Postcolonial Literature and the Magic Radio:  
The Language of Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*

Gillian Gane

*Hamilton College*

**Abstract**  Much postcolonial literature depends on unacknowledged processes of translation working like the “radio” in Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* that magically renders all Indian languages intelligible to the children of midnight. It is surprisingly difficult to determine what languages the characters in Rushdie’s novel are actually speaking; though there can be found in the novel several of the strategies Meir Sternberg identifies with translational mimesis (the representation of one language within another), the material substance of English is important in much of its dialogue. Arguably, the English language itself is the magic radio by means of which meaning becomes accessible in *Midnight’s Children*—and Rushdie’s own comments reveal ultimately that he evaded the issue of the underlying languages the characters are speaking.

In Salman Rushdie’s 1980 *Midnight’s Children*, the gift of midnight turns the young Saleem Sinai into “a sort of radio,” enabling him to understand all the many languages of India. This magic radio, with its translingual powers, is a powerful metaphor. Not only *Midnight’s Children* itself but much of postcolonial literature can be seen as such a magic radio, converting the many languages of the world into a select set of metropolitan languages. So efficacious is this radio that readers are often unaware of its workings: they forget that underlying the English (or French, or Portuguese . . .) they read are other languages. Rushdie’s own work is a case in point. Though much has been written about his linguistic inventiveness and about the “language” of
Midnight’s Children in particular, surprisingly little attention has been paid to a basic question: What is the language of the novel? Setting aside Saleem’s magical powers, what language do Saleem, his family, and his friends speak in ordinary, everyday life? Do they speak the English that appears on the printed page, or do these English words represent Hindi-Urdu?

The varieties of speech that appear inside quotation marks in Midnight’s Children cover a wide spectrum. At one extreme, General Sam Manekshaw of India, accepting the surrender of General Tiger Niazi of Pakistan, greets him with fond memories of their days together in the British army: “I say, bloody fine to see you, Tiger, you old devil!” (Rushdie 1981 [1980]: 367)—an utterance undoubtedly in English. We know too that Ahmed Sinai speaks

1. Those who have addressed the language of Midnight’s Children include Rustom Bharucha (1994: 160), who claims that Rushdie “has created a language of his own that transcends any English that has been spiced with Indian words and expressions”; Bharucha (ibid.: 161) asserts specifically that “Rushdie has liberated Indian English . . . from its false Puritanism, its fake gentility.” Clark Blaise (1981) similarly stresses the demotic irreverence that characterizes Rushdie’s dialogue: “Much of the dialogue (the best parts) reads like the hip vulgarity—yaaa!—of the Hindi film magazine. The desiccated syllables of T. S. Eliot, so strong an influence upon other Anglo-Indian writers, are gone”; Blaise goes on to proclaim that “Midnight’s Children sounds like a continent finding its voice” (apparently discounting that continent’s long literary history). Agnes Scott Langeland (1996: 16) acclaims Rushdie’s “linguistic takeover bid”; he “helps to establish a wider ethnocentric base for the English language by creating a magical and humorous Indian blend of English,” she maintains (ibid.: 21). Philip Engblom (1994), drawing on Bakhtin, commends Midnight’s Children as carnivalesque, dialogical, and multivoiced. Michael Gorra (1997: 133) sees the fact that the novel is written in English as its “most important attempt to engage the discourse of colonialism”; he praises the way Rushdie “makes English prose an omnium-gatherum of whatever seems to work, sprinkled with bits of Urdu, eclectic enough even to accommodate cliché, unbound by any grammatical straitjacket.” Feroza Jussawalla, by contrast, identifies most of the “dialect” in the novel as that of the despised Eurasian community of Bombay and charges that this language is both unimaginative and insulting: “The language depicted is the clichéd, stereotypical speech of the Eurasian, ‘niggerized’ class,” and Rushdie is “merely recreating a style already created for the specific purposes of parody,” she says in the chapter “Beyond Indianness: The Stylistic Concerns of Midnight’s Children” of her book Family Quarrels (1985: 118, 119). Robert Fraser (2000: 47) likewise emphasizes uniformity rather than diversity—but in this case it is standard English that he sees as central to the novel: “The words of the narrative rarely slip beyond the cultured, many-layered English of Saleem,” he claims, and English functions as a “‘unitary language,’ binding the novel together.”

2. Robert Fraser (2000: 48, 49) notes the satirical mockery here but finds it above all significant that at a time when the subcontinent was in the process of dividing for the second time—Pakistan, born in 1947, splitting in 1971 to yield the new nation of Bangladesh—“English serves here as a lingua franca between a Parsee and an Urdu speaker” and “has become a common coin through which the fragile unity of the subcontinent . . . can express itself.” (Fraser seems oddly to imply that “Parsee” is a language; in fact, as a Bombay Parsi, Sam Manekshaw—a historical figure—would presumably have spoken Gujarati.) In reality, though Manekshaw did indeed lead the Indian forces that came to the aid of the East Pakistanis, it was Jagjit Singh Aurora who accepted the Pakistani surrender—one of a number of historical inaccuracies in the novel that Rushdie himself points out in “‘Errata’” (1991 [1983]).
English to William Methwold, that “in the presence of an Englishman” Ahmed’s voice becomes “a hideous mockery of an Oxford drawl” (ibid.: 96). At the other extreme, there is Deshmukh, the peasant “vendor of notions” who scavenges from bodies on a battlefield: “No shoot I, my sirs. Ho no. I have news—ho, such news! India comes! Jessore is fall, my sirs; in one-four days, Dacca, also, yes-no?” Deshmukh, we are told, is speaking “bad, stilted Hindi”—a language he claims to have acquired by virtue of the magic belt that he is offering for sale (along with such items as “medicine for constipation” and “camera, almost working order”): “I am wearing now, my sir, speak damn good, yes no? Many India soldier are buy, they talk so-many different tongues, the belt is godsend from God!” (ibid.: 360).

In Deshmukh’s case, the fractured English on the page represents ungrammatical Hindi, a fact that we know because the language is explicitly identified. Sometimes, then, English speech in Midnight’s Children represents another language; at other times it is simply English speech. Most of the dialogue in the novel falls into a broad middle ground between the extremes represented by Sam Manekshaw and Deshmukh: it is neither so absurdly and exaggeratedly British that it has to be English, nor is it explicitly identified as spoken in a language other than English; it is neither smoothly correct by metropolitan standards nor as markedly and pervasively deviant as Deshmukh’s speech.

The question of what language characters in the novel are speaking proves unexpectedly difficult to answer; in the course of my investigation I changed my mind several times. I start with Meir Sternberg’s theory of translational mimesis, an illuminating account of how writers can within the medium of one language convey the presence of other languages in the worlds of their texts.

**Sternberg’s Translational Mimesis**

Every language, Meir Sternberg proposes in “Polylingualism as Reality and Translation as Mimesis” (1981: 221), has “the burden of reporting messages originally encoded in other languages.” Apart from *intertextual* issues (those
that translators face), the multiplicity of languages gives rise to intratextual and representational complications, especially “within the fictive worlds created in literature, with their variegated referential contexts, frequent shifts from milieu to milieu, abundance of dialogue scenes, and keen interest in the language of reality and the reality of language” (ibid.: 221–22). Sternberg’s summing up of the challenge he identifies seems particularly relevant to postcolonial literature: “Literary art thus finds itself confronted by a formidable mimetic challenge: how to represent the reality of polylingual discourse through a communicative medium which is normally unilingual” (ibid.: 222).

Some writers avoid this challenge. They may do so, according to Sternberg, in three different ways. They may opt for what he calls referential restriction; this “consists in confining the scope of the represented world to the limits of a single, linguistically uniform community whose speech-patterns correspond to those of the implied audience” (ibid.: 223). Jane Austen, Sternberg suggests, limits the world she represents in this way, “to the point of excluding interdialectical as well as interlingual tensions” (ibid.). It is hard to find such linguistic homogeneity anywhere in the world today; apart from the movements of peoples, the airwaves and cinema screens now carry alien languages, dialects, accents into most communities. And when literary works are written in English about parts of the world where other languages predominate, their linguistic condition is fundamentally and by definition heterogeneous.

Those writers who do present a polylingual world may opt for the practice of vehicular matching, reproducing the actual languages at issue—presenting them directly, as it were, rather than finding ways to represent them. An English-language text, for example, might include extended untranslated passages in French. In the best of circumstances, vehicular matching demands considerable “polyglot expertise” in both author and readers, says Sternberg (ibid.: 225). Supplementing this brief comment with the historical and geopolitical perspectives of our postcolonial moment, we might note that once upon a time highly literate Westerners could be expected to understand Latin and Greek, French and German, and speech or texts in those languages could be quoted directly in the original language within books written in English. The “polyglot expertise” of the educated elite was possible only because the languages that counted were a narrowly circum-

4. I am grateful to my friend Susan Ferguson for introducing me to Sternberg’s work; her 1995 dissertation “Speaking Volumes” inspired my own explorations of language in postcolonial literature. A recent article which applies Sternberg’s ideas to postcolonial literature is Eugene Chen Eoyang’s “English as a Postcolonial Tool” (2003).
scribed set. Now, however, we have an extended awareness of the possible sites and modalities of knowledge and culture; among the proliferation of possibilities, we recognize that there are more languages in the world than anyone can ever be expected to know. Postcolonial literatures may represent communities where people speak Igbo, Bengali, Gikuyu, Arabic, Kannada, Swahili, Tamil, Yoruba, Hindi, Xhosa, Ijaw, Gujarati, or Cantonese—to mention only a small selection; moreover, in a significant number of contexts (and in literary works about them), several different languages are spoken. To complicate matters further, many Asian languages use scripts other than the Roman alphabet—from Arabic through the variety of scripts in use in the Indian subcontinent to Chinese. Here, authentic vehicular matching would be a typographic challenge as well and would confront most readers with marks on the page that they would find totally undecipherable. Vehicular matching, then, is hardly a possibility for postcolonial literatures.

Finally, writers may elide linguistic diversity by the use of what Sternberg calls the homogenizing convention: They may, that is, use a uniform standard language to represent all speech, effectively ignoring the difference and the particularity of the actual languages at issue. Sternberg (ibid.: 224) cites Homer’s homogeneous presentation of the speech of Greeks and Trojans as well as Shakespeare’s Antony and Cleopatra, with its “anti-historical Englishing of the polylingual discourse held in the world of Romans and Egyptians.” The homogenizing convention can be widely found in postcolonial literatures; it is extremely common for both narrative frame and quoted dialogue to be written in smoothly standard English that retains no obvious trace of other languages. Sternberg sees legitimate reasons for such homogenizing. In the case of Antony and Cleopatra, he claims that “the development of the most complex figurative patterns known to literary art hinges on” that very “Englishing” (ibid.); he sees Homer’s linguistic homogenizing as serving “the text’s overall referential strategy,” suggesting that

Homer’s practice of homogenizing the language of his dramatic personae correlates with his practice of homogenizing their culture; the Greeks and the Trojans have the same gods, arms, customs, codes of honor. And these two dimensions of his poetic modeling of reality complement and reinforce each other with considerable thematic gain—yielding a world-picture of universal validity, projecting the common aspirations of humans against the background of mortal fate and immortal fun, and marking oppositions in terms of the essentials of character rather than the accidentals of race. (Ibid.: 236–37)

Transposed to twentieth-century contexts, such an analysis might give us pause; it is difficult now to imagine a writer homogenizing the language and culture of two nations at war, or in a colonizer–colonized relationship, in
the interest of either aesthetics ("complex figurative patterns") or "a worldpicture of universal validity" that elevates presumably transcultural "essentials of character" over "accidentals of race." I do not, however, take up here the question of what significance might be read into postcolonial writers' adoption of the homogenizing convention (after all, such writers do not homogenize culture as well as language, as Sternberg argues Homer does).

For all his acceptance of Shakespeare's and Homer's homogenizing linguistic practices, Sternberg (ibid.: 224) sees severe limitations in all three of these strategies that "eliminate the complications of imitating foreign ('heterolingual') speech." Their "extremity," he charges, "frequently also disqualifies them for serving as viable artistic strategies. Each of the three either demands or sacrifices too much" (ibid.: 225). Those writers who confront, instead of evading, the challenge of heterolingualism use what Sternberg calls translational mimesis as a means of representing within one language the presence and the distinctiveness of other languages. Within translational mimesis in turn, Sternberg (ibid.) identifies four distinct procedures, which he sees as arrayed along a spectrum "between the polar extremes of vehicular matching and homogenizing convention."

First, there is selective reproduction, or "intermittent quotation of the original heterolingual discourse as uttered by the speaker(s)." This "usually operates as a kind of mimetic synecdoche," Sternberg (ibid.) suggests, a token of the other language that signifies its more widespread use, even when most of the heterolingual discourse is translated into English (or whatever the language of the text may be). He further explains (ibid.: 226) that

there is an interesting minimal unit that may be called mimetic cliché—often an expressive interjection (like the French "Parbleu!", the English "Damn!" or the German "Donnerwetter!") that is conventionally regarded as typical of a certain sociolinguistic entity and therefore economically serves the purpose of mimetic gesture or synecdoche. Such ready-made locutions may have little intrinsic importance, merely functioning like the bundle of distinctive features within the phoneme: to denote otherness by way of opposition.

Second is verbal transposition, which involves "the narrator's (the 'translator's') superimposing on the translated quotation one or more of a variety of features and patterns distinctive of the source language but unacceptable in the target language—this montage accordingly producing an interlingual clash of the two codes within the transposed utterance)—a suggestion with interesting Bakhtinian resonances. This can operate at any level of language; it may take the form of "phonetic or orthographic idiosyncrasy," "grammatical irregularity," "lexical deviance," or "stylistic features that are contrary to the 'spirit of the language'" (ibid.: 227–28). Transposition "is not
so much a literal reproduction of substance as a stylized mimesis of form” (ibid.: 228).

The third type of translational mimesis is conceptual reflection. This, according to Sternberg, “retains . . . not so much the verbal forms of the foreign code as the underlying socio-cultural norms, semantic mapping of reality, and distinctive referential range, segmentations and hierarchies.” It thus “lies at the crossroads of language and reality” (ibid.: 230). Finally, the fourth procedure, explicit attribution, is simply the identification of the language being used or some dimension of that language (ibid.: 231).

Translational Mimesis and Midnight’s Children

In examining Midnight’s Children, I start by discussing Sternberg’s fourth procedure, explicit attribution, but work primarily with the first two mimetic strategies, those that have to do with the actual details of language, the “concrete texture of the original discourse” in the reported language (ibid.: 230). Because the third type of mimesis, conceptual reflection, extends beyond the limits of the strictly linguistic, I do not propose to explore it here.

Identifying the language being spoken is hardly in itself a mimetic gesture. As Sternberg (ibid.: 231–32) remarks, such attribution

may appear by itself, unsupported and unexemplified by even the faintest shade of mimetic “showing” and consisting in pure narratorial “telling.” . . . In extreme cases, therefore, attribution merges into the pole of homogenizing convention in all that concerns the uncontested unilingualism of the representational medium and is distinguished from this pole only in the “mimetic” awareness of the poly- or heterolingualism of the represented object, signalled through the occasional references to linguistic diversity.

However, the presence or absence of explicit attribution — of as simple and unimaginative an attributive tag as “she said in Zulu,” for instance — is particularly significant in that it may offer the only clue not only to which language is being represented, but to whether in fact a different language is at stake (different from the language of the text, that is — English, in the cases I am interested in). Other mimetic strategies only emerge clearly as such when we know that another language is at issue.

Surprisingly often in postcolonial literary works in English, there is no indication of the actual language or languages represented. What language do Azaro’s family speak in Ben Okri’s Famished Road (1992)? The family in Amitav Ghosh’s The Shadow Lines (1988)? The characters in Njabulo Ndebele’s Fools (1983)? In Rohinton Mistry’s A Fine Balance (1996)? None of these
books names the language at issue. It is true that identifying a language assumes a certain exteriority to that language (in a novel set in Britain or the United States, what writer would think of telling readers that characters speak English?); to advertise that characters are speaking a language other than English ruptures an illusion of transparency and reveals the disjuncture between the language of narration and the language of the world represented. Those familiar with a novel’s cultural context may well know what language characters are likely to speak—for instance, readers who know Calcutta will assume that Ghosh’s characters speak Bengali. For outsiders, however, there is always the possibility that the language spoken in these novels is exactly what it appears to be on the page—English. (After all, the authors of all these books are evidently fluent in English, readers might reason.) Without explicit attribution, particularly in the absence of other indicators of linguistic alterity, a significant dimension of a text may be erased, and it risks being assimilated to the vast and all-consuming body of Englishness.

Although there are many traces of other languages in the English of Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, those other languages are often not identified. The novel’s thirty-year-old narrator Saleem Sinai, who is writing the story of his life (which is also the story of India from 1915 to 1978) and reading it aloud to the pickle-maker Padma, identifies only certain languages—by and large, it seems, those which Saleem himself does not know. We know, for instance, that the solitary Hindu inhabitant of a Muslim *muhalla* is abused by neighbors who speak Bengali and Sindhi (Rushdie 1981 [1980]: 73), that the languages Saleem hears in his head (through the magic of midnight) include Malayalam, Nago dialects, and Tamil (ibid.: 166), that language marchers march through Bombay campaigning for Marathi and against Gujarati (ibid.: 188), and that, entering East Pakistan, Saleem hears (but does not understand) the Bengali lyrics of Rabindranath Tagore’s “Amar Sonar Bangla” (ibid.: 344). The particular utterances thus identified, however, represent only a handful of the speakers in this compendious and multiplicitous novel, in which Philip Engblom (1994: 300) finds “at least 115 specific voices.” There is no direct indication of the language spoken in the overwhelming majority of utterances in the novel; Hindi and Urdu, on several grounds the South Asian languages likeliest to be spoken in most of the novel’s contexts, are barely mentioned in the text. (I shall consider these as a single language, Hindi-Urdu.)

5. It is generally considered that Hindi and Urdu are substantially the same language; they share common phonological patterns, grammar, and vocabulary. Hindi is spoken primarily by Hindus in North India and has a special relationship with Sanskrit as a “high” language;
The most significant naming of Urdu, identifying it as a language that Saleem speaks, comes more than three-quarters of the way through the novel, when Saleem is an adult serving in the Pakistani army. Up to this point, readers may well believe that Saleem consistently speaks English (we know it is the language he uses at his English-medium school and in conversation with his schoolmates and the American Evie Burns). Here, however, we learn that his fellow soldiers are intimidated by Saleem’s “pure” accent, and one describes him as speaking “really classy Lucknow-type Urdu, wah-wah!” The utterance that elicits this admiring comment does not appear to differ from the English Saleem uses elsewhere: “Don’t try and fill my head with all that history. I am who I am, that’s all there is” is what he says (Rushdie 1981 [1980]: 340).

This act of explicit attribution is crucial; it not only shows that Saleem does (sometimes) speak Urdu, and speaks it with impressive competence, but it effectively eliminates the possibility that all otherwise unattributed dialogue in the novel is in English.

As for more directly mimetic strategies, there are, first, a significant number of non-English words in *Midnight’s Children* that we might read as instances of Sternberg’s selective reproduction—tokens synecdochically signifying that the language in which they are inserted is not the English that it seems to be. A sampling of assorted nouns: shikara, chaprassi, tongas, ikkas, gharrries, karta, ferchinghee, goonda, takhi, dupatta, phaelwan, lok saba, almiraah, muhalla, nargisi kofta, jawan, rasgullas, gulab jamans, pallu, khansamma, pakora, hijra, dharma-chakra, tamasha, lungi, garam masala. . . . Most of these designate culture-specific referents found only in India, without precise English equivalents. Apart from the nouns that appear in dialogue and narration alike, certain kinds of heterolingual terms appear frequently within dialogue. Many forms of address predictably crop up: amma, baboo, mamu, munani, janum, bhai, baba, bibi, begum, sahib, maharaj, maharajin, yaar; the honorific “-ji” is appended to English words as well as those in other languages—Abdullahji, babaji, sisterji, cousinji. (People are also addressed as “mister” and “sir.”) Then there are also a number of exclamations or utterances with exclamatory force, several of which might be considered to oper-

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6. In fact, Saleem is remarkably taciturn during this episode, and apart from “go that way” (ibid.: 348), this is all he says.

7. For instance, kurt, dupatta, lungi, and pallu name garments; nargisi kofta, pakora, rasgullas, and gulab jamans are foodstuffs (and garam masala a blend of spices); tongas, ikkas, and gharrries are wheeled vehicles; and a shikara is a kind of boat.
ate like Sternberg’s “mimetic clichés”: ohé, na; Wah, wah! Arré baap! baap-re-baap! hai-hai; Allah-tobah; chhi-chhi.

The frequency of words in South Asian languages and the large number of specifically Indian allusions are highly significant features of *Midnight’s Children*. Reed Dasenbrock (1984: 66) notes the “deluge of topical references that no one without local knowledge . . . can follow”; this and the “‘rush and tumble’ syntax” make it a novel “of almost impenetrable density,” he charges. Some critics suggest that impenetrability to outsiders may be not only unavoidable but even desirable in postcolonial and “multicultural” literatures. Bill Ashcroft is one of these; interestingly, he, like Sternberg, interprets the inclusion of words in languages other than English as synecdochic—but in a radically different way. Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (2001: 137) define Ashcroft’s “metonymic gap” as

that cultural gap formed when appropriations of a colonial language insert unglossed words, phrases or passages from a first language, or concepts, allusions or references that may be unknown to the reader. Such words become synecdochic of the writer’s culture—the part that stands for the whole—rather than representations of the world, as the colonial language might. Thus the inserted language “stands for” the colonized culture in a metonymic way, and its very resistance to interpretation constructs a “gap” between the writer’s culture and the colonial culture. The local writer is thus able to represent his or her world to the colonizer (and others) in the metropolitan language, and at the same time to signal and emphasize a difference from it. In effect, the writer is saying “I am using your language so that you will understand my world, but you will also know by the differences in the way I use it that you cannot share my experience.”

It does not occur to Ashcroft that the language of the text is anything but English; it is within and against the context of this “colonial language” that words inserted in another language stand out as synecdoches, not of another language but of another culture. And indeed, the presence of these expressions in other languages does not necessarily imply that the sentences in which they appear were uttered in those languages. Rushdie’s practice is not unlike that of colonial Anglo-Indian writers (such as Kipling, E. M. Forster, and many lesser figures), in whose works howdahs and punkahs and maidans, not to mention many categories of servants (ayahs, chaparssis, chaukidars, dobis, mahouts, munshis . . . ), figure in the discourse of both characters and narrators who are clearly using English. To be sure, Rushdie uses more South Asian terms than the colonial writers, covering a different and wider variety of domains of reference, and they are more seamlessly integrated into his sentences, neither corralled inside foreignizing quotation marks nor itali-
cized; only rarely are they translated into English or defined. They might be tokens of the real language underlying the text, following Sternberg’s (1981: 226) “pars-pro-toto principle,” but they do not in themselves offer compelling evidence that the English surrounding them is a mimesis of another language.

Consider next Sternberg’s verbal transposition. A number of recurrent features mark the language in Midnight’s Children as distinctively Indian. Phonic and orthographic idiosyncrasy (as measured against standard English conventions) is naturally an issue in a high proportion of proper nouns; it is also found not only in apparently nonverbal exclamations, such as the “banshee-wail” of the distraught Pia, “Hai! Hai, hai! Ai-hai-hai!” (Rushdie 1981 [1980]: 243), but in various onomatopoeic forms: a sneeze is “yaaaakh-thoo!” (ibid.: 36) and spitting “ekkkhh-thoo!” (ibid.: 338); khrikk-khrikk is the sound of necks being broken between Shiva’s knees (ibid.: 360). A wail may perhaps conform to linguistic and cultural norms, but sneezes, spitting, and the sounds of bones cracking are unlikely to vary much in themselves; the recorder’s imposition of a particular phonic or orthographic shape on the sound in question, however, reveals the linguistic structuring of nonlinguistic sound—in all these cases, in ways that are markedly alien to English expectations.

At the level of lexis, there are a number of expressions that are anomalous in English, running the gamut from references to large babies as “ten-chip whopper[s]” (ibid.: 116 and elsewhere) to the way servants call Dr. Narlikar’s corpse his “death”: “They have brought his death home, wrapped in silk” (ibid.: 175). The ayah Mary Pereira boasts that the infant Saleem “never takes out one tear” (ibid.: 124), and her sister Alice says that she “couldn’t make top or bottom” of Ahmed Sinai’s babbling (ibid.: 199). “Catch your ears for shame, boy!” Saleem’s aunt Sonia adjures him (ibid.: 380). “Has his brain gone raw, janum?” Amina asks her husband of William Mefwold; “is it safe to do bargains if he’s loony?” (ibid.: 96; raw brains also appear on 76, 163, and 375). Abuse and imprecations are fertile ground for

8. Bakhtin (1986: 120–21) reflects on the difference between “the word used in quotation marks, that is, felt and used as something alien, and the same word . . . without quotation marks.”

9. Such nonlinguistic forms offer rich possibilities for research across languages. Raymond Chapman (1984), in the chapters “Non-verbal Vocalizations,” “Natural Non-human Sounds,” and “Inanimate Sounds,” points to representational strategies used in French, German, and Italian as well as English. The representations of nonlinguistic forms in postcolonial literature are often imaginatively strange by English standards and a prominent site of alterity—see, for instance, Tsitsi Dangarembga’s Nervous Conditions (1988), Chinua Achebe’s novels, and Ken Saro-Wiwa’s Sozaboy (1994 [1985]), as well as Rushdie’s other works.
lexical distinctiveness, as illustrated in the invective of a member of the Ravana gang: “Mother-sleepers! Eunuchs from somewhere! . . . Sodomizers of asses! Sons of pigs! Eaters of their own excrement!” (ibid.: 85). “From somewhere” is elsewhere appended to various other insults: “Donkey from somewhere!” (Mary, ibid.: 117); “Madman from somewhere!” (Padma, ibid.: 121); “Pig from somewhere!” (Ahmed, ibid.: 154). “Mother-sleeping” (de-euphemized) will be a familiar epithet to many speakers of English, but sexual relations with sisters are evidently an Indian obsession: “sister-sleeping” is a favorite epithet of Shiva’s (ibid.: 215, 216), and the whore Tai Bibi calls after Saleem, “Hey, bhaenchud! Hey, little sister-sleeper . . .” (ibid.: 310). To call someone black is an insult—the young Saleem is called “you black man!” (Amina, ibid.: 163), “you bad black boy” (Mary, ibid.: 210), and “black man!” (his uncle Hanif, ibid.: 235)—and to “black-tongue” a person (ibid.: 137) is evidently the same as to bad-mouth that person.

Clearly, many of these are versions of expressions in Hindi-Urdu, but it is not easy to tell whether the narrator is presenting a mimesis of the characters’ Hindi-Urdu speech or whether the characters themselves are speaking English marked by traces of their mother tongue. When Alice says she can’t “make top or bottom” of Ahmed’s ravings, it looks as if she is speaking English but has misremembered the idiomatic “head or tail,” and we might wonder about Tai Bibi’s apparently repeating the same epithet (sister-sleeper/bhaenchud) in both English and Urdu; however, in virtually all cases, either option is possible.

Syntactic features are far more prominent in *Midnight’s Children* than phonetic or lexical features (and raise the same questions as the lexical deviations). Dozens of grammatical deviations from standard English can be found, most of them appearing repeatedly in the speech of one or more characters. Here is a partial list of representative syntactic peculiarities:

1. Verb aspect may differ from the forms expected in standard English:
   “that is what the Public is wanting!” (Pia Aziz, ibid.: 236)
   “I don’t know what got into your daddy now” (Alice Pereira, ibid.: 200)
2. Word order may seem anomalous, in one of several ways.
   a. Subject and auxiliary verb may not be inverted in questions:
      “Why that woman doesn’t ask me to be shorthand typist?” (Pia Aziz, ibid.: 236)

In the entry for “bahen/behen,” the Hindi word for “sister,” in his entertaining 1992 glossary *Hanklyn-Janklin*, Nigel Hankin notes that *Bahen-chud* (Rushdie’s *bhaenchud*) is “probably the most common Hindustani expression of abuse.” He notes too that “as used by the British, either through ignorance or bowdlerization, the expression was usually rendered as barnshoot.”
“Why these old things can’t stay dead . . . ?” (Mary Pereira, ibid.: 239)

b. The words only and even may appear after what they delimit instead of before it:
“that girl is sickly from too much soft living only” (Aadam Aziz’s mother, ibid.: 25)
“must your wife not look after you, even?” (Naseem Aziz, ibid.: 35)

c. Adjectives with the intensifiers so or too appear before nouns:
“with so-big sisal farms” (Ahmed Aziz, ibid.: 97)
“a too bad business” (Tai the boatman, ibid.: 20)

3. A word may be repeated (“reduplication”) to convey either intensity or repetitiveness:
“What does she know about this politics-politics?” (Mary Pereira, ibid.: 104)
“his boring-boring scripts” (Pia Aziz, ibid.: 236)
“all day I am sitting sitting” (Lila Sabarmati, ibid.: 98)

4. Articles may be omitted:
“My number two cousin,” Lifafa Das says, “is bone-setter” (ibid.: 83)
“I am great actress” (Pia Aziz, ibid.: 235)

5. Verb transitivity may be at odds with standard English convention:

a. Verbs that require objects in standard English are used without them:
“How dare you suggest!” (Padma, ibid.: 88)
“This way they’ll never catch” (Parvati, ibid.: 367)

b. — or, conversely, a verb that is intransitive in standard English may be used with an object:
“What are you all talking?” (Picture Singh, ibid.: 375)
“Such things you talked yesterday!” (Mary Pereira, ibid.: 167)

Deviations such as these may arise at different levels in the generation of a text, as Sternberg points out. A “genetic hypothesis” would consider them to be “authorial error” (Sternberg 1981: 228)—that is, would here consider that Salman Rushdie was unaware that these specimens violated the rules of standard English. This hypothesis can safely be ruled out. The difficulty is in deciding between two other alternatives that Sternberg insists should be “sharply distinguished.”

The first possibility is that the “mixed speech” arises with the “original (real or fictive) speakers” as a result of their “imposing on a foreign language the various features and patterns peculiar to their native tongue” (ibid.: 229)—here, imposing the features and patterns of Hindi-Urdu on English, the language they are speaking. The second possibility is that these speakers
are speaking not English but Hindi-Urdu and that it is the narrator (who is also in this case the translator) who “superimpos[es] on the translated quotation . . . features and patterns distinctive of the source language but unacceptable in the target language” (ibid.: 227). This takes us back to the question we started from: Are characters in the novel speaking English, or are they speaking Hindi-Urdu?

Most of these deviations correspond to features of South Asian languages and are at the same time typical of “Indian English”—naturally enough, since Indian English is the product of speakers imposing on English patterns from their native tongues. Reduplication (as in “boring-boring” and the other examples in item 3 above) is for instance “a typological feature which all S[outh] A[isan] L[anguage]s share,” according to Braj Kachru (1983: 41). In South Asian languages, subject and verb are not inverted in questions (Kachru 1982: 360), and there are no articles, so the omission of English articles is predictable (Kachru 1983: 32). By British and U.S. standards, progressive and perfective aspects are often anomalously used in Indian English (Trudgill and Hannah 1994: 132). In all these cases, interference from South Asian languages leads to the patterns illustrated in Indian English—and a translational mimesis of those languages might well share the same features. Whether the native-tongue “interference” happens within the speaker (speaking English) or whether our narrator/translator reshapes English in conveying the speech of characters (speaking Hindi-Urdu), the results are the same.

There are then many elements in *Midnight’s Children* that can be seen as illustrating Sternberg’s strategies of translational mimesis. All function as tokens of other languages and contribute to the polylingual richness of the novel. And yet (setting aside the few instances of explicit attribution) their presence does not unequivocally indicate that any particular utterance is an instance of translational mimesis.

**The Substance of English in *Midnight’s Children***

Set against these traces of other languages are a number of other distinctive features of the spoken language of characters in *Midnight’s Children* that depend on the particular forms and sounds of English.

There’s the coinage of new words. Padma is particularly inventive in this department. She has the habit of forming nouns out of adjectives by adding “ie”—“the plumpie,” “the baldie,” “the blackie” (Rushdie 1981 [1980]: 51, 127, 57); she several times uses the made-up noun “writery” (ibid.: 39 and elsewhere), and she generates the belittling rhyme “writing-shiting” (ibid.: 25). To invent these forms, she appears to make creative use of English mor-
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phology, including the relatively rare suffix -ery, and of the sound equivalences needed for rhyming. Uma Parameswaran (1984: 23), the one critic I have found who asks what language the characters of Midnight’s Children are speaking, is puzzled by this and sees it as indicating that the illiterate Padma must be speaking English, unlikely as this seems:

If one were to conclude that Padma does not speak in English, we have a problem. Her hallmark interjection, “Mister,” is easily explained for that is commonly used all over India, no matter what the language. Even her imperatives and inversion of statement to question (e.g., “Why you’re waiting? Begin, Begin all over again.” [347]) are explainable as translations that retain the flavour of the vernacular. But what happens to words like the much-quoted “writery” or “looker-after” or the even more difficult “writing-shiting” whose word-play depends on the specificities of the English language?

Another Padma-ism, “hankyng and pankyng” (Rushdie 1981 [1980]: 56), is very difficult to interpret as a mimesis — nor is it easily seen as an example of mother-tongue interference.

Other examples of nonce words created by the addition of the suffix -ery are “spittoon-hittery” (ibid.: 45, 432), “glass-kissery” (ibid.: 293), “cheate-ry” (ibid.: 225, 294), and “pumpery” (ibid.: 236, 318). “Spittoon-hittery” appears first in the speech of the Rani of Cooch Naheen and is later used by Saleem; “pumpery-shumpery” is the invention of Pia Aziz, later repeated in quotation marks in Saleem’s narrative. “Glass-kissery” and “cheate-ry” appear only in the narration. A few other examples of creative word formation appear in forms of advertising quoted in the novel: posters advertising a film announce its “SECOND RIP-ROARIOUS YEAR!” (ibid.: 49), and a sign on the wall of the Pioneer Café offers “FUNTABULOUS FALOODA” (ibid.: 211).

Padma’s “writing-shiting” is not the only instance of a playful and subversive rhyme where an English word is rhymed with a made-up form starting with sh; other examples are “joke shoke” (Parvati, ibid.: 374), “club shub” (Shiva, ibid.: 222), “pumpery-shumpery” (Pia, ibid.: 236). All have the effect of mocking and belittling the word that is echoed (and what it signifies). Yet of course the rhymes all depend on the specific sounds of English words. The same is true of more extended verses, such as the in-

12. The Rani’s name is an in-joke for those who know Hindi-Urdu: it means “the queen (more or less) of nothing at all.”
13. Other languages use similar rhymes to similar effect, even drawing on similar sounds: according to the entry for “Jewish English” in The Oxford Companion to the English Language, “the dismissive shm-” of Yiddish has entered English “in hundreds of reduplications: Oedipus, shmoedipus, rich-shmich, value-shmvalue” (McArthur 1992: 546).
erant fruit seller’s “come all you greats-O, eat a few dates-O” (ibid.: 69) and Shri Ramram Seth’s rhyming prophecy foretelling the unborn Saleem’s life, part of which runs: “Newspaper praises him, two mothers raise him! Bicyclists love him—but, crowds will shove him! Sisters will weep; cobra will creep” (ibid.: 87). In addition to actual rhymes, assonance plays a role in reiterated references to the bodily sites of Saleem’s and Shiva’s special powers—“nose and knees and knees and nose” (ibid.: 87, 117, 196, 216)—and again it is the specific sounds of English that are at issue.

Then there are puns, which likewise depend on specific sound equivalences between English words. Dr. Schaapsteker, who experiments with injections of snake venom, is called “Sharpsticker sahib” (ibid.: 137). The guru Lord Khusro, Saleem’s former schoolmate Cyrus-the-great, owns an aircraft known as “Lord Khusro’s Astral Plane” (ibid.: 262). The street entertainer Wee Willie Winkie starts his spiel with an English rhyme (“Wee Willie Winkie is my name; to sing for my supper is my fame!”) and proceeds to a pun, which depends on a rather un-English pronunciation of an English word: “I hope you are com-for-table!... Or are you come-for-tea?” (ibid.: 101). (Later, he makes a distinctly awkward pun equating “two fine” and “too fine” [ibid.: 102].) There is also an interlingual pun, playing on the homophony of the Urdu (ultimately Arabic) djinn and the English gin: Ahmed Sinai is said to be possessed by djinn and warns the young Saleem (with fumes on his breath): “Never believe in a djinn’s promises, my son! Let them out of the bottle and they’ll eat you up” (ibid.: 130).

All these varieties of wordplay depend crucially on the substance of English. It would seem too that when the pronunciation of English words is represented as deviant—for instance, the cricketers’ cry of “Owzatt?” (ibid.: 180)—English must be the language being spoken, especially since such respellings to indicate pronunciation are relatively rare. The schoolteacher Mr. Zagallo, who affects a Latin accent—“Thees ees what?” (ibid.: 225)—is surely talking English; Evie Burns, who has come from the United States,
is obviously talking English too, and so it stands to reason that her American accent is strongly marked (“I’ll show ya,” “whassamatter?” and the like [ibid.: 180]). If the other kids on the Methwold Estate speak English to her, it’s not unlikely that they also talk English among themselves, which would explain “whaddya suppose . . . ?” (ibid.: 153), the apostrophes in “an’” and “jus’,” and such forms as “man,” “hey!” and “wow!” Yet colloquial pronunciations of English are recorded not only among those who we know speak English: strikingly, the street child Shiva’s speech is marked by similar features: “doin’,” “goin’,” “gotta,” “outa” (ibid.: 215).

Another instance where English is deformed by causes unrelated to the influence of other languages is that of a girl with a lisp, who cries, “Me firth! . . . let me thee!” (ibid.: 75). Here, yet again, we are drawn beyond the abstraction of printed English words to the actual sounds of English.

These tokens of the very substance of English—its morphology and its phonetic structure—appear in the speech of a wide array of characters, including those with little or no education. The girl with the lisp is only eight years old, and we know that her parents speak Sindhi (ibid.). Padma is an illiterate pickle-maker; Shiva grows up as an orphan on the streets of Bombay; Parvati lives in Delhi’s magicians’ ghetto, a shantytown behind the Friday mosque. It would be surprising if characters like these not only spoke English, but could compose English rhymes and engage in other kinds of English wordplay.

How widespread is the use of English in India? According to the entry “Indian English” in the 1992 *Oxford Companion to the English Language*, “An estimated 30[million] people (4% of the population) regularly use English” (McArthur 1992: 504). The population of India has increased since 1992 to over a billion, and there is some evidence that the proportion of those who speak English has increased. But *Midnight’s Children* ends in 1978, and it

16. A complication to which we will return later is that Shiva’s speech is here presented not immediately but as magically translated (presumably from Hindi) by the magic radio.

17. Braj Kachru, one of the coauthors of the *Oxford Companion* “Indian English” entry, has since proposed a figure eleven times as large: “In India now an estimated figure of English-users is about 333 million” (Kachru 1998). In a footnote, Kachru gives the provenance of this figure as a 1997 *India Today* survey and cites the newspaper’s claim that “contrary to the [Indian] census myth that English is the language of a microscopic minority, the poll indicates that almost one in every three Indians claims to understand English, although less than 20 percent are confident of speaking it.” It is the higher figure that Kachru uses to come up with the number of 333 million English users—a total that, he points out, is “estimated to be numerically equal to the total population of the USA, the UK, and Canada.” We may well be skeptical about the self-reports on which the survey is based and wonder about the degree of competence of even the “confident” speakers; nonetheless, the number of U.S. telephone services that have recently been outsourced to India testifies to an enormous pool of fluent Indian speakers of English.
seems probable that during the period it covers only a small and privileged elite would have been fluent in English. So either the characters in the novel are a highly unrepresentative group, or the stuff of English that appears on the page is not what it seems. A third possibility is that conceivably the world of discourse within the novel does not adhere to historical reality.

Recall that, at a point when his quoted speech looks unremarkably English, we are explicitly told that Saleem is speaking Urdu. Is it not also possible then that even speech that looks remarkably English (including elements like English rhymes) in fact represents speech in Indian languages? After all, how might a writer indicate simultaneously both that someone is speaking Sindhi and that she is lisping? Perhaps the invented English words should be taken as representing invented words in Hindi-Urdu, the English rhymes, rhymes in Hindi-Urdu, and so on. As support for this, we might note a point in the novel where a rhyme in Gujarati is instantly translated into an English rhyme: When the pro-Marathi language marchers ask the young Saleem whether he knows Gujarati, he recites “a rhyme designed to make fun of the speech rhythms of the language,” and this rhyme “Sooché? Saru ché! / Danda lé ké maru ché!” is immediately followed by an English translation, “How are you?—I am well!—I’ll take a stick and thrash you to hell!” (1981 [1980]: 188). As narrator-translator, Saleem here takes care to replicate in English a feature of the sound of the Gujarati message—the fact that it rhymes—where another translator might have found this incompatible with the project of conveying its exact meaning. Feroza Jussawalla (1990: 227), as it happens, has explained that, “literally translated,” the verse means “What’s the matter? Everything is well! Take a stick and beat them.” Elsewhere in the novel, it is conceivable that Saleem moves directly to a comparable translation that reconstructs in English some feature of the sound of the original message without ever attempting to relay that original version. (Rhymes, puns, and dialectal variation—all featuring the sound substance of the source language—have after all always posed particular challenges to translators.)

18. Jussawalla does not take issue with the accuracy of Rushdie’s translation (her complaint is that the rhyme is demeaning to Parsis). We might note, however, that Saleem’s translation differs in several ways from Jussawalla’s. In her version, there is no I or you; the only pronoun is an indeterminate them. Both the changed pronouns and his wording “thrust . . . to hell” in place of “beat” make Saleem’s version more confrontational, which evidently explains its incendiary effect when the Marathi language marchers that afternoon meet a pro-Gujarati procession: “To the tune of my little rhyme the first of the language riots got under way, fifteen killed, over three hundred wounded” (Rushdie 1981 [1980]: 189). Meaning aside, Saleem’s English rhyme does not seem to reproduce the sound of the Gujarati particularly closely: his well–hell end rhyme replaces three instances of a single word ché, and he has turned “nine words of emptiness” (ibid.: 188) into a string of fifteen English words.
If these markedly English forms are not uttered in English but represent speech in Indian languages, the strategies of the translator-narrator are more various than we realized. Not all representations of other languages in *Midnight's Children* are mimetic in any direct or simple way; sometimes, it is a question of re-creating within the target language the devices used in the source language, this re-creation on the surface revealing no obvious traces of the source language itself.

Thus reoriented, we are effectively returned to our starting point: Sometimes English dialogue in *Midnight's Children* is English dialogue, and sometimes it represents dialogue in Hindi-Urdu. Having decided that even English rhymes, puns, and the like do not necessarily indicate that English is being spoken, however, we will be more inclined to assume that dialogue is in Hindi-Urdu unless at least one of the speakers is an outsider who does not know the language. This adjustment has repercussions extending beyond those specimens of speech that appear within quotation marks, and it ultimately points to a paradox at the heart of *Midnight's Children*. In the novel’s frame, Saleem, now thirty years old and coming apart like his country, is writing his story—this very novel—and reading it aloud to Padma, against whose down-to-earth skepticism it must be tested. The entire novel, that is, is part of a spoken dialogue. In a 1982 interview with Jean-Pierre Durix (1982: 24), Rushdie says, “Padma enabled the book to become an oral narrative, some kind of stylization of such a narrative, if you like. And that allowed the rhythms of the dialogue, the rhythms of the speech that I had originally invented for the dialogue sections to become the rhythm of the whole book.” If Padma knows little English, it is hardly possible that Saleem reads to her the same English-language novel that we read in the published book.

Perhaps we should assume that there is a Hindi-Urdu novel underlying the English version—the true, original novel that Saleem reads to Padma. But trying to imagine this in any detail, with all the inescapable layerings and interrelations of languages, leads to difficulties. If Padma hears a Hindi-Urdu novel, how does she hear the dialogue that is spoken in English? Does she hear neutrally standard Hindi-Urdu where we read lively nonstandard English? Has Saleem actually written a text in Urdu or Hindi (given the two languages’ different scripts, he would here have to make a choice)? Does this authentic underlying Ur-text include Hindi-Urdu nonce-word equivalents of “kissery” and the like, Hindi-Urdu puns, Hindi-Urdu rhymes? And where then does our English text come from—by what invisible and unmentioned acts of translation and reconstruction, at whose hands? (To finish the novel he reads to Padma, Saleem must race against his own impend-
ing death; he has no time even to revise it: “Yes, I should revise and revise, improve and improve; but there is neither the time nor the energy” [Rushdie 1981 (1980): 443].) There is in the end only one novel, and to question the language within the novel is to reach an aporia: It is impossible for Padma, knowing little or no English, to understand the same novel that we read in English. Either she or we must understand Midnight’s Children by virtue of an impossible feat of transfer across languages—a textual equivalent of the magic radio.

The Magic Radio, “Universally Intelligible Thought-Forms,” and English

The magic radio that transparently converts one language into another is not only a figure within Midnight’s Children; it is the dream underlying the novel and the fantastic conceit that makes it possible. This dream has been a recurrent one in the cultural imaginary, from the Pentecostal speaking in tongues to the Universal Translator of Star Trek. In Midnight’s Children, as is commonly the case, the process is actually presented not as the exchange of one language for another but as a peeling away of the garment of language to disclose the naked ideas that supposedly lie beneath it. When he magically starts hearing voices, the young Saleem reports that

the inner monologues of all the so-called teeming millions, of masses and classes alike, jostled for space within my head. In the beginning, . . . there was a language problem. The voices babbled in everything from Malayalam to Naga dialects, from the purity of Lucknow Urdu to the Southern slurrings of Tamil. Only later, when I began to probe, did I learn that below the surface transmissions—the front-of-mind stuff which is what I’d originally been picking up—language faded away, and was replaced by universally intelligible thought-forms which far transcended words. (Ibid.: 166)

Later he explains further:

If you think of me purely as a radio, you’ll only be grasping half the truth. Thought is as often pictorial or purely emblematic as verbal; and anyway, in

19. Its fantasized powers are parodically echoed—and diminished—in Deshmukh’s belt, which supposedly endows the speaker with the ability to speak Hindi. Moreover, among the children of midnight some version of the gift of tongues is realized not only in Saleem but in “Siamese twins with two bodies dangling off a single head and neck,” which head “could speak in two voices, one male, one female, and every language and dialect spoken in the subcontinent” (Ibid.: 195).

20. Sternberg (1981: 222) refers to the “millennial vision of language as an abstract spirit rather than a concrete substance.” He quotes, in German and in English translation, from Thomas Mann’s Der Erwählte (The Holy Sinner), remarking on “the irony of finding an original and a translated version of a tale that aspires to the condition of ‘language in and for itself’” (Ibid.: 223).
order to communicate with, and understand, my colleagues in the Midnight Children’s Conference, it was necessary for me quickly to advance beyond the verbal stage. Arriving in their infinitely various minds, I was obliged to get beneath the surface veneer of front-of-mind thought in incomprehensible tongues. (Ibid.: 214)

Language is presented in these passages as a superficial phenomenon—“surface transmissions,” a “surface veneer”—that Saleem must “probe” to reach what is “below” it, must “advance beyond” and “get beneath.” Both passages associate language moreover with the front of the mind, implying that there is a back of the mind where something deeper and truer than language can be found. Behind and below the jostlings and babblings and slurrings of multiple incomprehensible languages lies something else: “thought” that is “pictorial or purely emblematic,” “universally intelligible thought-forms which far transcended language.”

Saleem does in fact describe some pictorial images transmitted via the “radio.” At first he looks through its “miraculous peepholes” as no more than a tourist, seeing “the Taj Mahal through the eyes of a fat Englishwoman,” for instance (ibid.: 171); his first experience of penetrating beyond “surface transmissions” comes when he enters Evie Burns’s mind and sees—not through her eyes, but in her memory or fantasy—graphic and wordless scenes of matricide (ibid.: 187–88). Another nonlinguistic manifestation of Saleem’s gift enables him to tune in to the emotions of others: He feels the secret sadness of his uncle Hanif (ibid.: 168), and when he first makes contact with Shiva, “great boiling waves of anger scalded the inside of my head” (ibid.: 215). But the most significant transmissions, the discussions of the Midnight Children’s Conference, simply cannot be imagined as other than verbal. (What conference could be held without language?)

Saleem has learned “to act as a sort of national network, so that by opening my transformed mind to all the children I could turn it into a kind of forum in which they could talk to one another, through me.” Assembling at midnight in “the lok sabha or parliament of my brain” (ibid.: 221), the children propose various “philosophies and aims”—“collectivism” (“We should all get together and live somewhere, no? What would we need from anyone else?”), “individualism” (“You say we; but we together are unimportant; what matters is that each of us has a gift to use for his or her own good”), “filial duty,” “infant revolution,” “capitalism,” “altruism,” “religion,” and more (ibid.: 223). These discussions can only have taken place in words; the children ask questions, quote earlier speakers (“You say we”), and grapple with complex abstractions. How could any of this be done by images, emblems, or “thought-forms which far transcended language”?

Most of the children do not have distinct voices (“for one thing, my
narrative could not cope with five hundred and eighty-one fully-rounded personalities,” Saleem confesses [ibid.:]21, but one who certainly does is Saleem’s rival, Shiva. Consider the exchange—via radio—when Saleem first presents his concept of the Midnight Children’s Conference (or M.C.C.) to Shiva (whose own idea is that the midnight’s children should form a gang). “I had in mind something more like a, you know, sort of loose federation of equals, all points of view given free expression,” Saleem says. Shiva responds: “That, man, that’s only rubbish. What we ever goin’ to do with a gang like that? Gangs gotta have gang bosses” (ibid.: 215). Saleem speaks earnestly and emphatically of reason and purpose. Shiva’s response is scathing:

“Rich kid, . . . you don’t know one damn thing! What purpose, man? What thing in the whole sister-sleeping world got reason, yara? For what reason you’re rich and I’m poor? Where’s the reason in starving, man? God knows how many millions of damn fools living in this country, man, and you think there’s a purpose! Man, I’ll tell you—you got to get what you can, do what you can with it, and then you got to die. That’s reason, rich boy. Everything else is only mother-sleeping wind!” (Ibid.: 215–16)

Two concepts of social structure, two philosophies, two personalities stand here opposed—expressed inextricably in two different styles of speech.22 Saleem handles political abstractions impressively for a ten-year-old but speaks tentatively and indirectly (the politely oblique past tense “had,” the hesitant “you know,” the cautious “sort of”). Shiva’s speech is coarsely colloquial; in bluntly articulating a nihilistic individualism, the product of his own experience of life on the streets, he uses assaultive expletives, addresses Saleem with contempt (“rich boy”), and batters him with unanswerable questions. The exchange is a classic dialogue between an effete intellectual and a hardened representative of the underclass. The point, for my purposes, is that it is necessarily dialogue, and dialogue can only be realized in language. Saleem and Shiva are not bouncing transcendent thought-forms at each other but words.

Even Saleem as narrator at times forgets about the thought-forms—or else they take him in some odd directions. At one point in his discussion with Shiva, for instance, he reports, “Something resembling a violent snort echoed around the walls of my head.” A snort, rather than “transcend[ing] words,” is a nonverbal but highly expressive vocalization more likely to be

21. Four hundred and twenty of the thousand and one children born in the hour after midnight on August 15, 1947, have died before the survivors make contact on their tenth birthday.
22. The contrast takes on particular resonance in light of the fact that Shiva and Saleem were exchanged at birth: each is the product of the environment to which the exchange assigned him.
thought of as sublinguistic than as transcendent. A few lines later Saleem hears “Shiva-laughter in my ears” (ibid.: 215), and elsewhere he admits that he “disliked the roughness of [Shiva’s] tongue” (ibid.: 221)—though neither ears nor tongues would seem to be involved in the transmission of thought-forms. There is, moreover, the evident materiality and specificity of the speech acts involved: Would a thought-form include hesitation phenomena like Saleem’s “you know”? Would grammaticality be an issue in thought-forms? One of the rhymes cited earlier occurs in a session of the M.C.C., when Shiva derisively dismisses Saleem’s “club-shub stuff” (ibid.: 222): But how, without the specific sounds of a particular language, could thought-forms conceivably rhyme?

It is particularly remarkable that Shiva’s speech carries several classic markers that signal lower-class English dialects—“goin’” with its telling apostrophe, “gotta,” “outa” (ibid.: 215). This is an unusual degree of Englishness; elsewhere in the novel, Hindi-Urdu speech is presented by the distinctive patterns of Indian English; comparable English-dialect forms in the speech of the children who live on the elite Methwold Estate indicated that they were speaking English (as they regularly did both at school and in talking to the American Evie Burns). The communications of the Midnight Children’s Conference cannot conceivably take place except through the medium of language; despite recurrent and pervasive fantasies, there is no “language” that is not a particular language; and the particular language that the children of midnight speak seems more like English than any other.

I started off by setting aside the privileged telecommunications of the children of midnight and scrutinizing ordinary speech in this novel, attempting to determine what language was being spoken. Despite the many features that depend on the substance of English, I tentatively concluded that most of this speech was probably in Hindi-Urdu: to use Saleem’s spatial metaphors, English is the language that appears on the surface, the means of representation, and Hindi-Urdu the underlying language that is the object of representation. And since the whole novel is part of a spoken conversation between Saleem and Padma, the entire text must be seen—at some level, in some sense—as a Hindi-Urdu novel brought to us by translational magic, as if by the magic radio.

In this section, I have turned to the magic radio itself, examining its supposed workings and the communications it enables. Here, the language layers are reversed: multiple subcontinental languages are the “surface veneer,” and something else underlies them. Saleem’s claim that this sub-stratum consists of “universally intelligible thought-forms which far transcended words” is patently untenable; there can be no doubt that most messages transmitted by the magic radio are in fact verbal. In fact, they look
very much like the speech in the rest of the novel. Most surprisingly, they are represented by markedly English forms, arguably by forms even more English than those used to represent everyday speech in Hindi-Urdu elsewhere in the novel. Can it be that English is what underlies the multilingual surface Babel—that the magic radio operates by turning everything into English—that those “universally intelligible thought-forms,” demystified, are in fact the English language?

The suggestion may initially sound outrageous, but in a complicated way it makes sense. After all, English is the language that frames the novel’s discursive universe, the medium in which other languages are rendered and through which the world is made intelligible (though not universally intelligible—that is an impossible dream). As Saleem by virtue of his magic-radio capabilities understands “the myriad tongues of Babel” (ibid.: 223), so we, reading this novel in English, understand alien tongues. English in this novel is variously surface and substrate, representational medium and object represented; other languages are occasionally named, indicated by token specimens or traces, re-created by imaginative means, obscurely implied, layered and intertwined with English in complex ways that cannot always be unraveled—but it is English that constitutes the novel. The dream of the magic radio—the dream of transcending Babel, of instantaneously and effortlessly understanding all other languages—is the wish underlying this novel. The illusion is that language—in this case, specifically English in its central and enabling role—can fade away and be replaced by universal thought-forms.

Postscript: Rushdie Speaks

It was only after writing this that I discovered two interviews in which Rushdie himself addresses the question of what language is being spoken in the novel. In a 1983 interview with Rani Dharker (2001 [1983]: 57), he says:

Many of the characters in the books wouldn’t really be talking in English to each other although they’d be talking some curious mixture. What I was trying to do was to invent a kind of idiom that would just leap over that problem. I said you can’t write a book like this and have people constantly asking are they speaking English, what are they really speaking, what would they actually have said. I thought it was necessary to find a way of allowing them to talk which would seem natural and which would have differentiation but which wouldn’t raise that question. Like the Kashmir section—they wouldn’t have been speaking English to each other. In Bombay you can understand there are various kinds of Bombay English that might have been a mixture of English and Gujarati or English and Marathi or English and Hindi or English and Urdu. But I couldn’t get into that
problem because that would have been a terrible tangle. So it would have to be a partially invented medium which would excuse me from that problem and that in a way was the hardest thing to do. It took longest to get it right.

In my arduous attempts to decipher which languages characters were speaking, I have been doing precisely what Rushdie tried to forestall, asking the very question he didn’t want readers to ask (and which indeed has evidently not occurred to most readers and critics). The dialogue in the novel, Rushdie admits, is largely invented: “What I was trying to do was to invent a kind of idiom. . . . It would have to be a partially invented medium”—and he essentially confesses to sleight of hand designed to obscure linguistic reality—to “just leap over that problem” or “excuse me from that problem.” Then, in a 1987 interview Rushdie discusses with Salil Tripathi and Dina Vakil (2000 [1987]: 81) the prospect of a film version of Midnight’s Children:

I think there would be all kinds of problems with [filming] Midnight’s Children, of which the most obvious one is the problem of language. You can write a novel in English and the reader will accept the convention that most of the characters are not really speaking English, or speaking English only part of the time. . . . In a film, you can’t duck that issue and you have to decide what language the characters are speaking in. And if they’re not speaking English all the way, it might look rather peculiar. It also has an implication for the budget. You’re not going to get a massive international budget to make a film if the characters are all speaking in Hindi.

Here again Rushdie admits to evasion, to “duck[ing] that issue.” Even more revealingly, he says, “In a film . . . you have to decide what language the characters are speaking in”—implying that in the novel he did not have to make that decision. If Rushdie himself did not always know what language his characters were speaking, it is not surprising that this question would pose difficulties for others, or for those few who raise it.

Rushdie’s conjuring trick, his fabrication of colorful and distinctive varieties of English that may or may not represent other languages, has effectively beguiled many readers and critics. Metropolitan English-speaking readers do not question the English that constitutes the novel and acclaim Rushdie’s transformation of that language.23 By contrast, South Asian readers with whom I have discussed the book often have strong intuitions about which South Asian languages particular characters within it speak. Balaji Venkateswaran,24 for instance, responded in 1997 to a query I posted on the Sasialit listserv:

23. See the critics cited in note 1.
24. Venkateswaran, who knows that I am publishing this, is now a novelist himself (as well as an engineer); his first novel, Rage, was published by Penguin India in May 2005.
Undoubtedly the older characters (the grandparents, Tai, etc.) spoke Urdu. The younger ones, Saleem and his sister, probably spoke a mixture of English and Urdu/Hindi, their parents more Urdu/Hindi than English. Not that none of the older people could speak English (the grandfather undoubtedly could, as could the parents and their siblings), but keeping the cultural context in mind, they would all have spoken mostly in Urdu/Hindi amongst themselves. Characters like Dr. Narlikar would have spoken to the Sinai family in English and Bombay Hindi. The women of the Narlikar clan undoubtedly spoke Marathi amongst themselves. Saleem and his friends mostly in English with some Hindi/Urdu thrown in. The neighbours in a mixture of English, Bombay Hindi, Gujarati and Urdu.

What is troubling is that it is only those already familiar with the linguistic situation in India who perceive other languages underlying the text, who read the novel, or much of it, as a translational mimesis of other languages. Most metropolitan readers will complacently continue to believe in the universality of English. The magic radio operates powerfully to elide the reality of polylingualism: like the children of midnight, readers believe that the words of others are being magically conveyed to them through some transparent medium outside of language.

What Rushdie says about film is particularly revealing. Film in fact offers polylingual possibilities that print does not: one can present characters speaking any number of languages while translating those unknown to viewers in subtitles (as long as those viewers are literate). This retains the physical substance of source languages, their rhythms, intonations, and distinctive qualities of voice, while relegating the translation to the more remote visual medium of print. Yet Rushdie apparently did not consider this option. It is true that subtitles are widely believed to detract from a film’s popular appeal, and Rushdie may well be right in assuming that no “massive international budget” would be available for such a multilingual enterprise. Part of the appeal of English then is its marketability: books and films in English are more lucrative than those in other languages. Magic turns out in the end to have much to do with money.

25. Rushdie did in fact in the 1990s write the script for a 290-minute BBC series based on *Midnight’s Children* which was never produced. (Rushdie tells the story in his introduction to the script: in the wake of the *Satanic Verses* affair, first the government of India, then the government of Sri Lanka refused permission for the series to be filmed in their countries, and the BBC gave up on the project. This account is reprinted as Rushdie 2002.) However, a much-condensed and modified version of the script was presented as a play (performed by the Royal Shakespeare Company) in 2002. In both the television series and the play, all the characters speak English. (The scripts of both have been published; see Rushdie 1999 and Rushdie et al. 2003.)
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