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# Over the wall ...

**Alan Maley** recommends books that give a voice to the 'tongue-tide'.

*I have crossed an ocean  
I have lost my tongue  
From the root of the old one  
A new one has sprung.*

**Grace Nicholls**

The books reviewed in this issue deal with the immigrant experience from a more specifically linguistic angle. Two are memoirs, one is a novel, and two of them are humorous. In all of them, the tide of language washes over the characters and leaves them tongue-tied in one way or another.

## **Lost in Translation**

The first memoir, Eva Hoffman's *Lost in Translation* (not to be confused with the film of the same name) is a most perceptive and moving account of what it means to be uprooted and transplanted. In Part 1, 'Paradise', she evokes the atmosphere of post-war Krakow – despite all its hardships, a surprisingly warm and intimate place. In Part 2, 'Exile', the 13-year-old Eva explores with particular sensitivity the painful linguistic re-invention of herself she undergoes as an immigrant to Canada. Virtually every page has telling quotes, but these few must suffice:

*'Polish in a short time has atrophied, shrivelled from sheer uselessness ... In*

*English, words have not penetrated to those levels of my psyche from which a private conversation could proceed.'*

*'I'm not filled with language anymore, and I have only a memory of fullness to anguish me with the knowledge that, in this dark and empty state, I don't really exist.'*

The sense of having lost one language and not yet having acquired another is beautifully conveyed. In Part 3, 'The New World', Eva, now in New York,

It is set in 1950s Dublin. The family is unusual in more ways than one, but principally because of the languages the children grow up with. The mother is German and speaks no Irish. The father speaks both English and German but, as a tyrannical promoter of the Irish language, will allow no English in his house. The children are the 'speckled people' of the title, neither one thing nor another, and they suffer for it.

## **The tide of language washes over the characters and leaves them tongue-tied in one way or another**

has become thoroughly at home in the English language: *'But now the language has entered my body, has incorporated itself in the softest tissue of my being.'* However, she still has to find a way of adapting culturally without a loss of identity. As she says, *'I have to lose my alienation without losing my self.'* I cannot recommend this book highly enough for the insights it gives into the mind of a 'cultural transplant' – and she writes like an angel.

## **The Speckled People**

Hugo Hamilton's memoir *The Speckled People* is a beautifully written, sensitive evocation of the author's Irish childhood.

The father, who also has a limp, is violent both to his wife and kids. They are physically punished if he catches them so much as listening to English: *'... we could only play with children who could speak Irish.'* Unsurprisingly, they have few friends. And a psychological atmosphere of stifling terror suffuses the household. *'In our house it's dangerous to sing a song or say what's inside your head. You have to be careful or else my father will get up and switch you off like the radio.'*

They are mercilessly bullied and harassed by other kids, who brand them 'Nazis'. Their mother, who comes across as warm and protective, is also deeply

unhappy both to be trapped where she is but also because she is still working out the trauma and guilt of a war-time rape by a Nazi businessman: ‘... she’s downstairs again, clacking on the typewriter, putting down all the things that she can’t say to anyone, not even my father. Things you can’t say in a song, or a story, only on a typewriter for people to read later ... on their own, without looking into your eyes.’ She desperately pretends happiness. ‘Everybody has a story to hide behind, my mother says ... She made up a story to hide behind and said she was nowhere more at home than in Ireland with her family.’

Yet for all the pain and misery, Hamilton leaves us with a feeling of optimism. His exploration of the country of childhood is full of sharp perceptions from the eyes of an observing child. And it is good-humoured and witty into the bargain. ‘In Germany ... people think before they speak so that they mean what they say, while in Ireland, people think after they speak so as to find out what they mean.’ And maybe not just in Ireland!

## A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers

The only novel in this batch is Xiaolu Guo’s *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*. This is a spirited and saucy romp through the experiences of Zhuang, a 24-year-old Chinese girl who is in London to learn English. It charts her progress in English and in love over a 12-month period, during which she meets and falls in love with an older British man – a bisexual artist and drifter. Each chapter is based on a word and its definition from her dictionary. Although this is superficially a light-hearted and irreverent story, it has some serious undertones – about what it feels like to be an alien, about language learning (she is scathing about her English teacher), about the difficulties of adjusting to cultural difference, and about growing into love and loss. The inevitable ending of her affair and her return to China rings true and leaves us sharing her sadness. One interesting feature is the skilful way the author shows the improvement in Zhuang’s English, which starts off as pidgin and progresses to a still quirky yet highly expressive style by the end. It is a book well worth reading, if only for its acerbic asides on Western (and Chinese) cultural practices.

## The Education of Hyman Kaplan

*The Education of Hyman Kaplan* by Leo Rosten (and its sequel, *The Return of Hyman Kaplan*) should arguably be on the ‘additional reading’ list of any ELT teacher training course. The books are based on the happenings in an evening class for adult migrants in New York in the mid-20th century. The hapless teacher, Mr Parkhill, struggles against all odds to inculcate some kind of communicable form of English into his class of highly individualistic and eccentric learners. ‘Poor Mrs Moskovitz, she was still confusing English with some other, unrevealed language.’ Chief among his scourges is Hyman Kaplan. Here he is, in typical full and eloquent flow:



These books offer several different takes on the immigrant experience and its linguistic fallout

‘Oh sed, sed, sed, to play mit halth for de sek of odders ... So dey had to call a doctor, and he came an’ said, ‘Mr Popper, you got bronxitis!’ So Jake vent into his bat. An’ got more seek. So de foist doctor insulted odder doctors ...’

‘You mean “consulted” ...’

‘an’ dey took him to Mount Sinus Hospital ...’

‘Mount Sinai!’

‘... vere dey fond Jake Popper had double demonia! So dey gave him special noises ...’

‘Nurses!’

‘... an’ from all kinds medicine de bast, iven oxenjin tants, he should be able to breed. An’ dey give him blood confusions ...’

‘Transfusions!’

‘... an’ dey shot him in de arm he should fall aslip, mit epidemics.’

Small wonder that Mr Parkhill concludes that ‘... so much of Mr Kaplan’s English remained to be improved that the hills of his progress shrank before the mountain of his errors.’ Yet, ‘... sometimes Mr Parkhill wondered whether it wasn’t entirely fair to try to clamp the chains of conformity on so unfettered an intelligence.’

The often hilarious humour does however mask an underlying truthfulness about such teaching situations. Any of us who has ever tried to eliminate a fossilised pronunciation error by intensive practice (pronouncing *w* as *v*, for example) will

identify with the immediate reversion to the error once the practice stops.

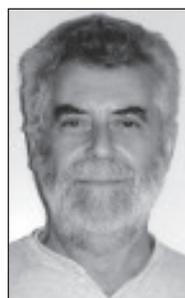
‘Prectice?’ Mr Kaplan’s voice rang out. ‘Fromm nah on, ve vill voik vit dobbble-yous till ve vouldn’t iven whisper vun void vitout.’

And Mr Parkhill feels even worse because Kaplan is such a nice guy, and so hard-working, ‘who wedded such willingness with such unteachability’.



These books offer several different takes on the immigrant experience and its linguistic fallout. They remind us, as language teachers, that for all the generalisations we make about language and language learning, it remains an intensely personal thing, deeply influenced by culture. **ETp**

Guo, X *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* Vintage Books 2007  
Hamilton, H *The Speckled People* Harper Perennial 2003  
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Rosten, L *The Education of Hyman Kaplan* Penguin 1970  
Rosten, L *The Return of Hyman Kaplan* Penguin 1968



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