

The image features a stylized profile of a person's head. The left side of the head is dark grey, and the right side is white. Inside the white area, there is a yellow silhouette of a human head in profile, facing left, with a textured brain inside. Above the dark grey area, there are several speech bubbles in black, grey, and gold. The background is white.

# Tuning In

an anthology of  
unheard experiences  
of multilingualism in  
psychological therapy

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# Tuning In:

an anthology of unheard experiences of  
multilingualism in psychological therapy

*Languages are something which we oddly take for granted. Even in 'talking therapies' the potential of 'different languages' is often ignored. This book offers moving, insightful and enlightening depictions of how languages shape our everyday lives – throughout and beyond our lifetimes. With a special interest in linguistic empathy, the authors bring the human experience of languages to the forefront. Drawing on creative writings, they invite us to ponder over how our 'linguistic repertoire' may impact both our sense of selves and the relationships across communities in clinical contexts and beyond. Reading this book is likely to change you.*

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*This anthology presents the relationship between language, power, identity and connection and the many layers in which this relationship exists. It gives you the opportunity to enter a multilingual world from the perspective of therapists, clients and ultimately fellow human beings. As you slowly open a window into their experiences you can feel layers of disconnect, prejudice and not-knowing melting away. The anthology offers you the gift of how to start a dialogue about language itself so that language can take the space it deserves offering us the connection we strive for. A must read for therapists, trainers and supervisors.*

*I hope all my supervisors read the anthology. They will understand me and my clients so much better!*

Selene Rull-Usano, Multilingual therapist.

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## OUR INVITATION TO YOU

We are so happy that you are opening this book and we welcome you into our shared reflections and creative writing about the important topic of languages in our lives in general, and in talking therapy in particular. Whether this topic is totally new to you or not, we believe our collective reflections bring something new to a field that needs to be further explored. Our pieces of writing are meant to provoke your interest and excite your curiosity, as our hope is that you will soon become one of us: convinced that this topic is of utmost importance to the theory and practice of psychological therapies.

We hope that together we can finally shed some light on an area that has traditionally been overshadowed by many other closely related issues. We are taking the time to explore this singular field to uncover and understand some of the roles it plays in our daily lives, and in psychological therapies in particular. In this anthology, we have chosen to give our creative writing a lead role to let the experiences shine.

We have selected some of these pieces to reappear in our second book, where they will be accompanied by our commentaries and reflections, as well as practical implementation tips. We hope you'll find them useful in your personal and professional reflections, training, or in the work you undertake with your clients.

Happy reading!

The editorial team

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# INTRODUCTION

*Tuning In* is an anthology of creative writing for people who use more than one language and for people who use just one language. In other words, it is about the human experience of languages, which affects us all. Languages offer us agency and they facilitate relationships.

Try imagining this scenario:

*You arrived last night in a country where you do not speak the language(s) and no one there speaks any of the languages you speak. Not only that, you have sole charge of an 18-month-old baby. The baby became very ill overnight and you know that you are going to have to find a doctor. You manage to find a clinic and luckily it is open. You go into the reception area and you see that there is a receptionist sitting at the desk. She doesn't look very friendly but maybe your anxiety is affecting your judgement. You start to show her the baby and to communicate the best you can with a phrase book and gestures. However, it looks like you weren't imagining it. This receptionist clearly doesn't want to make the effort to try to understand you. She gets up and walks back into the staff room, leaving you on your own. You have no idea if she is going to let you see the doctor.*

How do you feel?

You might have found it hard to imagine the scenario, but it is based on real experiences of people across the world. Spoken languages matter, and not just on a practical or technical basis. Languages we speak and don't speak, our linguistic repertoires (Busch, 2012), surround us and accompany us throughout and beyond our lifetimes. They may be lost and gained across generations. They are often invisible. They are frequently ignored – as you were in the imaginary scenario with the doctor's receptionist.

Languages are the core resources of both practitioners and clients in talking therapies. Yet many psychological therapists around

the world do not know enough (and often think they don't need to know) about the complex relationships between language, emotion, and identity among their multilingual and multicultural clients (Bager-Charleson, et al., 2017).

Of course, it is understandable if a worker (or any member of the public) feels useless when people speak languages that they don't understand, and where there is no shared language. If you imagine yourself in that situation, you might understand that sense of helplessness and the reasons people try to avoid engaging due to the language barrier. How do you form a bridge between people when there is no shared language and a great deal of anxiety?

And what about if you (or your parents, or your grandparents) arrived in the UK to study or to work? You may have arrived speaking English, but what happened to the self that was developing over years in another language? Did you leave it behind? Did you bring it with you? Has it been welcomed, or has it been shunned?

This anthology contains examples of creative writing which draw from and speak to a wide range of human experiences of living with multiple (visible and invisible) languages. The anthology provides examples of linguistic barriers but also of linguistic empathy which can de-escalate tensions caused by linguistic exclusion. The authors and editors offer the creative texts in this book as contributions to a shared effort towards building and improving relationships in and across communities in clinical contexts and beyond.

## **A note about the language(s) in which the texts are written**

Some of the texts are written in English and another language. Almost all the pieces are written by people for whom English is a later-learned language. We have taken the decision to leave them in

the form in which they were written, in celebration of the creative transformation of the English language by those who have come to it later in life. This reflects the transient nature of culture and language and re-evaluates the power dynamics of the global predominance of English as the default shared language.

We hope that those people who are represented here feel proud of the ways in which they have created new forms of communicating in English and which they are sharing with everyone who read this book.

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## Chapter 1 — SELF

In the first chapter, you will find pieces that people have written about extending and re-inventing their identities through languages. They share with us the impact their linguistic repertoires have had on their development and on their personal growth as individuals and, particularly, as clinicians in the therapy room.

### Letter to my younger self

Long before you decided to become a therapist, you had to choose between two languages, Kurdish and Turkish. Well, it was not a choice actually. You had to choose Turkish! Or you would be excluded from the society, you had to stay at home and not go out if you had chosen Kurdish. You might have not realised but you chose a part of yourself and left the other half behind. You had it with you all the time, but it was covered with a thick piece of cloth that there were very few places that you could dare to uncover that part.

On your journey to become a therapist, again, you had to choose between two languages, Turkish and English this time. Well, again it was not a choice. The university you wanted to go was teaching in English. This time you had to choose English, but I guess it was OK this time. Turkish was not your choice anyway. You learnt everything about psychology and therapy in English, but you were going to work with Turkish people in Turkish. Don't you think it was strange? Of course, you did! But what was the reason? Why did you have to study about mass-shooting in US Colleges when there was no such case in the history of Turkish Republic? In what way it was going to help you to exercise your profession in Turkey?

You finished your bachelor, you started your master's degree, again in English. Then you started to work in Turkish with your patients. Do you remember how hard was it at first to think about therapy in Turkish? Do you remember reading articles in Turkish and not understanding anything at all?

Then one day, finally, "your language" Kurdish came to your therapy room with a client. She was from Syria but what does that mean anyway? She was living a couple of miles away from your hometown. Do you remember how nervous you were? You had all those trainings, supervisions, you conducted I don't know how many hours of therapy sessions but there you were more anxious than your very first session. You were trying to translate your sentence into Kurdish, but it was very hard to find the "correct words". And, by the way, why the image of your aunt kept coming to your mind? You were going to see a client; you were a therapist in your therapy room. You were a professional! You were expecting a client, not a relative. She was not there to have a tea and chat. She was there to have a professional help. But there you were thinking about your village and your aunt as if you are in holiday and giving them a visit. How unprofessional! You thought you are unprofessional and unqualified, didn't you? But you weren't! Nobody told you anything about that. All of a sudden, you were expected to uncover your long-forgotten part, take away that thick of cloth covered with dust and pretend like it is just normal. Well, it was not normal. You were showing a normal reaction to abnormal situation. Yes, the same thing that you were telling your clients who had negative experiences and suffering from them. But there was no one to tell you that. You were overwhelmed with the situation, and you could not step out and have a "super vision". Your supervisor was supposed to have that vision but unfortunately, she did not. She could not understand the emotional effect. Just thinking about it makes me mad and feel sorry for you. And proud of you as well. You had to navigate by yourself in that stormy sea without any compass. But you should congratulate

yourself. You managed to survive and found other captains trying to find their ways through the fog. You realised that you don't have to be alone, and you are not alone. You are still the captain of your boat, but you are part of a fleet now. The sea is still wild, it is still hard to navigate but there will be always a hand when you need one.

## Letter to my older self

Dear older self, I imagine you now with your head full of grey hair (those that have started appearing over the last few years, perhaps from the stresses or perhaps from our growing age). I visualise you sitting in a comfortable armchair in your therapy room, and I look at you and I hope that you have found peace within yourself, and you are able to be calm, even during the minutes before meeting a new client.

I wonder if you may have had figured out why you used to feel so scared and anxious before meeting a monolingual client who did not share your first language. I wonder if the fear of being judged, rejected, or being seen as “not knowing” and “not worthwhile” because of your accent or your “not so proper choice of English words” has now dissipated. And if so ... what was it that helped? Did you find that it was about diluting your accent and developing so much your English that nobody would notice (except for your name) that you are not a native English speaker? I honestly doubt that this is possible ... or was it a matter of owning who you are and being okay with that, embracing that we are all different and in difference there is richness, evolution, growth, and a realm of possibilities?

Older self, can you tell me if the answer is within me or the answer is a collective effort? Is this something I have to work on myself? Are these my own insecurities and I just must work on my confidence and skills, or is this a systemic matter that needs conversations and dialogue with others?

I sometimes feel so alone and scared about feeling so different. As I have lived in two different countries now for so many years I feel like I belong nowhere and my languages are “not fluid or native enough in either language.” I feel as I have become something new. I do not feel solely Spanish anymore, nor I feel solely British either. ... I feel like I am an amalgamation, a new sort of species; I now dream in both languages, I think in both languages, I want to speak both languages and I have discovered new experiences and concepts in one language that do not exist in the other and vice versa, which brings a very strange conflict of reality and experiences and the implication of how to share this with others. I guess the biggest pain is how to feel truly understood and seen by others, now that I have become this merged person. ...

I guess you know all of this and my question to you is ... have you found peace? Have you found a way of not losing yourself? Or not having to “kill” or “destroy” a part of you in order to be seen or understood? Have you found a way of embracing your whole self, even if others may not be able to fully understand it?

I kind of imagine an answer from you now ... or maybe this is my current wish. I imagine you saying; “It will come”, with a gentle smile and no rush or pressure to make me believe it. I imagine you saying this to me with the confidence that comes when you have experienced it, and I breathe deeply as I let myself feel it.

I imagine you telling me that I am actually not alone. Millions of people in the world migrate and live their lives in different countries, acquire different languages at different ages and although it may not be a majority, I will find ways to be understood. Perhaps I imagine you telling me that I do not need everyone else to have experienced what I have in order to still be there for me. I also imagine you saying that I will find enough people to hold my hand and truly get me. Perhaps I imagine you telling me now to pause and actually look around me NOW, are those people in my life already?

Yes, being multilingual can be hard, it's complex and it brings a lot of challenges, it sometimes feels lonely and confusing, no doubt about that ... but it's also beautiful, it's rich, it expands your horizons and your possibilities. You lose and you gain, you change and evolve, you become something different, and that it's life, so embrace it, honour it and cherish it, because this is now YOU.

## Connection between an experience and an item of food

Working with Beverley's group has been a discovery for me, providing warmth and comfort and a little bit of spice, in a way that stays with me afterwards and it also provides self-care in a way I want others to discover too.

### Warm tea or warm drink

When I think about our group the item that came to my mind was a warm comforting drink. I am not sure exactly which one, perhaps something with cinnamon as it gives it some sweetness to taste good and a little spice too, having a warm and great combination that feels good, warm and nurturing to drink, but that it also leaves a taste on your mouth ... that once you finish the sip you still feel it, it stays with you for a while.

Warm drink is associated with my time in London and learning to have a warm drink when I needed to have a minute of self-care to myself. It's something that was new to me, as in my town/family/culture we don't drink tea or hot drinks that much ... but now has become a familiar drink, one that I attribute to something that I discovered myself and I want to keep, cherish and perhaps share with others (introduce them to it ... ).

## My fruit and the group

Just like a fresh healthy apple being a good snack, I think that something in me knew that I needed this group. This group is not about pretending or having a façade. We are genuine and true; we bring ourselves as we are. Just as the apple I imagined was natural, with no artificial colour or wax around it to make it look any better than it is.

The group feels fresh, like the bite, because is something I never got to talk about anywhere else and it's held in a safe and caring way, with respect and kindness, so it always feels healthy and good for you "when you take a bite".

The memories of my dad choosing an apple as a healthy snack, and also my own reticence to choose it as a first option, but then always feeling good about myself once having one, makes me think about how this group means making a choice towards my own self-care, it's good for me and my soul and I always feel better once I made the effort to make the space for it and attend it.

## Flash Fiction

It happened three times.

First, my mother tongue came in: it flowed through my veins, gave me a voice, made me, me.

Then another, through my school days: this one was the language of love, bringing more ideas, more poetry to read, more films to understand in their "original language". I fell in love for the first time writing brief poems with it.

The third, the one I am writing to you now, it pushed the other two aside. When I was young, it made me feel inadequate many times,

not good enough. But I worked using it and left my home to live in it, found love, built a family and a new career around it.

The beginning of the end may lie somewhere in these words.

## Call me Queen

You might think I am a king as they call me Mehmet

Or think I'm Italian as they call me Laura

I might even be Muslim called Roxana

And nobody every knows if there is 2 N in Anna

In this digital era, who could ever forget Paula?

And is it a C or a K when writing Katia

I could even be American called Beverley

Yet my English name is simply Latifa

## My mother tongue is ...

English is a monotonous cloud-laden sky

But my mother tongue is sun, rain, wind, and then sun again

It's protection

English traps me

But my mother tongue is my history,  
my identity

It makes me feel like a child,

And, as a mother, it embraces me

It makes me feel like an adult,  
And it gives me a sense of the world  
But what allows me to be the truest version of myself  
Is switching back and forth from English  
And my mother tongue  
How I perceive myself  
Without worries,  
Without overthinking  
And what allows me to be the truest version of myself  
Is switching back and forth from English  
And my mother tongue  
I feel home now.

## Words

You don't have to know it all  
Time will tell Time will flow  
You don't have to know it all  
Language is only a part of it all you know  
Don't stress so much of sounding accurate  
Think in any language you know  
Transmit it in many ways to show  
How you feel and how you know  
You don't have to mend it all  
The best way is to feel with words and to show  
You don't have to know it all  
To show that you care: it's not a talent show

You don't have to know it all  
Especially the confidence, don't forget to cherish the silence

You don't have to know it all  
Just open your heart to accents, meanings, expressions of feelings,  
misinterpretation, misunderstandings, learn more about languages  
and people's life luggage's, and of the old and the new be in awe

You don't have to know it all  
Open your heart and your mouth will follow

There is no point of knowing it all  
If language is not there to speak true and act as your heart tells you  
and to understand the other as a little part of you

## Chapter 2 — POWER

The power of languages was all too evident in the story you were invited to imagine in the introduction to this book. In the following pieces, we hear about the power continuum of languages. Some people feel de-skilled or infantilised because of the languages they speak on a very basic level. Some people may have felt shame about their home languages. Others enjoy the freedom afforded to them by their choice of language(s).

### Untitled

“How have you been since I last saw you?” The client doesn’t look at me at all and keeps looking at the interpreter. I’m supposed to be in charge, I’m the therapist! I hope I don’t show my frustration. Body language, body language. ...

“I’ve had an okay week, to tell the truth, nothing major happened,” the client mentions in response. “She’s had an ok week, nothing major has happened ... ” said the translator. The client turns to the translator again and the translator starts speaking back in Welsh. “Yes, I had a nice week, well, I think so ... ” said the client.

“What did you say, you thought you’d had an ok week?” I’m feeling really lost, I wonder if they’re saying something about me. How can I join in without being rude – well, are they being rude? Are they trying to undermine me? The translator apologises and explains that the client, after stating that they’d had good week, were unsure if they’d had? I nod, still not sure where this was going.

God, this therapist looks cross – this is my session, why is she cross?

Why is the client staring at me – I ask: “What has been positive and/or negative about your week?” The translator turns to the client and translates, although it’s obvious that the client had understood my question before this happened, as they were nodding. I’ve lost total control of this; I feel like running away and hiding in the pile of therapy bean bags in the corner!

What the hell is wrong with the woman, is she a therapist or what? Why is she looking so lost – like some sheep about to run away?

“The worst thing that happened to me was to start going on about my son,” says the client. The translator turns to the client again and starts speaking in Welsh.

I’ve had enough now. ... “Do you mind?” I said. ... They both turned to look at me as if they were choreographed. ...

## Dialogue between Meredith and Llio

Dialogue between a monolingual English (RP) therapist, called Meredith, and Llio, a bilingual (Welsh-English) client. Meredith is smart, in her late forties, wears a multi-coloured scarf and spectacles, and wears her greying hair in a bun. Llio is a rather overweight teenager, wearing black, khol, with a nose ring and some home-made blue ink tattoos on her hands and forearms. Llio speaks with a strong valleys accent.

They are in their first live therapy session, sat at right angles in a comfy, small room.

M: Well, Layo, sorry, I’m not sure quite how to say your name? ...  
(pause)

Ll: (stares into her hands in her lap)

M: (shuffles through her notes) ... What would you like me to call you?

Ll: You can call me Lizzie if you like. I don't really care anymore.

M: Ok Lizzie. ...

Ll: (cuts across) It's Llio! LL-I-O (spelled out Welsh way). LL like Llanelli, Llanilltud, llawr and llwch. LL. Stick your tongues at the top of your mouth and blow. ...

M: (tries) ... M: Clio. OK. Such a beautiful Welsh name. I'm sorry I'm struggling. Clio. Better? (really tries).

Ll: Yeah, yeah no worries.

M: OK so what brings you here (tries) Llio?

LL: (stares at her hands again. Sighs.)

M: I have so much to learn about your beautiful Welsh country – and you have such a lovely Welsh accent. ...

Ll: (cuts across) – yes but that's just it isn't it? You spotted me straight away!

M: What do you mean?

Ll: Uh! (rolls eyes slightly)

M: (looks puzzled, pauses). I mean, your accent is beautiful, lilting, you speak like you're singing. ...

Ll: (cuts across) there you go again! Singing! Why is it that everybody associates Welsh people with singing? Uh! (rolls eyes again)

M: (pause). I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend you. It's just ...

LL: You with your posh English accent, looking down your noses on us poor Welsh people, sheep shaggers, living in caves. ...

M: (puzzled) ... that's not what I meant at all. ...

M: Do you think we could start again? (pause)

Ll: (says nothing. Stares into her hands)

M: (Deep breath). Tell me what brings you here today. What is it about your accent and my comments about your accent that led you to react in the way you did?

## Conversation between a monolingual and a multilingual therapist

L: Hi A, how are you?

A: All good, a bit tired from a long day at work, but how about you?

L: Well, well ... I am okay, but I wanted to talk to you about something I have been experiencing lately. It's a really odd experience, you know? I don't know what to make of it

A: Oh interesting! I am all ears!

L: Well, so as you know, I am Spanish and I did my Psychology degree in Spain, and then I came to London, and I trained here as a Psychologist

A: Of course, I know that, L, we trained together!

L: Ha ha, I know! But the thing I wanted to tell you is that, during training I wasn't allowed to practice in Spanish, so I actually focused solely in developing myself as a therapist in English, and

it's only now, post qualification that I am starting to see Spanish speaking clients again.

A: Oh yes, how exciting for you. How is that going?

L: Well, so that's the thing. I was indeed kind of excited, although also very nervous and I have been feeling quite strange about it.

A: What do you mean?

L: So here is the thing, I do not why, but I feel completely different when I am in the room with a Spanish speaking client, which is even worse if they are from Spain and closer to my culture.

A: Humm. [looks puzzled and pauses] ... completely different?

L: Yes, isn't that strange? I feel as if I do not know how to be a therapist anymore

A: Oh, come on L, you are a great clinician, how are you not going to know how to be a therapist anymore, this is probably your impostor syndrome kicking in. ...

L: No, A, listen to me please, this time is not that. I truly feel different. Trust me on this, I know how it feels when it's my self-doubt or perfectionism being activated. This is different, this feels like I really do not know how to behave or talk

A: Humm ... ok, tell me more

L: It's very strange, A! I feel as a foreigner in my own language! When my first Spanish speaking client came to the room, he had written to me in English, so all the communication up to that day had been in English, so let's say ... I was not prepared. You know I like being prepared!

A: Ha ha, yes

- L: So, he entered the room and he sat down, and he just started talking to me in Spanish and all of the sudden, I needed to start talking in Spanish to him too. So, all the contracting, setting the frame, stating confidentiality, you know ... all the things we now do almost automatically, without thinking, it's second nature to us ... I found myself unable to say them calmly in a containing way.
- A: What do you mean, you didn't know how to say some terms in your own language?
- L: Well, part of it was indeed that! There are a lot of things that I learnt to say in English that do not necessarily exist or translate well in Spanish. ...
- A: Right, I see
- L: But I have to say that it was NOT only that. ... [Pause a bit hesitant, shrinking her body ... as the most embarrassing bit is coming]
- A: Okay. ... So, what else?
- L: Well, this is embarrassing to say. ... I just don't know. ... You may think I am going mad
- A: L ... [Looks at her in the eye] it's okay, you can tell me
- L: Well. ... Please don't judge me
- A: I won't
- L: I felt like a teenager in the room! It's like my professional role had evaporated. I suddenly felt childish when asking about risk or holding boundaries. I felt like a more 'wanting to be friendly and liked' part of me was stronger ... almost taking over. ... As if I had lost my ability to contain myself and think as a therapist and I was there as a person. ...

A: Wow, that sounds powerful

L: Well, I had to try so very hard in the session. Firstly, to think how to say things in my own language! Can you imagine?! And then. ... To remain professional. ... I felt so de-skilled and unprofessional. ...

A: Oh L, I am sorry that you experienced this so out of the blue. ...

L: Yes ... thank you, it was very surprising to me! Firstly, because I didn't expect him to speak Spanish, but secondly, because I did not expect to feel so out of my psychologist role!

A: Yeah. ...

L: Have you ever heard of this? I have been thinking a lot about it and connecting with other moments and interactions in my own language and I have been thinking that I feel like a different person when I speak Spanish ... almost as if I have grown in English but I have not grown in Spanish. ... It's as if I had a different identity, or perhaps I got stuck in my Spanish language and development. ... I feel a bit scared and also sad about this ... does this mean that I won't be able to do therapy in Spanish? Does this mean that I won't be a good therapist in my mother tongue?

[Silence. ... both Thinking]

L: Does this make any sense to you, A?

A: Well, I must admit that I have never imagined that this would be happening to you. ... I guess I assumed that as you are Spanish, you would just be able to transfer your skills and learning about psychology and psychotherapy to your own language with ease. If anything, I thought that you would be better at it in Spanish than in English.

- L: Right? I would have expected something similar. But it's not happening! It's really not ... and I am scared, I don't know what this is about. ...
- A: Yes ... I get that, L. And looking back, we really never talked about language in our training, did we?
- L: Not at all ... except a bit on interpreters ... but even that didn't even dig very much on it ... I feel like this is an invisible matter. ... Alien to me to be thinking about it in this way
- A: Yeah ... [short pause whilst thinking] ... what about your supervisor? Have you been able to talk about it with him?
- L: Well, after a few sessions with this Spanish client, I did bring it up. ... [Pause]
- A: How did it go? What did he say?
- L: I felt awful afterwards. ...
- A: Oh dear. ... Why is that?
- L: Because I felt that he completely dismissed what I was sharing with him. He just interpreted my feelings as something to do with the client. He was convinced this was a communication of him. ...
- A: Oh. ...
- L: Yeah ... and I appreciate that perhaps there could be something about my client ... but I honestly feel strongly that there is a big part that is about me, I just feel different when I have to speak Spanish with a client, and I need to understand what this is about ... but he wouldn't take it. ... I don't know. ... I ended up agreeing with him and left the supervision feeling unseen, unheard, and almost a bit 'crazy'. ...

A: Yeah ... I get that. ...

[Pause ... ]

A: Is he multilingual?

L: No. ...

A: Humm ... perhaps he doesn't know about language and being multilingual. ... Perhaps he also hasn't been trained on it

L: Do you think? But someone with his experience ... he must have? No? he has been working in the NHS for many years in London. ... London is a multicultural and multilingual city, there are more than 1.5 million people living in London who do not have English as their first language. ... I would expect that I am not the first person feeling this way. ...

[Silence ... ]

L: Am I?

[Silence ... ]

A: No of course not, I am sure you are not ... but you see, I can't help you very much with it, because I don't have that experience myself and also, I must say I haven't read anything helpful about it

L: Yeah ... me neither

A: But what if we try to look for something? I am sure that there must be something out there about this. ...

We take out our phones and search- "multilingual" and "multilingual therapists" "different identities?" ...

- A: Hey, I just found this book, it's called "Other Tongues: Psychological therapies in a multilingual world" ... looks promising.
- L: Let me see
- A: Look, she is doing a training on it next Friday – shall we go together?
- L: Oh my god, A, you are the best! Thanks for this, would you come with me?!
- A: Yes, absolutely, I may not be multilingual, but I have relationships with many multilingual people, clients, other therapists, if this is impacting you this way, I want to know more.
- L: [shows a big smile and becomes a bit tearful]
- A: Who knows? Maybe if this matter is so hidden and unspoken, we can actually make a difference one day.
- A & L: [Laugh together]
- P: Yeah ... maybe we do end up publishing on this, instead of our thesis that we have not been able to get our motivation back for it!
- A& L: [Shared giggles]
- L: [sighs with relief, as she had been holding up her breathing for the whole conversation] ... thank you so much A, I feel so much better. Thanks for being there for me, hearing me out and helping me start understanding something that it's so new for me ... but also for you. Thanks for not shutting me down and giving me a hand. 😊

A: Anytime Laura! Thank you for being you and sharing it with me. ...

Both: [Hug]

A: We are on this together

## English and me (Haiku, sort of)

I fear English conciseness  
Emotional straight jacket on me  
I love to hate it  
(This one has too many syllables. ... I can't count syllables. arghhh)

English is concise  
Emotional straight jacket  
I love to hate it

## Mae'n ddrwg gen i

I'm sorry  
How did I not hear that we are different?  
It is in the tone and fall and rise  
It is in the rhythm and the structure  
And the hard and soft of the sounds

I'm sorry  
Why did I not speak that we have difference?  
It is in the people that you help  
It is in your literature, title and study  
And in your history and experience.

I'm sorry  
How did I not recognise where we differ?

But now ...  
It will be in the spoken arena  
It will be another lens for exploration  
I will be curious about our difference  
Even in the sharing of our sameness.

## Language and Power

Language is Power  
Everyone knows that  
But language can also be vapour  
Depending on where you're at

The same words on paper  
Evaporate like smoke in thin air  
Sometimes we can smell traces of it  
Sometimes we don't even notice  
Sometimes steam can burn more than fire

Indeed, language also be smog  
Uttered from a little mouth or shouted out from a spout

The gift of the gab is not lost

Language can also taste sour  
And leave a bad taste for hours

Or it can also be bitter  
When words are engraved like daggers in the memory

But most of the time  
Language is not even noticed  
Like the air we breathe unconsciously

Language can also be dismissed  
As often accents, intonations and inflexions can be missed

In fact, language is mostly liquid  
Slipping through our lips all the time  
Words can be rock solid  
But language is surprisingly fluid  
Language has consequences  
In our thought or actions  
With its presence and even with its silence

Language is powerful  
Everyone knows that

Let's just remember this fact

## Chapter 3 — SOCIETY

In this chapter the pieces describe the impact of languages beyond individual experiences and identities. The creative texts portray feelings of belonging and not-belonging, of nostalgia for remembered and misremembered pasts, and of attachments and losses. Feeling connected to groups is a theme that is addressed here, and which continues into the next chapter.

### Letter to Frankie

Dear Frankie,

Having seen your experience as a trainee and how you learned to overcome the struggles and reflect so openly and honestly, I mainly have one thing I would like to say; Thank You. Being a trainee myself, I have felt the isolation and internal comparison and criticiser of “what did I do wrong”, and in all honesty the question of “what is wrong with this client”, seeing the client being the issue and, on reflection, being defensive. Seeing your experience that things go wrong is something I was not aware I needed to hear. It was the reminder that in the end we are all always finding our identity as practitioners and will forever be learning from one another. I also applaud your confidence and your honesty to seek exploration both with your supervisor and through your own internal dialogue. I couldn't help myself from wonder and would be interested in knowing whether attending personal therapy yourself would've helped your recognition as your own internal supervisor develops.

By having this glimpse into your journey, as a fellow trainee, I wanted to desperately tell you at that moment that it is okay when these emotions and frustrations occur, that nothing is perfect, especially in the profession we're in, particularly as we are told

there is no one right or wrong way to work. As you so openly shared around your emotions with your own identity and relationship with your mother, I have seen how this can be a lonely process to be in and let frustration come out with those around you. I empathise with your struggle with identity and by seeing your openness with peers, supervisors, and yourself, I have seen the importance of being able to share experiences with those around us, particularly when in such a multicultural world, where although we all differ, by hearing of others is journey there is a light that this can bring, a light which everyone needs from time to time. I have many questions about what you have experienced and how your journey has been as a trainee since the video and would be open for further communication, with myself or even on a platform where those who are working within this field, particularly in the multicultural setting, to be able to have that check-in with one another.

I again thank you for your honesty and reflections.

## Dear Myself

Gosh, do you remember how you felt growing up in a village where everybody was related to one another? Do you remember how difficult that was, even though you spoke Welsh? That experience shaped your life in an intense and emotional way. It didn't help that you used posh Welsh words like 'rheiddiadur' and 'teledu', when everybody else in class used the English words. That didn't do much to make you feel an equal and like part of the community and with people your age.

You didn't need to work so hard to be accepted – you did fine in the end because it made you into a person who felt strongly about the underdog's rights, the ones who are bullied. OK, the journey wasn't pleasant or easy, but you arrived in the end. One person's experience of speaking a 'native' language, with everybody else speaking the

same one, but yet not accepted. Nobody spoke English and nobody had moved away from their square mile, but you could escape to the world of books – Welsh and English.

This wasn't a bad experience but an experience to embrace and celebrate – the experience of growing into a different individual, and of being accepting of other people.

Keep believing that, will you? That happiness doesn't shape your personality; and that learning through a collection of experiences like this is very valuable.

Don't forget to believe in yourself and in the power of language and identity. You do belong and you are important – a Welshwoman to the core and nobody can change that.

Best wishes to you,

Myself

## Silent scream

We can speak in English and pretend it's important and we can go round and round and round in circles talking about the Welsh language as if it's a thing to keep like RS Thomas says in his poem is a museum piece but I don't want the language to be a museum piece I don't want to preserve the language like it's jam cos it's part of who I am and if my language dies then a part of me dies a part of my children my family my people die and that would be an awful shame wouldn't it and people would tut and say what a pity but there it is the world would go on oblivious to Owain Glyndwr and llythyr Pennal and his cave above Llyn Llewelyn and Cyw and bara brith and mam bia fi a fi bia mam and Jesus speaks Welsh too at least he did when I was a kid and the roar of hymns like lullabies and I can hear my dad in his white vest at Sunday tea time fresh from a

nap and ready to go once more out into the Welsh world of chapel and politics but it isn't like that anymore the world has moved on and we can say Senedd and ffon symudol but people don't know about Dafydd and Goleiath any more so there's no point I guess but today we sing Penblwydd hapus to Mistar Urdd who's 100 today so some things stay the same but it's like always being ready in case of I don't know death and being outraged when people slur my language cos if they dissed someone for being black or Muslim then they would be breaking the law but you can say what you like about the Welsh language on Twitter and the BBC asks what's the point of Welsh and people say casually it's a dead language but I know it's not it's who I am and I can't be nice knowing that this last machlud Llyn is the last one we might see and when I'm speaking Welsh there's nowhere to hide and you can see the real me like I'm a little girl again we say it doesn't matter I can speak English in fact my English is as good as yours and possibly better than a lot of people and why can't I say some things in Welsh?

## Think about the group as an item of food

This might not be particularly original or creative coming from an Italian, but I can only describe this group as a plate of pasta. Warm, inviting and welcoming, you cannot help but sit at the table, coming away feeling nourished and satisfied, with an energy that keeps you going all day. One single dish but so diverse: it can be spaghetti, tagliatelle, fusilli, conchiglie, lasagne and so on. It can be a traditional recipe, something you have already tasted because your grandmother used to cook it for you, which takes you back to your childhood. Or it can be a totally new and unexpected recipe, with a sauce cleverly created by introducing unorthodox ingredients or spices. Every time it is something different and yet something universal and enduring.

## The Bilingual Forum

The Bilingual Forum was a safe and secure place for me. A home, a place where I felt belonging. Belonging is a verb, it implies movement, not stasis. Belonging is not necessarily linked to a space, nor to a physical place, it is an inside/outside position, without borders, fluid, heterogenous, always in transformation. This was the Forum for me. A welcoming arena for my ideas on language/s and identity/ies, for hosting different professions and disciplines, for being part of a community where I felt I belonged to.

I could bring my languages there and my multiple identities, being a lecturer, a psychotherapist, a student, a mother, a daughter, a sister and much more. Through and with language. Language for me is not only discourse, it is an embodied and lived experience that defines who I am and who I am not, crossing borders and fixed notions of identity. The Forum allowed for this multiplicity of identities to co-exist within a shared, non-judgemental space where meaning was co-created among different languages and across a multitude of different experiences and professions.

What you choose to tell or not to tell? To share or not to share? What is said and not said in between therapist and client? In between you and others? What is that space in-between? The narratives we created about who we are, were part of this Forum, shaped through and with language/s, emphasizing the role stories have in understanding the world and our position within it. This was the Forum for me. A belonging where to bring my own narratives. A flowering, an opening to others, a listening space, a shared dissonance of multiple voices. A moment of being. A transitional space where creativity emerged, where possibilities flourished, where invisible stories were shared and made visible. To others, to oneself, to the community. A political space, where the voices of others mattered, where marginalities came to the forefront, where notions of power were dismantled. Re-translated, re-enacted, transformed.

This was the Forum for me and much more.

## To you

Keep warm,

keep them close.

Waging battles, is going through the storm.

You may feel invisible,

you may feel misunderstood.

Yet you know you have a respite, and can recenter in the group.

Layers we peel,

more uncertainty we dig.

And together, with curiosity, a light of sunshine we may instill.

## Language

Hey, I am “language”, can you see me?

Hey, I am “language”, I am here, can you hear me?

Hey, I am “language”, can you feel me?

Hey, I am “language”, please acknowledge me!

I am not culture (not the same)

I am not race (not the same)

I am not a tool, nor a fixed concrete pattern

I am flexible and fluid, I change and evolve

I create and transform; I create identity, experiences and can also destroy.

I am power and can also be a home

Hey, I am language, don't ignore me, por favor!

"Multilingual people experience themselves, the world and others in different ways"

LANGUAGE IS POWERFUL, DON'T IGNORE IT, LET'S TALK!

## Poem

A dialogue of enmity woven between and around us  
before we were born

Cymru fach mewn harddwch gwyrdd Wales in green (verdant)

Truth Gwirionedd

Lloegr England, also small, bach, with boots so big you trampled  
the world

we remain now arhoswn ni nawr

In the fallout

Like Celtic designs can our languages weave together

And heal the rift?

Longing Hiraeth, home cartref, presence presenoldeb

The words of the land around us Geiriau'r tir o'n cwmpas

Sea Môr, moon lleuad, depth dyfnder

Aderyn yn canu, A bird singing,

How would you add your shine sublime in mother tongue to these  
words of mine?

And go beneath the surface to the deeps

To heartbeat

The lifeblood of culture

Deep roots Gwreiddiau dwfn, strong feelings teimladau cryf

Mother tongue Mamiaith

My love.

## Chapter 4 — RELATIONAL ISSUES

Connections continue to be a central theme in this chapter. How do we live our relationships with family members and work colleagues through languages? What about the therapeutic setting? How are languages woven into the layers of therapeutic relationships – when they are present, but also when they are absent?

### To my manager

You are ignoring a big part of me when you don't acknowledge my multilingualism. And I am sorry, but you are not liberating me when you say "You can conduct therapy in other languages you know". You are a therapist yourself and you should be aware of the fact that language is not just a language, and less so in therapy. I know there is limited budget, I know you prefer not using interpreters to cut the cost. But just don't take it for granted when I use other languages in therapy. And please stop seeing it as just a way to cut the expenses. The organization is spending less money, that's true but, I am spending much more effort and energy. And the worst part of it, nobody is aware of that.

### Hi Mariela

Looking back to the multitude of issues we have experienced as a multilingual family; I would absolutely recommend you to first think of possible problems. I know you might not be able yet to grasp it because it is all too abstract, and you haven't gained enough experiences. But try to imagine how you would solve it in the context I offer you below.

- *A teenager girl who desperately wants to fit in.* You need to bear this in mind every single time when her friends are around. Puberty starts actually much earlier than it used to be when you grew up. That means that already in the Primary school, your daughter might feel embarrassed when you speak Slovak to her. She will also very often feel embarrassed for your accent. Especially in situations when she feels vulnerable, she might even hate you for it. She will mock you because of your strange accent. Do not forget this will be not personal, she still loves you anyway. But be prepared for that. Know that this might hurt. She doesn't want to hurt you, but she actually does. Do you know what I mean?
- *Power of language variety within one family.* If your husband doesn't master Slovak well enough, this might cause nuisances because every now and again, he feels the necessity to show that he actually has learned Slovak when he was younger. However, as he never lived in Slovakia, his Slovak will stay rather rudimentary. Therefore, your teenage children will take it as his Achilles heel and use it against him. Brief him those statements like "Stop speaking Slovak. You can't do it anyway." are not against him. Especially when your daughter states it. She loves him anyway; it is only her getting mature and approaching the womanhood that is playing tricks on her and the whole family. Her hormone level is at the moment experiencing many tornados and sometimes, trust me, she even won't remember how hurting was what she said. And her brother tries to imitate his big sister, to please her, he sometimes doesn't mind hurting his parents. His sister is the boss in this relationship!
- Four languages around the dinner table might cause situations that will expect lots of *tact, finesse, and diplomacy* to handle in a way that nobody feels offended. Sometimes, your husband will pretend he understood (or he will be convinced he understood!) when you spoke Slovak with the kids. Only later will you realise in his

actions he didn't. You should not get offended, even though you are exhausted after a week full of meetings, teaching, deadlines, etc. Take it all easy! Try to laugh about it, even though you were called from the school that your son is the last one, awaiting to be picked up!

- *Language and culture are two sides of a medal.* That means that if you change the country where your kids used to feel at home and went to school, this will also impact their behaviour in a new peer group. Their new teachers might not understand their reactions and vice versa. This will necessarily lead towards misunderstandings, sometimes problems. And do not forget that children in this age desperately want to fit in. Nevertheless, your children will never be able to fit in anymore. Nowhere. If they want to adapt, they have to put aside something they might not want to. This will lead towards conflicts. Occasionally, they might even need some professional help in order to make teachers happy. They might need an external help to get along with their otherness.
- *Grandparents.* The children will quickly understand that they can play the language card. Your parents will not be able to keep up with their multilingualism. Power imbalance needs to be considered again.

Think of the fact that all this will happen simultaneously. It would be wise to reflect on this before you have children. I am still convinced that it is the best way to approach your children in your first language (or what you call your mother tongue), but knowing the enemy is the best strategy. Therefore, do not underestimate drawbacks. Be prepared for them. Do not let them catch you surprised. Because it is not always cool to speak so many languages. There is also a toll to pay.

I hope you will find your best ways to deal with your multilingualism. It is a great advantage if you know how to use it.

Please do let me know your thoughts and if you want to, we can arrange a coffee and cake afternoon with friends in similar situation.

Yours sincerely,

## Saturday 13th November

I had the most amazing week. I had one of my best sessions with a client on Wednesday, where we did not only speak about language, but we truly connected language to her sense of self. It felt so natural even if it was new, as this had never happened before. We were not only talking about language and how that impacts her sense of self, but we were formulating it within the schema model, and thus how language is part of your vulnerable self/child, your healthy adult self, but also your critical self. We spoke about what different parts your language brings up, and in what accent your modes speak to you.

We were talking about language and accents, and I realised how certain exercises I would do with multilingual clients when helping them explore their sense of self and know themselves better, did not work with different accents.

I want to bring this more to the group, I have not read nor spoken much about it. With the client we spoke about how saying the same sentence in a different language may be difficult but easier, than saying the same sentence in the same language but a different accent, as we may be less aware that we are doing this.

It felt as if talking about accents is uncovering an extra layer of subtlety when we talk about languages.

On the same week, I spoke with a therapist in a totally different language, I felt unskilled at times. My position as part of a specialist service helped me feel less worried about the therapist wondering if I am competent, as I could not translate the word relation for example. It was difficult, subtle, I felt like a young unskilled girl, and likely speaking in one of my childhood languages made me experience this with more intensity. Subtlety is important when we are assessing, and I am not sure if I am able to do so in the best way when it is hard to describe the subtleties in words.

Perhaps because of this I felt attacked, defensive and frustrated with my team when discussing the case. I felt they could not understand cultural differences, and how these affects the therapeutic work and the way we talk about clients.

On the other hand, I felt they were punishing the client for choosing to do sessions in their mother tongue as I offered this by describing this as the client being controlling. It was the certainty in which it was said that enraged me. I feel sad, frustrated. I felt the white, psychoanalytic perspective, English higher band weight on me.

What also added an extra layer was the 'banana factor': the position of some multilingual colleagues that perpetuate the idea of language as a tool, and the idea that as any language can become an L1 (first language) the client will be able to gain the same from therapy that if they were to do it in their mother tongue. Also, thinking that this occurs in a really short period of time!

The lack of knowledge of those that believe they know, and the lack of curiosity, is extremely frustrating and angering to me.

With all of this I want to say to you – if you ever come back to this entry – that amazing things are happening and await. Things that I would have never thought would happen, such as not only talking about the importance of language and accents in the sense of self

with a client! But to do so while formulating in a specific model, bloody mind blowing!!!

But also, that there is a lot of work to do. A lot of education to do, and a lot of power dynamics to continue to battle.

It is a lot to do so on you own, so being part of a beautiful and sustaining group (like this one) is definitely the way forward.

I am really grateful.

## Couple Scenario

MATT (English speaker only)

LUCY (Welsh and English speaker)

Counsellor (Welsh and English speaker)

Counsellor: So how did the party go for each of you?

Matt: It started well but then she got a bit drunk and emotional you know like we talked about last week where all the progress we made just vanishes then

LUCY IN WELSH: Oh god I was worried we would get onto that, but you get what it's like don't you when you are a bit nervous and drink helps

Counsellor IN ENGLISH: Lucy I am curious that you spoke to me in Welsh then, what was that about for you?

Lucy IN WELSH: Sorry I just find it easier when I feel a bit guilty and want someone to understand and I know you know my Welsh, so it helps me feel closer to you

Counsellor IN ENGLISH: Lucy you know I am a Welsh speaker too and we have that in common but ... it sounds like there are some

important things to talk about in your couple work and that we use English so all three of us can be on the same page. PAUSE. ... Matt how is it for you when Lucy speaks in Welsh?

Matt: Tough. I think its private and she doesn't want me to know and is probably having a moan about me

Lucy IN ENGLISH: I'm sorry that wasn't it its just that I feel so bad about the drink that I think I go back to the Welsh as its comforting – is that a bit weird?

Matt: I know you do and I'm sorry that its hard to talk about it – but I want us to get through this together?

Counsellor: Lucy I wonder if you can translate what you were saying to me before?

Lucy IN ENGLISH: I just feel guilty and want you to understand,  
(looks at MATT not THERAPIST)

## Chapter 5 — CLINICAL IMPACT

In this final chapter, writers talk about the invisibility of spoken languages in clinical training and practice. How do we overcome that “language deafness”? How do we raise multilingual awareness in clinical practice and create a nourishing space for us to contain the anxieties about languages we do and don’t understand? How do we consider the multilingual experience with creativity?

### Untitled

In early 2000s I was doing a post graduate placement as a counselling psychologist in Italy. It was a large clinic and as a part of the Psychology Department, I was supposed to work with inpatients and outpatients. I was older than other trainees. By that time, I had a professional doctorate in psychology received in Russia and a master’s degree in counselling psychology newly obtained in Italy. I was the only non-Italian in the department and, possibly, in the whole clinic.

My colleagues, both senior ones and the fellow trainees didn’t seem to be ready to work with diversity. They treated me as if I were a *rara avis*, emphasising the fact I am Russian practically every time they spoke to me or about me. Moreover, my colleagues started calling me ‘la russa’ (the Russian one). My career began to be associated with unexpressed confusion, helplessness, and a growing frustration.

I was so eager to be taken in, to be fitted in, that I started hating my being different, my being Russian, and, ultimately, my being myself. I would’ve sold my immortal soul for a chance to not to be treated differently, for a chance to be heard, for an opportunity to be ‘like others’.

It should be said that I felt confident working in Italian, and I liked my job as a counsellor very much. My Italian was quite good, and I was proud of it. That how the things were when a referral for a Russian female client arrived.

Unsurprisingly, my colleagues unanimously decided (on my behalf) that the client should be allocated to me, and I was told to run the session in Russian, “because it’s the native language for both of you.”

I would have had so many things to discuss then: all my doubts, all my ‘whys’, the feeling of being disempowered, the fear of not to be able to keep boundaries. I would’ve liked to address the transference issues (the client was a woman of my age then, and her presented problems where depressive episodes and difficulty to adjust to the life in Italy). I would’ve needed to address all these language-related aspects of therapy, but I haven’t been given a chance. The psychology department at the time was completely “language-deaf”. And I stayed silent. I became ‘language-mute’.

The time of the session came. I introduced myself to the client as a psychologist, assuming that she would read my name on the badge, which, apparently, she didn’t. We greeted each other in Italian, which, I believe, came automatically for both of us. We continued the session in Italian.

More the session was going on, more my feelings of shame, of hiding something, of not being fully sincere, grew very strong. At the same time, it felt that disclosing my identity was somehow impossible in the middle of the session. I felt as I ‘have been lying for too long’ and I was too embarrassed to admit it to the client, who seemed to be totally wrapped into her problems: self-pity, lack of self-actualisation and integration difficulties. At the end she said she was grateful to me for having been listened to, to be understood and to be valued.

I would've liked to ask her whether having the session in Russian would've been different? And in what? But I didn't dare to do so. I wasn't trained to do so. I haven't been encouraged to do so.

Paradoxically, I got what I wished for: she assumed I was Italian. I became like others. I did my job which had been acknowledged. I did it without addressing the language issue.

But apparently, it came at a price: I silenced an important part of myself. I ran the session in Italian, without voicing the fact that it wasn't my native language, without asking the client what her preferences about language would be. It came at a price of me being ashamed of not having been sincere with her, of not having had courage to address the vital part of the talking therapy: the language matter.

## Dear Frankie

Thank you so much for letting me see inside your head and to hear about your struggles. It is such a privilege to see the inner world isn't it and something we hope to do as therapists. I don't know if you realise what a gift it is that you have given.

I should introduce myself I am a counselling psychologist practising in Wales and I also supervise and teach trainee therapists. Even though I live in Wales I am monolingual and only speak English. I also live in an area in South Wales where English is everywhere – work, home, shops, education. ... Having said that I have had many clients over the years who speak both Welsh and English. Of course, they have had their therapy with me in English and I am ashamed to say that I have not really given much thought to their other language – often their first language. There is shame when I say this Frankie and I wonder if that fits with how you feel when you look back at the work that you did during your training and what was

missed. Maybe there is some comfort for you that your struggle was not just a struggle for a trainee but here is someone who has been in practice for twenty years saying that I have shame about not being more skilled in working with a multilingual client.

You sounded very cross with yourself that you SHOULD be able to work as your more experienced supervisor did. "She would do it better than me, why can't I just DO IT!!!" But I wonder what specialist training she had and what was lacking in your own training. I recall language being a silent issue in my own therapy training (how ironic is that). Now as a trainer myself I am trying to bring awareness and understanding and experimentation with issues of multilingualism into training that I run. How can we expect trainees to not struggle if they are not given the chance to hear about the research and practice in the multilingual field? I think back to many clients who spoke other languages and what I could have done differently if I had the awareness, I have had from doing some training, and watching your videos was a big part of that Frankie!!!

I am sure that your experiences with Malik, your conversations with your supervisor and the observations of the work with Valerie will have influenced your practice, Frankie. Not least that you will have sought out reading and initiated conversations that help you to make sense of this difficult time in your training. We are never the finished article as therapists! We are always striving to improve, to know more how to help people and to bring ourselves authentically to the work. You have a fantasy, an understandable one, that your supervisor was all knowing. It's likely that she had her own insecurities and worries about her work. She would have taken those to her own supervisor as a reflective practitioner. Also, her lived experience wasn't yours! Remember that she drew attention to your own family and cultural difference and saw that as an asset! Watching your videos helped me to appreciate that I live in Wales and that there is an opportunity for me to learn more from my

colleagues, friends and others who speak both Welsh and English. I feel so sad at what was missed ... but need to look forward positively to what could be. ...

Watching your videos has helped me Frankie so thank you for the gift of sharing yourself, your insecurities and your journey to understand the multilingual therapy world!

## Therapist (monolingual in English) and client (Welsh and English)

In this extract the therapist (monolingual in English) has been working with a client who is Welsh (first language) and English speaking. This is the first time the therapist has worked with someone who is multilingual. They are working in English, but the therapist is finding it difficult to understand and work with the client and brings this to supervision.

Supervisor You said that you find some of the silences difficult. Can you tell me a little more about that?

Therapist Well ... um ... it's when ... no, it's as if they can't ... what do I mean? I just feel uncomfortable and not doing well enough.

Supervisor Just noticing you're struggling to find the right words you want to use. ...

*Silence*

Therapist Yes, sorry. I shouldn't be feeling this. ... I need to be more accepting and focus on helping the client and not thinking about myself so much.

Supervisor But this is a place where it is OK to look at your feelings and struggles

- Therapist Ok so the client struggles to find the right words and there are silences and I feel frustrated as it breaks up the flow of where we are going.
- Supervisor And where are you both going?
- Therapist The client wants to look at her difficulties in making herself understood by her manager and her colleagues – she says she always feels she’s in a different place. That’s where she wants to go.
- Supervisor Can I ask how you are going there?
- Therapist How?
- Supervisor Yes. It all sound very bumpy, with traffic jams and red lights.
- Therapist Yes, that’s it. I want to speed up and they can’t. Oh yes – I see what you mean (laughs) – I’m in a Ferrari and they need some air in the tyres of their Mini!
- Supervisor Can you help with the “air” problem?
- Therapist (Laughs) OK so it’s time for a pitstop yeah? And I’ll downsize my car or better still get in theirs and be the passenger!
- Supervisor And if your driver takes a wrong turn or gets lost?
- Therapist We can both explore how that feels. I can help bring it into the car!

## Cerys and Therapist

- Cerys            It's OK for you because you immediately get the right word when I have to fight to find it!
- Therapist        You mean because I only speak English?
- Cerys            Yes! You went through the English school system, and I went to Welsh school and so thought in Welsh during all that growing up period and all that time as a teenager when I learned who I was
- Therapist        Yes you are right that we went through different school systems, and I am interested about what you are saying about thinking and learning who you are using the Welsh language
- Cerys            Mmm
- Therapist        Can you tell me more about this to help me understand what this was like for you
- Cerys            Do you mean then or now?
- Therapist        It's up to you Cerys, both sound really interesting but what do you feel it is most helpful for me to know
- Cerys            I want you to know what goes on in my head when I feel something strongly it's in Welsh but then when I translate to English, to say it to you, it gets lost
- Therapist        Is that happening now, today?
- Cerys            YES, I want to say UNIG but it's not the same when I say it in English

- Therapist *(wants to know what UNIG means but is not wanting to take away from where Cerys is in the moment so instead says. ...*  
How is that for you to say unig here with me now?
- Cerys It's what I want to say most as it's what I wrote in my diary all the time, unig, unig, unig (gets upset)
- Therapist *When did you last say unig outloud?*
- Cerys When I was in my teens, the last time I had Welsh speakers around me ... but it's in my head even as an adult
- Therapist Is it important for me to know what unig means to you or is it enough to say it.
- Cerys It's a word that I want to say here in my counselling ... but I want you to also know why I struggle with it – it's about being lonely – but when I say that in English it's not the word I used in my teenage diary
- Therapist Thank you for helping me understand UNIG, I wonder if we can talk about UNIG, and use that word to talk more about it
- Cerys Yes, I would like to tell you a story about UNIG and how it took over my life. ...

## Untitled

A Welsh learner therapist and client have decided to revert to English as the therapist's language skills aren't fluent enough to fully support the client and the therapist has some anxiety around the focus becoming about her rather than the client. The therapist is wanting to be able to use Welsh as a therapeutic tool but is struggling a bit with letting go of a fully Welsh session and seesawing thoughts

and feelings around how to facilitate this. (*Internal monologue of the therapist in brackets*)

Th: Hello Hello Delyth

C: Hello Hello

Th: So nice to see you (*familiar form*) Mor neis i weld ti (*Is that too familiar? – the Welsh I speak is from school, friendships, but in English I would say good to see you. It sounds so much warmer in Welsh ... culturally English people can be perceived as cooler and Welsh people more open, hmmm generalizations/cultural stereotyping? I haven't added so! So good to see you. Why? Nice to see you Neis i weld ti sounds colder without the so mor*)

C: (*a little taken aback perhaps by the very warm/possibly over familiar welcome*) Thank you! Diolch! Nice to see you too. Neis i weld ti hefyd.

Th: I want to say again, I'm very sorry that I can't give support through the medium of Welsh. Dwi eisiau dweud eto, mae'n ddrwg iawn gennai bod fi'n methu rhoi cymorth drwy gyfrwng y Gymraeg (*Therapist internal monologue. Why? Pam? Am I carrying guilt here that is wider or is this courteous? Is the focus about me again!! Arrgghh!!*) But if it's ok with you (*familiar / polite*), I'm going to continue in English for the time being. Ond os mae'n iawn efo ti/chi? Dwi'n mynd i barhau yn Saesneg am y tro.

C: That would be ok. Bysa hwna'n iawn.

Th: Great! Gret! So, I was thinking around our discussion last week and how important speaking in Welsh is for you, particularly in this healing process of exploring therapeutically your emotional background, memories and family of origin. How do you feel about continuing to use Welsh in a more fluid way to explore your emotions as things come up. I think this could be very

powerful and necessary to your healing journey. If you felt able you could translate to English for me. I may understand some of what you are saying. Some I may not, but that is periphery to the reflective work which you could do and which we could share together using your mother tongue as a therapeutic access point. What are your thoughts and feeling around that?

C: OK. Iawn. I think that could work. Let's see. Gawn ni weld.

Th: (*Internal: Is this going to work? I don't want to passively let this slide into supporting me*) Please feel free to let me know if you feel a burden in this in anyway. This session is for you and about you. The aim is to create a safe space where you can articulate and explore your feelings in either language. I will be here to think alongside with you and support in whatever way I can.

C: Ok.

Th: So how has your week been?

C: Up and down. Lan a lawr. I had some difficulty with my boss this week. ...

## Authenticity

Eluned sat in the reception room, she had gone there much earlier than usual to meet the client. She wondered about the consultation session with Janice the week before, she was quite uncomfortable about it really and had been thinking about what to do. The session didn't go that well to be honest, and Eluned doubted whether Janice would return or not? Things were quite embarrassing from the first moment when she greeted Janice.

Janice came in the week before looking quite nervous (nothing wrong about that). Eluned introduced herself to her and Janice mentioned –

‘You come from north Wales. ...’ Eluned didn’t click at that point, but Janice further explained that she was from Swansea and that her Welsh was not as good as someone from north Wales. Janice noted that she did not use the correct Welsh words and that she spoke Wenglish; ‘You won’t understand me, and I won’t understand you either’. Eluned was quite familiar with this view, but she didn’t quite understand either – Eluned didn’t have difficulties understanding Janice or was it vice versa?

Both entered the counselling room, and the consultation session began. Eluned asked Janice how she felt about having the session in Welsh and asked if her accent/understanding was going to be a barrier, as Janice’s wellbeing was extremely important. Janice had originally asked specifically for a Welsh-speaking therapist, and Eluned noted at this point that they did not have another Welsh-speaking therapist in the practice. Janice started moving in her chair, looking quite embarrassed. Janice was not confident she said about speaking Welsh if they were not from the same area as her. Eluned was quite determined to persuade her that everything would be fine and that there were no problems understanding each other. Janice said very little after that, just giving short and purposeful answers.

Eluned felt quite embarrassed herself after this – had she hustled the point too much as SHE thought there was no problem? Why didn’t she discuss how Janice felt about the accent etc.?

‘Hello Eluned’ says Janice – she was back. ...

## Use of multilingualism in therapy (a clinical case)

Italian is my foster language. The Italian chapter of my life includes studies, an attempt of an academic carrier, motherhood, and my work as a therapist. Now when I live in London, Italian is one of the languages I offer therapy in.

Alba, a 30 years old single Italian woman sought therapy because of anxiety, panic attacks and depression. She came to London to get a new life experience and had a job that she was overqualified for. She, nevertheless, seemed to put a significant effort, creativity, and commitment in what she was doing.

However, she said, her manager had never acknowledged her effort. She felt non-validated, frustrated, and angry. For a few sessions she went on describing how unjust her manager was to her and how much commitment she was putting in her work.

I asked whether a part of herself was still expecting a validation from her manager, and she said that it was the case. At this point an Italian proverb came to my mind and I exclaimed:

“Ma e’ come cavare il sangue da una rapa!” (But it’s like expecting a turnip to bleed!)

The mood between us changed. Her voice sounded excited. She said: “that’s true!” and we laughed together. It was the shifting point of the therapy.

She said that when she was in her teens, she was required to take care of her younger brother, to manage the household on her own whilst her parents were working. She also was expected to get the highest marks at school and to attend her music classes. She told me how desperately she needed recognition from her parents, how she was longing for their validation which she had never received. She’s been told that that was only doing her duty.

Using an old Italian proverb helped me to articulate the client’s experience and it consolidated our bounding. But, most importantly, it facilitated the client’s connection to her past. The proverb was an insightful medium to access her early experience.

Writing this I realised that the verb *comprendere* which is Italian for to understand, although they mean the same thing, they reflect two different ways to approach the meaning.

Under-standing literally means finding ourselves able to see underneath reality, seeing deeper layers. The meaning of Italian: *com-prendere* implies more cooperative approach, a shared action of co-taking, getting together.

While the English meaning of re-flection is perfectly mirroring itself in *ri-flessione*: bending meanings many times trying to find different aspects of them or different angulations.

Ultimately, exploring feelings in depth, finding new meanings, isn't this what therapy does?

## Being part of this group has meant ...

Gaining an understanding of what it really means to be a multilingual therapist. I have learnt that it does not – necessarily – entail being able to speak several languages. It means fostering linguistic empathy, being comfortable with ambiguity in meaning, respecting other ways of using language and recognising linguistic privilege. The group provided me and my companions with the opportunity to reflect on the impact of multilingualism on identity, emotions, relationships, and the unconscious inner world of individuals. And how all of this plays out in the therapeutic relationship. For my own part, being in the group helped me to understand that what I thought was my major drawback as a therapist – i.e. not being a “native” speaker – is actually my major asset in working with both monolingual and multilingual clients. I have gained confidence both as a therapist and as an immigrant in a foreign country.

## How being in this group has helped my therapeutic practice

I am a trilingual psychotherapist based in London. I work in English, Russian and Italian.

What makes me different from monolingual therapists? What do I have in common with other multilingual therapists? How does being multilingual affect my therapeutic work?

Being part of a linguistically sensitive supervision group with my colleagues-therapists made me reflect on these and other questions that I have summarized below.

The group gave me the opportunity to reflect on language implications on the therapeutic process. It raised my linguistic awareness as a therapist and activated my 'inner linguistically sensitive supervisor.'

Being a private practitioner, especially, when you are new to the professional community and come from a different country, can be a very lonely experience. The group gave me a wonderful sense of belonging to a community of like-minded people.

The group helped me to articulate my multilingual experience related to the therapeutic process. It allowed me to 'translate' my intuitive guesses and observations into words and concepts. The link between language and power, language and identity, the issue of language attachment and loss in therapy became more visible to me. The hidden things became un-hidden.

The languages we speak are part of our identity, not only personal, but a professional identity too. Different languages are connected to different areas of our lives, different stages of life, different emotional experiences. This is what we bring to the therapy room. This is true both for a client and a therapist.

I find that my self-perception (my idea of myself and my attitude towards myself) is different when I work in different languages.

- For instance, I can easily forgive myself for a professional term that I can't remember in English, whilst I noticed that I am rather harsh on myself in my native language – Russian.
- I find it more difficult to keep boundaries when I work in Russian, and I feel I am somehow less able to “hold” the client and to be more inclined with being emotionally involved in the client's story. This happens when I work in Russian as a shared minority language in the UK and not when working in Russian in Russia.
- To my surprise, I noticed that I am more reluctant to disclose something about myself when I work in Russian, while this is different in English or in Italian.
- Some of my clients told me they didn't feel at home in their own culture. I wonder whether they saw me as a “foster parent”. I wonder whether the fact of having a therapist from a different cultural background enabled them to share with me their discomfort of being oppressed by their cultural norms and values that they struggled to accept.
- In conclusion, I would like to highlight a feature that, in my opinion, all multilingual therapists have in common: a larger area for wordplay and cultural references at their disposition. This can be used in therapy facilitating our connection to clients and helping them to articulate their experience.

## Untitled

“I'm curious about what you said about your accent? It's so lovely to hear it, though?” I looked at her and felt tension in my jaw while I clenched my fists; here we go again, for goodness' sake, why

does everyone have to draw attention to my accent all the time? The old falseness, "oh it's so quaint ..." and so on. Suddenly I feel uncomfortable; I really don't want to be here at all. "Well, I'm a bit self-conscious of my accent actually ...", I said. "You really shouldn't be, it's so lovely, you should be so proud ...", she said trying to flatter me.

"Well, it does and I'm not," I said quite abruptly. The woman looked straight into my eyes; she looked confused. "You sound angry ..." she said. "Angry," I said to myself. "You haven't a clue how I feel and you're not even trying either. What's the point in my wasting my time trying to explain how I feel about this – I haven't started with the things that are really worrying me." From that point onwards, emotionally, I left the room; this person wasn't going to get to know what was going on in my head – no way!

# CONCLUDING COMMENTS ABOUT THE PROCESS AND NEXT STEPS

## How was the anthology created?

Our anthology contains stories, letters, poems, and dialogues. It is being published in 2023 but the conditions for it to come into existence were laid down over a decade earlier.

In 2010, the Bilingual Forum (<https://www.pasaloproject.org/bilingual-forum.html>) was set up for therapists and mental health interpreters, so that we could gather together, meet each other beyond the consulting room, and share ideas and experiences. The Bilingual Forum currently has nearly 800 members from all corners of the world. We come from the diverse disciplines of psychology, counselling, psychiatry, speech and language therapy, education, applied linguistics, interpreting, and academia.

Three years ago, a new supervision group was established by Pásalo (<https://www.pasaloproject.org/>) which focused on the multilingual experience in psychotherapeutic practice. There are now three regular groups which meet once a month. The participants include multilingual and monolingual psychological therapists, supervisors, trainers, trainees, academics, interpreters, and one paediatric nurse. We have all come together because we felt the issue of multilingualism was unseen and left out. Many of us felt left out ourselves in our professions. With support from the National Lottery in 2021, we engaged a creative writing facilitator, Angharad Price, Professor in Welsh and Creative Writing, Bangor University, and with her excellent facilitation some wonderful pieces were created by the supervision groups and the Bilingual Forum.

All the authors agreed to contribute their pieces anonymously to this collection. All the pieces tell, in compelling ways, about the

role multilingualism plays in their lives as practitioners, patients, clients, individuals, family members, friends, lovers, citizens, and professionals. They are stories, poems, letters, dialogues, monologues, allegories. They are glorious and we hope that now you have read them you will become as passionate as we are about this essential, if invisible, phenomenon of human experience.

## Next ...

The anthology is one of two books which we are publishing as a result of our work in the Bilingual Forum, the multilingual supervision groups, and the creative writing workshops. Our anthology showcases the pieces that emerged from the workshops.

The second book contains a selection of pieces from the anthology, together with commentaries about them, a theoretical framework for thinking about multilingualism in psychological therapies, and an implementation section with tips for practitioners, trainers, and supervisors working in psychological therapies. You can read either of the books independently from each other or as complementary texts.

Please email us at: [beverley@pasaloproject.org](mailto:beverley@pasaloproject.org) if you want information about any of the issues, activities, and groups mentioned in this book or about the books themselves.

**And finally**, thank you to all those who contributed their beautiful pieces of writing, which came out of the workshops with Angharad, for us to use in the anthology.

## Thank you to:

Michela, Caroline, Martina, Derith, Elin, Martin, Carole, Rachel, Hâf, Donata, Lorenza, Katia, Latifa, Anna, Paula, Mehmet, Roxana, and Beverley.

*This anthology ... gives you the opportunity to enter a multilingual world from the perspective of therapists, clients and ultimately fellow human beings. As you slowly open a window into their experiences you can feel layers of disconnect, prejudice and not-knowing melting away.*

*I hope all my supervisors read the anthology. They will understand me and my clients so much better!*

Selene Rull-Usano, Multilingual therapist

*This book offers moving, insightful and enlightening depictions of how languages shape our everyday lives – throughout and beyond our lifetimes. Reading this book is likely to change you.*

Dr Sofie Bager-Charleson, Senior Fellow (SFHEA), Director of Studies (Management) MPhil/PhD and Doctoral Development. Metanoia Institute, London.

## **The Pásalo Project**

The Pásalo Project aims to share knowledge, ideas and experience from applied linguistics, psychotherapy and social care across borders and boundaries. Pásalo CIC is a not-for-profit organisation.

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[www.pasaloproject.org](http://www.pasaloproject.org)



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