

FROM LINGUA FRANCA TO NEW CREOLE

A Romance in Five Acts and Twenty-One Englishes

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On a grey October evening in 2014 in London, several dozen people congregated at *Kunstraum*, a small non-profit art space in the city's diverse and multicultural east end. The host, Dutch artist Nicoline van Harskamp, had invited non-native English speakers living in London to join in for a collaborative reading of George Bernard Shaw's classic play, *Pygmalion*. Preparing for the event, Van Harskamp brought together all currently existing foreign-language translations of the play, ranging from Turkish to Japanese, Farsi to Czech, making them available to participants during the reading. The idea behind the event was simple: on the basis of translations of *Pygmalion* in their native languages, participants — most of whom had only just recently arrived to the U.K. — would translate the part of their chosen character back into English, in a collaborative effort with other participants. Essentially, the event would constitute an English-language reading of Shaw's play, but in the absence of an English-language script. After the reading, which was recorded, Van Harskamp transcribed the newly back-translated oral version of the play and, several months later, published a new version of *Pygmalion*, titled *A Romance in Five Acts and Twenty-One Englishes* — with the notion of 'Englishes' referring to the 'accented' forms of English used by the numerous non-native speakers who had participated in the reading, and their varied cultural and ethnic backgrounds (albeit mainly from the global North).^{1&2}

That Van Harskamp decided to stage this event in London is hardly a coincidence: with its large, foreign-born population, London is one of Europe's most linguistically diverse cities by languages spoken. It is a place where the English language is exposed to a plethora of centrifugal forces, further complicating an already complex linguistic landscape in the United Kingdom itself, where the English language is not only spoken in innumerable regional varieties but where language historically also represents an important marker of social class. Van Harskamp's choice of *Pygmalion* is not coincidental either: the play revolves around the relation between language and power; between performance and social class; between oppression and self-empowerment through language. Its main protagonist, Eliza Doolittle, is introduced as a poor, uneducated, Cockney-speaking street flower vendor from the working class. After a theatre performance, she has an encounter with linguistics professor Henry Higgins, who takes an avid interest in classifying the social and regional varieties of the English language, and in particular, Eliza's English which, as he believes, "will keep her in the gutter to the end of her days".³

¹ The project incorporated the following translations: German, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Bulgarian, Nynorsk, Hungarian, Czech, Croatian, Turkish, Swedish, Danish, Polish, Russian, Ukrainian, Mandarin, Farsi, Arabic, Hebrew, Korean, and Japanese. With the exception of Nynorsk, speakers of all the above-mentioned languages participated in the project. According to an e-mail exchange with the artist on October 16, 2016.

² Nicoline van Harskamp, *A Romance in Five Acts and Twenty-One Englishes*, Eindhoven: Onomatopoe, 2015.

³ George Bernhard Shaw, *Pygmalion: A Romance in Five Acts: Definitive Text* (1913), Leonard Conolly (ed.), London: Methuen Drama, 2008, p. 20.

Higgins places a bet with a fellow gentleman, Colonel Pickering, that he would be capable of passing Eliza off as a member of the upper class by teaching her how to rid herself of her lower-class phonetics and instead speak "like a lady in a florist shop".⁴ The play then derives much of its humour and suspense from this somewhat precarious act of social performance aimed at transgressing the rigid class divisions of Victorian England. While Eliza proves a fast learner and eventually adopts the accent of the upper class, her manners and vocabulary continue to threaten to jeopardize her act — but, ultimately, she succeeds (making Higgins win his bet). And yet, increasingly uneasy with the role of the 'live doll' she has been cast into, she rebukes Higgins and refuses to adopt the social mores of the upper class. Instead, she decides to use her newly acquired linguistic abilities to live a self-sufficient life on her own terms, free from the narcissistic patronage of professor Higgins.⁵

Back-translation — that is, the procedure of reconstructing an original from the basis of a translation — is a rare occurrence in translation practice, useful primarily to assess on the accuracy of a translation, restore a lost original, or experiment with language and translation itself.⁶ In *A Romance in Five Acts*, comparing the differences between the back-translated English version and the English original is as illuminating as it is entertaining. At first glimpse, the reader can tell that the language has undergone a process of reduction and simplification. "Thunderstruck" becomes "completely insane"; "in heaven's name" is remade into "for heaven sake"; "not bloody likely" reappears as a succinct "fuck no", and so forth. Moreover, idiomatic language estranges itself from English norms. "There's not [a cab] to be had for love or money" turns into "you can't get [a taxi] even if you cut yourself in pieces." Surprisingly radical shifts in meaning take place as well: "Freddy loves me" makes way for "Freddy isn't an asshole". Beyond these 'minor' changes, the overall reading experience is altered as well. The text becomes increasingly opaque, with frequent contradictions and seemingly unstable meanings. (fig. 3)

When speaking about her work, Van Harskamp frequently emphasizes her interest in linguistic processes of decentring, the disentanglement of the English language from its imperial and colonial relations of power, and the diffusion of English into contexts and communities where it is neither socially nor historically rooted. The Indian linguist Braj Kachru has referred to this zone as the "expanding circle" of the English language, where non-native speakers use the language to communicate with each other.⁷ Linguists like Jennifer Jenkins and Barbara Seidlhofer have developed the concept of Lingua Franca English, which, according to Seidlhofer, acts to "achieve the fullest communication possible" between the members of a heterolingual group, as it happens continuously every day in different

⁴ Ibid., p. 40.

⁵ Ibid., p. 78.

⁶ For an outstanding example of back-translation as an artistic device see Mark Twain, *The Jumping Frog: In English, Then in French, Then Clawed Back Into a Civilised Language Once More* by Patient, Unremunerated Toil, New York: Harper and Brothers, 1903.

⁷ Braj B. Kachru, *The Other Tongue: English across Cultures*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982.

⁸ Barbara Seidlhofer, *Understanding English as a Lingua Franca*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 17-18; also see Jennifer Jenkins, *English as a Lingua Franca: Attitude and Identity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. Today, the concept of Lingua Franca generally refers to any language used as a means of communication between speakers of different native languages. During the Byzantine era, however, the Lingua Franca was an actual trade language used particularly in the eastern and southern Mediterranean region as a means of communication between Western Europeans, Arabs, Persians, Turks, Greeks, and others.



fig. 1 Still taken from Nicoline van Harskamp, *A Romance in Five Acts and Twenty-One Englishes*, 2014–2015. The project involved live translations, an exhibition, publication, and a theatre play. Video registration of the play took place during a live staging at De Theaterkamer, Amsterdam. Courtesy Nicoline van Harskamp.



fig. 2 Still taken from Nicoline van Harskamp, *A Romance in Five Acts and Twenty-One Englishes*, 2014–2015. Close-up of the character Eliza Doolittle. Courtesy Nicoline van Harskamp.

settings around the globe, such as in transnational institutions, corporate offices, and online communities.⁸ Because the English used in these settings mainly serves to facilitate communication between non-native speakers, its norms are not only “established during the interaction”, Seidlhofer argues that it would also be absurd and counter-productive for these communities to adhere to the same rules that native speakers follow.⁹ Instead, Seidlhofer and Jenkins both argue that Lingua Franca English, with its many regional and cultural varieties, should be recognized as a legitimate form of speaking English, suggesting that the teaching of the English language should be adjusted globally to meet the needs of international speakers whose number is consistently on the rise.¹⁰

Van Harskamp already explored non-native Englishes in an earlier video performance titled *English Forecast* (2013): conceived as a live streaming performance for online audiences, *English Forecast* brought together a group of four voice actors with different mother tongues to perform a collage of statements that Van Harskamp had collected by interviewing numerous non-native English speakers (as well as scientists and language experts) about their views on the English language and their predictions for its future. During the performance, which took place in a studio at London’s Tate Modern, the four voice actors listened to the voice samples on headphones and repeated what they heard, forming a dissonant and frequently contradictory narrative delivered in a multitude of changing accents, grammars, and attitudes. The different narratives that emerged suggested a linguistically decentred future for the world; with some of the participants speculating that monolingualism might eventually become the exception; or that people might be switching between different ‘Englishes’ depending on the different

⁹ Ibid., p. 18.

¹⁰ Jenkins, op. cit. (note 8), pp. 237–255; Seidlhofer, op. cit. (note 8), pp. 175–210. While the desire to reframe Lingua Franca English as a legitimate way of speaking English entails a criticism of the hegemonic power of normative English, it remains an open question whether English learners globally actually share this sentiment—and how many are indeed motivated precisely by the language’s powerful promise for upward social, cultural and economic mobility.

communities they locate themselves in. Essentially, Van Harskamp’s *English Forecast* not only suggested a differentiation of the English language on a purely linguistic level, but the possible emergence of a new cultural consciousness born out of a heterogeneous and fundamentally ‘impure’ vision of the English language.

A theoretical concept that encapsulates this condition is the notion of *Creoleness*. Marked by a desire for cultural and linguistic self-empowerment, the *Créolité* movement, developed in the late 1980s and rooted in Martinique, sought to overcome the hierarchy between the assumed ‘purity’ of the European paternal languages and the supposedly inferior ‘impurity’ of Creole languages.¹¹ As such, the *Créolité* movement played a key role in the cultural ascent of Creole languages throughout the postcolonial era, theoretically underpinning their evolution such as Martinique or Seychelleois Creole into mediums of cultural, literary, and institutional use. In cultural terms, the movement’s aim was to inspire a new Creole literature that could lay the cultural foundations for an inherently heterolingual society, free from European colonial dominance. In a captivating manifesto titled ‘In Praise of Creoleness’, published in French in 1989, writers and linguists Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant theorized Creoleness as an “interactional or transactional” form of identity, characterized by multilingualism, cultural hybridity, and intertwined histories of displacement and colonial violence that had brought together people from vastly different backgrounds: African slaves as well as indentured labourers from India, China, the Middle East, and elsewhere.¹²

In order to resist the cultural hegemony of France and its language, the authors of the *Créolité* manifesto saw it as imperative to create and establish a new mode of cultural and literary expression that reflected the

¹¹ Linguistically, the notion of Creole distinguishes itself from other forms of linguistic hybridity, such as the Lingua Franca or pidgin. Although the division is fluent and contested, Lingua Franca or pidgin generally refer to transactional forms of communication between speakers of different native languages, and do not have native speakers.

¹² Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant, ‘Éloge de la créolité’ (1989), trans. by Mohamed B. Taleb Khyar as: ‘In Praise of Creoleness’ in: *Callaloo* 13 (1990), no. 4, pp. 891, 901.

experience of a linguistically, ethnically, and racially heterogeneous population whose history they saw as one of “survival, resistance, compromise, and synthesis”.¹³ As a heterogeneous people that endured centuries of adversity and colonial servitude, the population of the French Caribbean naturally had a different relation to the French language than native French speakers from the mainland. For them, cultural empowerment was possible if the hierarchies within language — between purity and contamination, between high and low — were redefined; when the French language was made to serve the purposes of the colonized peoples as opposed to their former colonizers. “We made the French language ours”, they proclaimed proudly, arguing for a broader politics of cultural and linguistic re-appropriation and transformation as a central pillar of an emergent Creole culture:

We did conquer it, this French language. [...] We extended the meaning of some of its words, deviated others. And changed many. We enriched the French language, its vocabulary as well as its syntax. We preserved many of its words which were no longer used. In short, we inhabited it. [...] In it we built our own language.¹⁴

What they sketched out was the vision for a language in a perpetual state of reinvention, imagining the Creole writer as a “collector of ancestral speech” as much as a “gatherer of new words”, a discoverer and conqueror.¹⁵ The power of Creole, they believed, would be to overcome the centre-periphery dynamics that characterized Martinique’s relation to Europe, accommodate the irreducible cultural, ethnic, and racial complexity of the Creole people, and provide a true alternative to both the hegemonic universalism of the West as well as the trap of cultural and racial essentialism associated with the earlier notion of *Négritude*.¹⁶

Even though today’s speakers of English as a Lingua Franca have not endured the brutal conditions of slave labour and colonial exploitation of the past, the transactional use of English has increased in parallel to an unprecedented acceleration of global migration and displacement. Prosperous urban centres like London have accommodated and simultaneously vastly profited from global migrant labour: if the street vendor of the late Edwardian era was a Cockney speaker, it might be a native Spanish, Polish, Romanian, Turkish or Arabic speaker today. By producing a Lingua Franca English version of Shaw’s *Pygmalion* and publishing it anew, Van Harskamp not only recalls the importance of literature in constituting cultural communities, she also calls into question the linguistic and cultural identity of today’s migrant communities: non-normative Englishes, her work suggests, could become the cultural basis for transnational and heterolingual communities of the displaced. And while no generation has yet grown up

¹³ Ibid., p. 896.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 900.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ The concept of *Négritude*, coined by Aimé Césaire and others as a philosophy of anticolonial resistance and black empowerment, has played a key role in the development of Martiniquean thought and the evolution of the concept of Creoleness. Unlike *Négritude*, however, the concept of Creoleness, while acknowledging the African roots of many Martiniqueans, does not possess a racial dimension. While the Creolists regarded *Négritude* as a necessary dialectical moment in the emergence of a postcolonial consciousness, they emphasized that Martinique is home to an ethnically and racially mixed population with many different roots — African, European, Asian, Middle Eastern. Regarding the links between *Négritude* and Creoleness see *ibid.*, pp. 888–889.

on Lingua Franca English, this may well become the case if global migration continues to accelerate. As Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant predict,

a new humanity will gradually emerge which will have the same characteristics as our Creole humanity: all the complexity of Creoleness. The son or daughter of a German and a Haitian, born and living in Peking, will be torn between several languages, several histories, caught in the torrential ambiguity of a mosaic identity. [...] Expressing Creoleness will be expressing the very beings of the world.¹⁷

Granted, if Lingua Franca English were to establish itself more broadly as a language of use for cultural purposes, the complex question of what rules govern this language — if any — would need to be addressed and negotiated. Disagreements might appear over whether a truly pluralistic and polyphonic language should not by definition eschew the kind of standardization and institutionalization processes conventionally associated with nation states. Indeed, a plausible future might be the proliferation of numerous different ‘Englishes’ and standards of Lingua Franca English, cultivated to different degrees by different transnational social, cultural, professional or political communities.

Meanwhile, perhaps one of the most interesting aspects about *A Romance in Five Acts and Twenty-One Englishes* is how the relation between language, power, and social status is rearticulated through the act of back-translating *Pygmalion*. The process has almost entirely erased the socio-linguistic attributes that made Eliza so clearly recognizable as a lower class ‘gutter girl’, and Higgins and Pickering as members of the educated upper class. Now, they all speak non-normative English. As such, the basic premise of Shaw’s *Pygmalion* — the act of transgressing social class boundaries through performance, and the suspense over whether this act of social performance will succeed — collapses. The protagonists of *A Romance in Five Acts and Twenty-One Englishes* seem much more preoccupied with understanding each other than with recognizing the fine nuances of their fellow speakers’ class identity. Does this mean that future Englishes might be freer from cultural hierarchies?

Linguist John P. O’Regan has expressed doubts whether Lingua Franca English will be able to deliver on this promise. He points to how the spread of neoliberal capitalism has not only perpetuated and exacerbated class hierarchies internationally, but fashioned English as a near-universally recognized form of symbolic capital; an asset worth investing in for those who can afford to do so, and have access to appropriate higher education.¹⁸ Here, O’Regan comes full circle with Eliza’s fate in *Pygmalion*, realizing that she herself can capitalize on her new ability to speak English ‘properly’ (fig. 3).

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 902.

¹⁸ John P. O’Regan, ‘English as a Lingua Franca: An Immanent Critique’, in: *Applied Linguistics* 35, no. 5 (2014), p. 540.

Pygmalion

ELIZA [desperate] I'll marry Freddy, I will, as soon as I'm able to support him.

HIGGINS [thunderstruck] Freddy!!! That young fool! That poor devil who couldn't get a job as an errand boy even if he had the guts to try it!

Woman: do you not understand that I have made you a consort for a king?

ELIZA. Freddy loves me: that makes him king enough for me. I don't want him to work: he wasn't brought up to it as I was. I'll go and be a teacher.

HIGGINS. What'll you teach, in heaven's name?

ELIZA. What you taught me. I'll teach phonetics.¹⁹

A Romance in Five Acts and Twenty-One Englishes

ELIZA: I will marry Freddy. Yes, I will. As soon as I can sustain him.

HIGGINS [completely insane] With Freddy! That stupid? ... Even if you would have the energy to try it, woman, you don't understand what I've made of you: an ideal company for a king.

ELIZA. Freddy isn't an asshole. He's a king. Freddy loves me and he will be my king. I'll not send him to work. He doesn't fit for work. And as for me, I'm going to teach.

HIGGINS. Teach what? For heaven sake!

ELIZA. The thing that I learned from you: phonetics.²⁰

fig. 3 Side-by-side comparison of *Pygmalion* and *A Romance in Five Acts and Twenty-One Englishes*.

Access to English is still linked to socio-economic inequalities, as sociolinguists Nicola Galloway and Heath Rose have pointed out.²¹ Despite the fact that different communities could proclaim their own Englishes 'Creoles' — Edouard Glissant called Creole "the self-made man among all pidgins, the king of all 'patois', who crowned himself"²² — this does of course not necessarily translate into the level of political and economic power that native English-speaking cultures yield. In fact, Barbara Seidlhofer has conceded that so far, Lingua Franca English as a cultural phenomenon has largely failed to gain traction and destabilize the socioeconomic prestige of normative highbrow English, putting non-native speakers into a position where they 'just cannot win':

Either [non-native speakers] subject themselves to native-speaker authority and obediently strive to meet the norms of the hegemonic language, or they try to assert themselves against the hegemony, only to then be told that they got it wrong because they have the misfortune not to be native speakers. So the primacy accorded to native speaker norms puts the non-native speaker user of English in an inescapable double bind.²³

In light of this, *A Romance in Five Acts and Twenty-One Englishes* makes a symbolic attempt at such decentring from *within* the centre. Avant-garde gesture or an experiment destined to fail — it might one day speak to a new generation for whom the Lingua Franca of today will be the mother tongue.

Martin Waldmeier recently completed his PhD in Visual Cultures at Goldsmiths, London. Titled *The Artist as Translator*, his thesis examines the rise of the (cultural) translator figure in international exhibition culture. From 2014 to 2016 he organized *The Translator's Voice*, a travelling group exhibition shown in France, Spain, and Norway. He is currently a research and teaching fellow at the National Academy of Art and Design in Dublin.

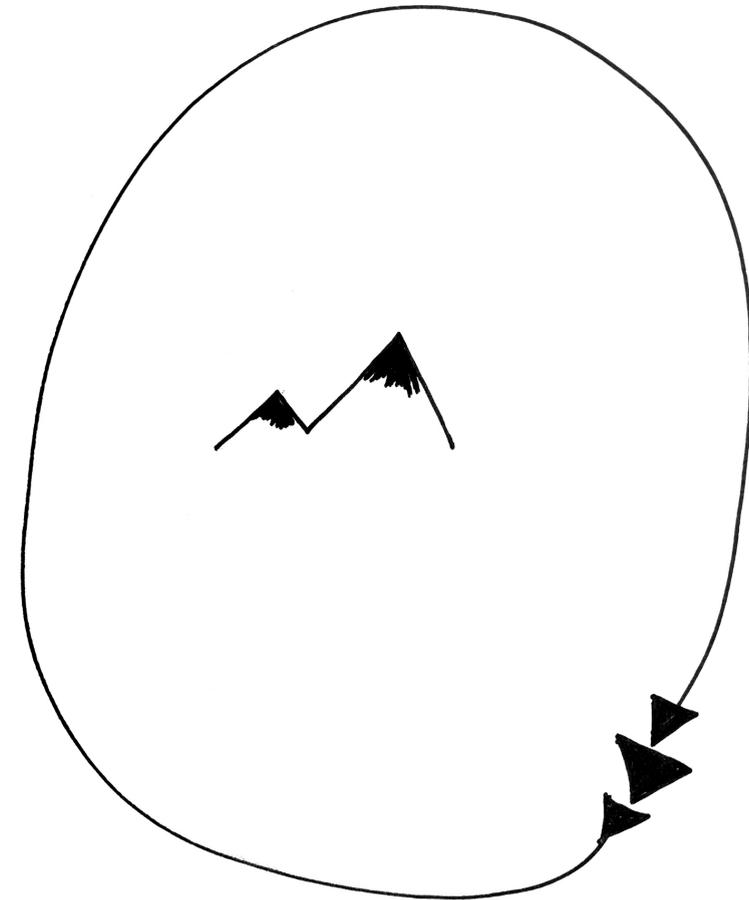
¹⁹ Shaw, op. cit. (note 3), p. 126.

²⁰ Nicoline van Harskamp, op. cit. (note 2), p. 103.

²¹ Nicola Galloway and Heath Rose, *Introducing Global Englishes*, London: Routledge, 2015, p. 61.

²² Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. by J. Michael Dash, Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989, p. 20.

²³ Seidlhofer, op. cit. (note 8), p. 34.



Antoinette Nausikaä, *Going Around the Mountain*, 2014, drawing. Courtesy the artist.