Olga Tokarczuk
A finger pointing at the moon

Our language is our literary destiny, writes Olga Tokarczuk. And "minority" languages provide a special kind of sanctuary too, inaccessible to the rest of the world. But, there again, language is at its most powerful when it reaches beyond itself and starts to create an alternative world.

Being aware of one's own language with all its virtues and advantages as well as its limitations and oddities is like the effect of long-term psychoanalysis. It reveals all the baggage we carry, not just as writers, not because of any faults or merits we may have, but for the same reason as why we were born in a particular place, time or form. So in a way our language is our literary destiny. It is also plainly obvious that in our language we can only be ourselves to a certain degree (and "being oneself" seems to be an important demand of our culture), while to a large extent being subject to something bigger and stronger than us, over which we have no influence.

No wonder the philosophers eventually dropped God, existence, and questions of "why something rather than nothing", and took up with language instead.

Writers often make the mistake of treating language as their own personal field of freedom, like a great primordial soup in which, like the first amino acids, our individual thoughts and means of expression are formed. However, it looks as if the crystal axes are already fixed, and we have no influence on them. We are just thrown into language.

I was thrown into the Polish language. I was born and brought up in the western part of Poland that was joined to the rest of the country after the war.
and settled by a huge post−war mixture of Polish cultures and dialects.

According to the language experts, this melting pot has produced the model Polish language — apparently in Lower Silesia we speak standard Polish. I have no hints of foreign dialect and no accent. I do not know any other language well enough to be able to treat it as the language of the literature that I write. I am monolingual. I would not be able to write in another language. I am able to communicate in two other languages, but it is simplified communication, and in some ways painful. You could put me in Sevres, near Paris, where all sorts of standard models are kept, as the perfect example of a Polish−language specimen. I am embedded in Polish like a fly in amber. It is not an objective point of view.

The Polish language belongs to a large group of Slavonic languages, and therefore to the Indo−European family. It began to take its written form quite late on, in the twelfth century. Adopting Christianity from Rome, and not from Byzantium, had immense significance — it meant that the Polish language entered the sphere of Latin culture and adopted the Roman alphabet (as we know, some Slavonic languages, such as Russian or Bulgarian, based their alphabet on the Greek). Only in 1270, in the "Ksiega Henrykowska" or Book of Henrykow, which actually came into being in Lower Sileia, was the first sentence written in Polish, and in a rather curious context at that. The Latin text tells the story of one Boguchwal who — a fact that seemed so unusual to his contemporaries that it needed recording — helped his wife to grind the corn. It was he who uttered the famous first sentence: Day ut ia pobrausa a ti pocziwai, which means "Allow me to do that while you take a rest".

Because of Poland's geographic position between powerful neighbours in the middle of Europe, close to a variety of cultures, a lot of foreign words have seeped into Polish. It is unusual compared with other languages in that up to about 70 per cent of the Polish lexis consists of words borrowed from other languages. Thus it is a composite language, a patchwork language, a melting pot and a Mischsprache. We took words from our neighbours because of the business we were conducting with them, because of wars, journeys, fashions and obsessions. We owe our rich technical vocabulary to the Germans. Every novelty seeped into our language via our western neighbours, and we had a lot of problems with them too — the German settlers on Polish territory were always an economically strong, well organized group. In the fourteenth century for example they represented 80 per cent of the Krakow patrician class, which prompted the Polish king to set them a special language test — he identified the disloyal Germans who had raised a rebellion in Krakow by ordering them to pronounce the following words: soczewica, kola and miele mlyn ("lentil", "wheel" and "the mill grinds"). Those who could not pronounce them properly were punished. A lot of Italian phrases came to Poland with Queen Bona, mainly in the spheres of architecture, music, military science and, above all, cooking. In the seventeenth century the French language launched an invasion. The Russian language and other eastern languages have also had a large influence, and we can even boast some Turkish and Hungarian elements. Latin supplied the Polish language with expressions to do with the study of abstract and religious ideas. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the Czech language was fashionable, and it made a good impression to display a knowledge of Czech in society. During the long years of the partitions, active, highly intensive Germanization and Russification policies were pursued. Nowadays, as everywhere in the world, English has assumed the offensive.

I like the openness of the Polish language to foreign words — it is not threatened by any danger; in the mad whirl that it creates, the most alien
sounding words are put through the mighty mill of Polish grammar, special endings are stuck onto them and they are mangled by case inflections. This is a language that sucks in a lot from the world around it, an ever hungry language.

And yet in the long years of subordination to the partitioning powers this patchwork language played an unusual, paradoxical role, becoming a mainstay of the national identity, and the literature that was written in it was the only place where Polish culture survived. People fought and died to speak Polish.

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For a writer, translators often perform the function of helpful psychoanalysts — they ask the most surprising questions. One should write them down, keep them and publish them now and then in special editions, to give the reader a chance to appreciate the miracle of writing and the effort involved in translation. And the miracle of language in general, thanks to which things I thought were obvious and universal even, suddenly lose their internal cohesion, becoming not obvious and purely local. It is my translators who have drawn my attention to the properties of the Polish language that I describe below. It is the same with foreign friends, those brave people who are determined to learn Polish. They often complain that Polish grammar consists mainly of exceptions, that they keep having to learn tricky rules that are immediately disputed by a vast number of exceptions of every possible kind. And it's true — perhaps the best approach to the Polish language is to learn it intuitively or by heart. It is a language that attaches great weight to traditions and historical forms, it is a museum of a language, full of fossils that refuse to give in to the simple principles of pragmatism. Complicated inflection not only adds and removes endings, but changes the very roots of words. We have perfective and imperfective past time, which can unmask even the very best German speaker of Polish. In Polish orthography several identical sounds are written in various ways, because in the past they were pronounced differently and have remained in the language for old times' sake, sowing panic among school pupils.

The Polish language is neither logical nor pragmatic. Its grammar is demanding, and even the weird orthography is difficult. Despite lexical flexibility, for illogical (and thus maybe sentimental) reasons it maintains some traditional old grammatical and orthographical forms.

It has another traditional feature — it is androcentric. Of the three genders at its disposal it gives a privileged position to the masculine gender. Nouns of the masculine, feminine and neuter genders inflect differently by person, case and number. Of course there are also lots of exceptions among them. We say of men that poszli, "they went", and of women that poszły, "they went", but of a mixed group, consisting of men and women, we always have to say it the masculine way, poszli. This principle even applies to a group of, let's say, sixty women, if it includes just one man — his presence obliges us to use the masculine form, poszli, for the entire, mixed group. Any group of women, children and animals takes the feminine form. The privileged, masculine form is reserved for men only. Naturally, as in some other languages, the word człowiek, meaning "a person" or "a human being", has the masculine gender. So in speaking about human beings in general we grammatically exclude women (and children). This patriarchal tone is also reflected in the names of professions. While some other languages cope well with this (as for example German), in Polish there are still problems. In Polish the feminine names for professions sound like diminutives of the masculine ones, which often gives a
less–than–serious impression and certainly conceals a latent deprecatory meaning — the word for a woman professor or teacher, profesorka, sounds like a small male professor or teacher, profesorek.

As a writer — or pisarka, the feminine form of pisarz — I have very often struggled with the Polish language's androcentricty, because in Polish it is impossible to avoid the gender of the person writing when you use the first person. The gender is immediately evident in verbs in the past tense, and in the present it is given away by the feminine form of adjectives. Jeanette Winterson wrote a book where by consistently using the first person in the present tense she managed to conceal the gender of the narrator, which was essential to the novel. But the woman who translated it into Polish had trouble — it was impossible to get away from the narrator's sex, and it was arbitrarily necessary to assign him or her a gender — in this case feminine. Incidentally, the Polish phrase for "mother tongue" is język ojczysty — literally "father tongue".

Like other Slavonic languages, Polish has enormous potential for word building, and is particularly good at forming a vast multiplicity of diminutives to suit all manner of word play. For me this is a sign of the language's warmth, of a category that is left out of the grammar books. It is a feature of the language that makes the world cosy and safe in an inimitable, magical way. No one in Poland is surprised by the words of a folk song about a soldier going to the wojenka ("war−ette"), with a szabelka ("sabre−let") at his side, on his beloved konik ("horsie"). There are lots of ways to form diminutives, and every proper name can be put through this operation, as can almost any noun or adjective.

Until the Second World War Poland was a multicultural, multilingual country. Wherever Polish encountered other languages, sensitivities and mentalities it was at its most creative. It is no accident that the greatest masters of the Polish language came from the borderlands of Polish. There is the fascinating, inimitable prose of Bruno Schulz, which originated at the junction of Polish, Yiddish and Ukrainian. There is the vivid, rich poetry of Czeslaw Milosz, who came from the Wilno (now Vilnius) area, and the absolutely fairytale and sadly untranslatable Polish of Boleslaw Lesmian and Julian Tuwim, both from the Jewish−Polish borders.

Flexible, pliable, vague, not too precise, traditional and grammatically unpredictable, Polish is made more for intuition than logic, perhaps, more for poetry than academic theses. I don't think it feels at its best in an intellectual discourse or a realistic, linear account of events. It prefers open−ended, ambiguous forms. It is sensitive to farce and absurdity, susceptible to pathos. No wonder we have poetry that is well known and appreciated worldwide. It is a language that gives a lot of leeway, a language that sketches the world rather than describes it, an impressionist language capable of expressing an atmosphere, a mood, a presentiment, one that's open to making associations and building images. Apparently Flaubert used to insist that language suffers a fiasco when it starts to create images, because then it eludes itself and slips into anachronism. I do not agree with this claim. Language is at its most powerful when it reaches beyond itself and starts to create an alternative world, when like a magician it pulls things out of a hat that we could never have dreamed of. For me Polish is an archaic language that corresponds to the world before it became diversified, when everything seems to have been more compact, more sensory, when it all balanced on presentiments and "what" was more important than "how". To use an eastern comparison, I treat language like a finger pointing at the moon. I do not stop at language.
I wonder how far my own sensitivity, my perception and thinking have been formatted by the difficult, none too precise but very vivid Polish language. Could I express what is so crucial for me in writing — a presentiment, a mood, the sense of unease that lurks beneath a seemingly fixed, safe configuration of events — in another language? Maybe I should be grateful for my linguistic destiny?

Paradoxically, Polish is known as a minority language, despite the fact that about 50 million people speak it worldwide (including the large Polish émigré population). It is a local, marginal language, and on top of that a difficult one that scares a lot of people away. The virtue of these "minority" languages — especially when one knows the "majority" ones — is the opportunity for sanctuary, for an escape into a language, to reside in a small, well-trodden area inaccessible to the rest of the world. I have had experience in the past of hiding away in the Polish language at big international airports a long way from Poland, when we could be sure no one would understand us speaking in Polish. Nowadays things are already different. The vast emigration of Poles in recent years has allowed Polish to spread with them worldwide, though I do not think this will ever lead to it becoming widespread among foreigners. We are more likely to learn to speak English well, and that will be our way of communicating with the rest of the world. We'll know we have crossed the border at the nearest bar when the waiter asks if we want our kaweczka — "coffee-let" — with mleczko — "milkie". Or when we hear the Polish conductor greeting us with a merry cry of: Bileciki do kontroli! — "Show your ticket-lets please!"