la robe, pourvu qu'il n'ait pas le chanfrein blanc, et qu'il soit beau et docile.</p>	<p>Il mantello è tutt' uno per me; purchè non sia sfacciato, e che il cavallo sia bello, e docile.</p>
<p>Voici un poulain de cinq ans qui est très bien dressé.</p>	<p>Ecco un puledro di cinque anni, benissimo ammaestrato.</p>
<p>Montez-le, faites-le trotter et galopper; je veux voir s'il n'a pas de défauts.</p>	<p>Cavalcatelo, fatelo trottare, e galoppare; voglio vedere se ha qualche vizio.</p>
<p>C'est un cheval fringant, qui n'a ni défauts ni vices.</p>	<p>È un cavallo brillante, che non ha nè difetti, nè vizj.</p>
<p>Faites-le brider et seller; je veux le monter moi-même, pour l'essayer.</p>	<p>Fatelo imbrigliare ed insellare; voglio cavalcarlo io stesso, per provarlo.</p>
<p>Bien volontiers. Le palefrenier va lui mettre la bride et la selle, et vous le monterez.</p>	<p>Volentierissimo. Il palafreniere gli porrà subito la briglia, e la sella, ed ella lo monterà.</p>