

Uljana Wolf

Simen Hagerup

FIBEL MINDS

a conversation

UW Uljana Wolf
SH Simen Hagerup

Staying in Berlin, the interviewer had expected to meet with the poet, and was stumped to learn she, in the meantime, had crossed the Atlantic. Still, the correspondence found its natural rhythm: as one slept, the other wrote, and the exchange went back and forth as migratory bird questions, with a velocity measured in bits per second.

SH Dear Uljana Wolf,

First of all, thank you for your time and thoughts. I hope we can talk a bit about *falsche freunde*, false friends, the work(s). At this year's Audiatur festival, it's the written works that have been invited to participate, with the writers more or less acting as envoys. *falsche freunde* seems well warranted in such a context. It is constantly activating the human beings connected to it; the reader and author both seem present at every turn. The suite of poems that gave the book its name, is a collection of 26 texts, from A to Z, based on false friends, ie. words which are written or pronounced similarly between two languages, but carry different meanings. In your case, you are writing in German hybridized with English, based on puns between (and within) both languages.

It may be a false start, but hoping that false starts are in the spirit of the texts themselves:

reading *falsche freunde*, I did become curious about your own language background. At the time of this interview, you are in New York, but you write in German and have close ties to Berlin. And, if I'm not mistaken, you have a relation to the Polish language? How would you say this in-between of languages has affected what and why you write?

UW

Great to start with false starts. I love them. Slips, glitches, splinters, Holz, mistakes. Because what they do is multiply the possibilities of what might actually be there, create ~~room~~ ~~ro~~ ~~space~~ ~~om~~ space—to wonder, to stumble, to question. They make a language multilingual by showing what other word could have been there instead of the one that we currently use ~~this moment~~. *wenn du forst bist. Saatsgewalt. Eine Runde Vogel-fragen*. They jiggle us out of our tracks. And the truth is, I felt this way always with the German language, and perhaps all writers do, not with German (although Mark Twain might very well say so), but with their own language. Benjamin called this encounter *Entstellung*—which means deformation but literally “de-putting,” so you're opening up a new path of perception or knowledge by removing the familiar. Which is what poetry does. Which is where it can be political. Going abroad and immersing yourself in another language enhances this process—physically,

emotionally, intellectually. But my first book (*kochanie ich habe brot gekauft*, 2007), which was written during a period when I spent a lot of time in Poland and learned some Polish, actually doesn't necessarily explore this deformation on a linguistic level. There are Polish words in the title of the book and in some poems, but they function more as sign-posts, pointing towards the experience of defamiliarization and disrupted communication on a personal and historical level, between Germany and Poland (my grandmother came from the German speaking population of Silesia). But since then, the reality of living in or between two languages—in this case English and German—has had a much more direct impact on how I write, although all of my books (*falsche freunde* and also my new book *meine schönste lengevitch*, 2013) have explored similar issues to those in *kochanie*, issues around identity, nation, state, border, history, control, exclusion, inclusion. And *falsche freunde* explores, as you say, the actual meeting of languages in controlled experimental set-ups, *Versuchsanordnungen*. It is 'transatlantic' writing because it is informed as much by my transatlantic or transnational movements as it is by translation as a poetic practice.

SH The linguistic phenomenon of false friends is most keenly felt by learners of foreign

languages. Learning can be anguishing as well as rewarding. Consider how language makes life difficult for lower class immigrants (with low mastery of the official language) all over the world. These are the people who really get backstabbed by false friends. So there is that, but mostly anyone will have experiences with false friends, and they can also entail one of the true joys of discovering, and even creating, language. I would be interested in some of your views on what constitutes the epistemological and social world of *falsche freunde*.

UW It's very interesting that you raise the issue of language learning and class here. Or mastery. I'm not quite sure that I agree with what you're saying about lower class immigrants backstabbed by false friends. I know many people in Berlin, let's say many middle class Americans, who don't attempt to "master" the "official language." And if they did, false friends would give them a helluva lot of trouble. So the question we need to ask with regard to immigrants is: if there is trouble with language acquisition, why is it so? In Germany, for many years the deep-rooted hesitation to overcome the socio-cultural imagination born during the Romantic period that Germany is a German-language-nation state that comes with a German 'Leitkultur,' or leading culture, has influenced the educational

system with regard to language acquisition. The languages of working class immigrants were seen as an obstacle to their assimilation into German culture and thus the focus would be on repressing those languages in favor of all-German-all-the-time, in childcare, in schools, even at home. Parents were advised to speak German to their children at home, even if their own German was wobbly because they had themselves just recently or barely learned it. So the educational system in a way created its own illiterates by disregarding the language and embedded knowledge those kids had brought with them, by attaching a lower status and therefore less desirability to certain languages, or even discrediting existing bilingualism if it didn't come with the right set of languages (Turkish-German). But success in second language learning rests mostly on you knowing your mother tongue and learning intuitively all the grammatical structures, and on having a positive, powerful, blooming relationship to that language. So there is a need for a rethinking, and this has already started: more bilingual classrooms, experiments, more support for the first language, much like there already exist for more desired and officially sanctioned language-pairs like English-German or French-German. (Because there is multilingualism in Germany, but it is a

multilingualism from above, sought out by middle or upper class parents). In those classrooms, of course, false friends and other transfers and overlaps will play an important role, but not as danger or lack of mastery—rather as plurality, spilling, Überfluss, fluidity, excess, cross-over and crossing-back of culture, of knowledge, heritage. Or that's what I imagine, anyway. Autrement dis, the autre ment this.

SH Your writing is constantly researching a lingual mutability like this, yet you never outright switched languages (as so many writers have done to various effects). Rather, you 'stayed' with the German, which strikes me as a very conscious choice in your work, and not an unambiguous one. Precisely by sticking to the mother tongue, you seem to be seeking out positions in the border zones.

UW Yes, that is true. I've stayed with German—whatever that really means—because we've both moved a lot, my language and I and not only picnics. (This comes to mind because ... a little digression, or not ... one of my favorite texts, "Meine Sprache und ich" by the Austrian poet Ilse Aichinger, portrays the author and her stubborn inaccessible language during a picnic at a coast, next to an unidentified border post. Her language, she writes, is one that "leans towards foreign words," thereby making

itself unavailable for discourse and belonging and instrumentalization. This is something that I strongly sympathize with, although I would probably portray my own relationship to my language and to its occurring instabilities and unavailabilities in less troubled terms.) Nevertheless, German is sometimes behaving very “de-putting” towards me, in the Benjaminian sense. There is a constant low-level experience of deformation that keeps me on my feet, satelliting instead of settling in, and this opens up the language and world to experiences of displacement, destabilization, pathologization, periphery—be it the experience of asylum seekers in German and European camps, the pathologizing physical examination of immigrants in Ellis Island, or the intricate and complicated socio-linguistic history of hysteria in a case like Anna O. testfly/testify. My latest book, *meine schönste lengevitch*, takes its title and important cues from a book called “Die schoenste Lengevitch,” published in Chicago in 1925, by a Germanic writer named Kurt M. Stein, probably a pseudonym. His book contains a series of satirical poems written in a kind of German-American Creole, poking fun at the mother language loss or deformation among German immigrants who nevertheless think they can still master their Vaterdeutsch correctly.

He attaches a negative value to this loss and subsequent language mix, but he also uses it to generate some hilarious words and lines. But I am interested in fluidity, in erring, in what is perhaps perceived, by the writer of this book, as linguistic disloyalty. In my own book, I am also dealing with Schleiermacher’s assertion (in his otherwise wonderful essay on translation) that people who write literature in a language that is not their mother tongue are doppelgänger, ghosts—“they are rather like an artful man who causes watercress to sprout on a white cloth without soil.” This of course brings us right back to the roots of our present problems with regard to language acquisition and identity in Germany education. This is where it comes from, the idea that thought and expression are one, and thought deeply steeped in, shaped by and shaping, a cultural identity that can only rightfully be represented in the yet-to-be-created nation-state, that one can, in other words, belong to and speak in only one Vaterland, Vaterlanguage: “As to one country, man also has to decide to belong to one language or another, or else he will hover in an unpleasant middle.” I like this middle (a middle of periphery, that is) and yet while my writing is invested in questioning and loosening and rejecting those knots, I find myself thrown back to the watercress

man when thinking about why I don't write in English: I would be missing those roots, the hypodermic ability to connect and branch out and reach far back and down into a language depot, a place where endless voices roam, where the banal is next to the beautiful, all half-present, half-remembered (falsely, of course) fairy tales! Grimms! ... It would be hard to reach this thicket level in English, though of course one doesn't have to write vertically at all. And in staying within this one language and deforming it, mistakes and false friends point to a lack—of mastery, of presence, of accuracy, what have you. But they also, and maybe more importantly, point to an excess, a too-much, of languages, possibilities, as well as to the places where cultures meet in languages, out of their own volition or forcibly, and as a consequence are changed, shaped, or even erased by this experience. Édouard Glissant comes to mind, who in his intro to “Poetics of the Diverse,” laid out why it is impossible to write “in a monolingual manner” even if one writes only in one language: “That is to say that I return and force my language not into syntheses but toward linguistic openings which permit me to conceive of the relations between today's languages on the surface of the earth—relations of domination, connivance, absorption, oppression, erosion,

tangency, etc.—as the fact of an immense drama, an immense tragedy from which my own language cannot be exempt and safe.”

SH How did you conceive the idea of a text collection devoted to false friends? Did it crystallize from dissimilar drafts, or do you have some Eselsbrücke leading straight to the source?

UW I began working on the DICHTionary, the first chapter of *falsche freunde*, in the fall of 2006 after conversations and translation experiences in which false friends had played an important role (i.e. in which I made ‘mistakes,’ slippery language, loopy loopy). I started to write down false friends, made lists, read dictionaries, etymologies. I began to collect false friends for every letter of the alphabet and started to write small prose poems based on these words, their histories and misunderstandings, translations and mistranslations, idioms, overheard phrases, songs—really whatever came to mind, I followed every path. This was a crazy little journey that lasted for about two weeks in which I wrote a first draft of the DICHTionary and made a small book, gluing the poems into an old “Fibel”, a sort of chap book dictionary used in elementary schools which I had found at a flea market. Going over these drafts later, I found that I was unable to trace back certain connections or links or jumps: false friends

had become autonomous and almost created a third language, “archipelagizing” myself and any potential future reader, to borrow another term from Glissant.

SH Achieving that sense of wonder at the language one grew up with does demand a great deal of either work or (good or bad) fortune. You manage to turn the sense of wonder experienced when learning a foreign language, inwards toward the “Vatersprache.” There is an aspect here of de-working one’s own mastery of that language, which may be seen as at once solidaric with those who lack that mastery, but also to a certain degree almost envious of the astonishment with which they may discover fabulous words like “Schnabeltier” (taking into consideration, here and now, that the word “snabel” in Norwegian is translatable with the German “Rüssel,” and thus: OMG “Rüsseltiere!”)—reconstructing the language as a means to reconstruct the orders of social identity?

UW You cannot imagine the shivers of delight I feel when I read this. “Rüsselenten” and also “Rüsseltassen!” Worthy of Borges’s *Manual de zoología fantástica*. My one and a half year old daughter says “elephant” by pressing two fingers to her nose and shaking her head up and down as if dipping it under water. There is no second arm as “Elephantenrüssel” in her sign—she

forgot about this feature entirely—but now I wonder if perhaps she’s actually saying “Rüsseltier” in Norwegian, which would be “Schnabeltier!” A water-bending being, thick-skinned duck, a diving Phant. I believe you very beautifully described the movements of solidarity and desire at the heart of *falsche freunde*, and also of *lengevitch*, with regard to father- and other language. There is of course also always a sense of loss, and lostness, but also of wonder. I have a very distinct memory of a “Rüsseltier” moment in my childhood, a moment of wonder and failing, falling out of understanding and *Selbstverständlichkeit*, almost out of bed. I was perhaps 11 years old and couldn’t fall asleep because I obsessed about the impossibility of the word “Sternschnuppe,” which means falling star. I thought, how could a word like “schnuppe”—if it even existed, if I didn’t just make it up in its complete *schnoddrige* inappropriateness—with its meaning of “egal” (unimportant, unworthy) ever come to be attached to a word like “Stern” (star)? I climbed out of bed and luckily my father was still up, looking at me in disbelief, confirming the existence of the word. I was relieved, but also wasn’t. It didn’t matter anymore whether the word existed or not. What mattered was that one could so utterly fall out of one’s language, get lost. This was one year after

Mauerfall, amidst large and destabilizing cultural, linguistic and socio-economic changes, and I've only slowly come to understand the full meaning of this non-incident, the reverberations of this non-coincidence in my thinking and speaking as a writer born in East Germany ... in a country that does not exist anymore, even though my parents' apartment and many things around it have not migrated much.

SH Going off on a tangent: A political and/or existential aspect to *falsche freunde* may be found in the seemingly mechanic workings of the poems. For example, a fairly loaded word like "ich" crops up, but not so much as a central point of view, rather as one of several elements that can be worked by the text. In the end, the constraints end up destabilizing their very starting point. The simple trope of a quotidian misunderstanding isn't present any longer in, say, the comparison between the German noun "Fell" and the imperfect conjugation of the English word "fall." Cross-fertilized with "flog" this gives rise to the F-text in *falsche freunde*, a very interesting piece about verticality, but hardly anything a teacher of Deutsch als Fremdsprache would feel compelled to mention. More like the text-machine is launching some sort of post-Foucauldian revolt from the border zones. Interestingly, it is in some of these cases—where

the underlying system of the poems seems to collapse—that the human author becomes the most noticeable.

UW I love your observation of how the poems sometimes start to dismantle the system that brought them about ... If this wasn't the case, I would probably be deeply worried about my tools. The poems are rule-based (create lists of false friends words, react to those lists, create short prose poems), but they are not a text-machine; there are way too many glitches and excuses and serious play and side-steps (phonetic explorations in Z, thoughts on phenomenology and sameness in V, an Inger Christensen homage in X)—also, the way in which I work with the material changes throughout the series. Sometimes, the actual false friends words appear in the poem, sometimes they don't. I'm not interested in creating a closed system or mastery. And indeed, I could probably say that I started to write serial prose poems to ~~allow myself to~~ ~~de~~ to ~~deviate~~ push myself away from the urge to create masterful little singular poems with line breaks, units, consume goods, the kind of intricate lyrical texts of *kochanie*, ruled by a lyrical subjectivity. And I still love those poems, but can't write them very often.

SH In *falsche freunde*, there is even a poem playfully devoted to the disappearance of the I

(elegantly assigned the letter J, as it originates in the false friend “jot”):

JOT / JOTA

“*Size matters not. Look at me.*” Yoda

dear smallest letter! dachte grad, ist es gerecht, dass wir dich ständig übersehen, da schallte jemand: jot this down! so schrieb ich, wie ums leben, grimmig eben, hui, im nu, und spürte schon den speer dazu, den ritterlichen stoß auf deine brust, als der geheimrat brüllte: schluss! von einem wort lässt sich kein jota rauben! meinst du, man kann ihm glauben? just ihm? herzlich, ota.

dear smallest letter, i was just thinking: how unjust that we so often abjure you—then somebody shouted: jot this down. and so i wrote for dear life, whirling in a jota, wheu, already feeling the spear, the chivalric jab upon your breast as the ancient poet bellowed: enough! a word may not be robbed of so much as an iota! do you suppose he can be taken at his word? that old jouster? xo, ota

(tr. Susan Bernofsky)

It’s a great example of how far you stretch the concept. We are a long way away from the everyday misunderstandings that false friends

usually give rise to. Since the letter “iota” in English is actually “I,” the “smallest letter” to which the text is a (brief) letter can also carry the significance of the first person singular. The English “I” doesn’t show up in the text, but there is an “ich,” existentially threatened as we’re talking about striking an iota from that word from which “kein jota rauben [lässt].” Various readers (or one and the same) may think of Virginia Woolf’s bemoaning of how the letter “I” has come to dominate so much of male literature, or Beckett’s assertion that “I shall not say I again, ever again [...], if I think of it.”

UW

You’re absolutely right, it’s far, -stretched and -fetched, and I really love your reading of the—wait! I broke my glasses yesterday and they are now taped together with purple striped masking tape. As I was writing this last sentence, the left lens fell out. I am now officially mono-lensical. Right. Onwards, one-eyed-Jane!—the disappearing “I,” is what I meant to say. And this points to your earlier observation of some instances where the false friend material is taking over, is taking the writer and the reader into ungoverned territory—and the Geheimrat (read: Goethe) here is perhaps just another version of the border guards in Aichinger’s picnic piece, a constant hovering threat and presence of systematic

thought, mastery, omnipresent authority. Beckett, “Texts for Nothing” 3: “There’s going to be a departure, I’ll be there, I won’t miss it, it won’t be me, I’ll be here, I’ll say I’m far from here, it won’t be me.” This is not to say that the texts are afraid of first person singulars. In general, I guess I am doubtful of the rejection of such person-occurrences (i.e. of embodied politics and poetics) when it occurs within the experimental or conceptual scene, seeing how the desire to not be limited or discredited by lyrical subjectivity can possibly blind-spot discourse with regard to the many ways in which personhoods—breathing, physical, local, biological, sexual, incomplete—constantly permeate and necessarily ground our experience as writers, translators, readers, critics, activists. So the dominance of the lyrical “I” was never a looming threat in *falsche freunde*—the opposite was the case. I paid a lot of attention to pronouns in the book because the pronouns multiplied all over the place. *Wir und ich und sie und du und ihr und uh und ah*. The pronoun question was especially difficult in the Ellis Island poems of the ALIEN section, which contain a lot of material from original documents and immigrant testimonies. There is a strong “we” in those poems, and I almost took it out in the end for fear that it could give the poems an usurpatory

tone, overwrite the experience of displacement with proper pronoun-domestication. But the truth is, for both the I and the We, that they represent fractured, multiple, traversed-and-traversing, fluid, collaged perspectives, bubbly nodes of experience, between languages, and it is also true that they’ve all lost the “i” in “iota,” that they are ota, other.

SH Your work with literary constraints makes me think of precursors like Oulipo, who owed so much to Gertrude Stein(!), as well as Inger Christensen, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, and so forth. Raymond Roussel’s crazy holorhymes also spring to mind. In German, I can at least think of Unica Zurn’s anagrams and Monica Rinck’s dictionary of precious words, as well as obscure (to me, at least) stuff like *Spiegelgedichte* by Anton Bruhin. Is there a Germanophone tradition for the kind of poetry you’re working with, or did you have to go elsewhere for inspiration?

UW Actually, writing *falsche freunde* became possible only after stepping out of the German literary scene and tradition and wandering around in Canadian (Erin Moure, Oana Avasilichioaei, pb nichol), North American (Rosmarie Waldrop, Susan Howe, Cole Swensen, Mónica de la Torre) and various other (Caroline Bergvall, Cia Rinne, Ida Börjel) literatures of hybrid writing,

dinged conceptualism, translation-poetics, and forms of transpoetics—not only by women, but these are names that come to mind right now. These were begleitet by Stein always, as well as some L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E. Yes, Christensen certainly (Alphabet)!

SH I was originally surprised to learn that *falsche freunde* has been translated. This might seem an impossible task due to the texts' reliance on puns and hierarchies of meaning (or rather: rotating these hierarchies 90°). However, the English translations work quite well, and the Ugly Duckling edition even includes variant translations of single texts. More than anything, these texts live between English and German, rather than in a 'pocket' inside the German language. How do you yourself feel about the English translations? And what about other languages—do you think it would be plausible to translate *falsche freunde* into Hungarian, for instance?

UW The Ugly Duckling chapbook (which can, by the way, be read as a PDF on their website—it's out of print) gives a wonderful idea of the various ways in which *falsche freunde* can be translated. When Susan Bernofsky started to translate the series (at first for an issue of the Chicago Review on Berlin poets), I just sat and watched because I had no idea how

a translation would be possible and of course I wanted the translator to find her very own answer to this question. Susan chose, because she knew she was translating for a more or less monolingual, or at least pretty much Germanless readership, not to attempt to translate the bilinguality, but rather the multiplicity within one language, i.e. the puns, slips, distorted idioms, associations, sound plays. So her translations capture a lot of the vibe, tone, and of the actual encounters that happen within the poems (for I often saw the things that happen in the poems, mostly between an I and a you, as encounters of languages), but only within one language. Then a bit later a New York magazine devoted to experimental translation, *Telephone Journal* (run by Paul Legault and Shamila Cohen) picked *falsche freunde* to be translated by various American poets (whether or not they knew the original language). Out of this came very different approaches, translation as reversal of German and English, rewritings, bastardizations. Eugene Ostashevsky translated the B poem by mistranslating the key false friends within the English language: he chose to represent them with homophones (hair – hare, letter – ladder, hear – ear etc.), which are maybe false cousins or something. I'm very happy to have these translations side by side—ones that

focus more on the actual language material, i.e. the finished poem, and others that focus on the rule or constraint, or more simply put, the process. I know that two translators in Brazil are working on translations that would utilize false friends between Spanish and Portuguese, which will most certainly generate entirely new poems, and I can't wait to read them. And after that, the Hungarian!

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