
‘Two Tongues Occupy My Mouth’ – Poetry, Performance and the Moving Image

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Abstract

This article argues for a raised awareness of the possibilities offered by the moving image in English, achieved through a wider and better informed understanding of the range of modes that are woven together in a typical text or performance. It pursues the argument through a case study of four films produced by bilingual Year 11 girls in a comprehensive school in Cambridgeshire.

Keywords

Moving image, multimodality, poetry, bilingualism, writing

Introduction: the moving image in English

The moving image occupies a troubled place in the English curriculum – always the bridegroom to the blushing bride of language. Many arguments have been deployed by its campaigners and devotees over the years, and the British Film Institute (*bfi*) especially has lobbied for its inclusion in more substantial form in the mandatory curriculum.

This article will explore four arguments for a greater emphasis on the moving image in English, looking at an example from two years ago from my own teaching at Parkside Community College in Cambridge.

The first argument is about the nature of the moving image as a form of communication. In some ways, it seems obvious that English is about language predominantly – the English language and literature and its associated literacies are the base of the historical rationale of ‘English’. However (and without getting too stuck in the familiar despondencies about a subject in crisis), for many people this model has outlived its usefulness; or at least needs some serious expansion. For me, it has always been constraining. At university in the mid-1970s, I already felt quite frustrated by a course whose unremitting privileging of language as print produced a complete bypass of the illustrations of the Beowulf manuscript, the music of the English ballads, the drama of Shakespeare, the paintings of Blake, the film adaptations of the Victorian novel, Ralph Steadman and Leonard

Baskin's illustrations of Ted Hughes. In recent years, a new kind of semiotic theory has proposed ways in which we might conceive of how different communicative modes are, in practice, integrated in most of our real-life engagement with texts (as opposed to the kind of engagement required by an English exam). This theory of multimodality, most prominently presented by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (2000), argues that language is losing its prominence in an increasingly multimodal world. A good example is the mobile phone, which used to be, in the days of the good old brick, all about language; and is now increasingly about music, photography, web pages and mobile gaming. Interestingly, the telecommunications industry also uses the word 'multimodal' for this phenomenon, though independently of Kress and van Leeuwen.

This multimodal view would make a greater emphasis on the moving image in English a logical move. It would extend the expressive and representational repertoires available to students, and bring resonances of the audiovisual cultures of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries closer to the classroom. The debate about such an expansion of English has often, in recent years, centred on the idea of literacy, and whether media, digital, silicon, visual, cine- or other literacies could be defined with language as the analogy. This debate is contentious – Gunther Kress, for instance, argues that to use literacy so generally loses the specific value of the term for language (2003). But it is also a productive debate, since it is, in the end, a debate about how English might really be about semiotics – how students can learn to make and interpret texts, understanding the specific characteristics of different sign systems, but also how general principles and patterns (such as those of narrative) work across and between these systems.

The second argument is about media education. For many years, media education has explored forms of representation and communication quite distinct from those of language, in particular the moving image as film, television and video. Furthermore, it has located these practices in the daily cultural lives of ordinary people, forcing open a space for popular culture in a curriculum traditionally dominated by heritage models of culture of one kind or another. The argument for the moving image in English is not the same thing as an argument for popular culture in the curriculum (the moving image has its own forms of exclusive practice and textual canon); but it is closely associated with the argument for popular culture in the history of the media education movement.

The third argument is about information and communication technologies (ICTs). It's tempting to regard computers as transparent vehicles for content delivery, rather than as integral parts of the stuff of meaning-making. In this view, we make poems through *language*: it doesn't much matter whether we write them or design them in a desktop publishing package, whether we record them for a CD-ROM or film ourselves performing them – these choices are simply about the delivery mechanism. The multimodal argument, by contrast, would be that these choices of mode and medium can and do make a difference to the meanings made, and not just a trivial, secondary, decorative difference. More specifically, with the advent of digital video, there's a tendency to collapse the moving image into the technology through which it is edited, so that it becomes just another computer application, and, as in the view above, therefore just another 'delivery vehicle' (sounds like a mail van). The result of this, as an evaluation of last year's BECTa DV (digital video) pilot argues (Reid

et al., 2002), is that the moving image as a signifying system is in danger of neglect.

The fourth argument is about rhetorics of creativity. English traditionally invokes a post-Romantic rhetoric of the creative act built on metaphors of the organic and natural. Behind these is the literary Romantic sensibility, from Blake's *Garden of Love* to Wordsworth's *Lake District*, from Dickens's *Sissy Jupe* to Yeats's wild swans. We have learnt to suspect this tradition, to see through its mystification of creativity, which for learners results in creativity as a natural gift which a few are born with and the rest forever miss out on. In its place, the tradition of media education offers a view of creativity as a technical, transparent process which can be unpicked and learnt by anyone. The mystery of creativity is replaced by the transparent exploration of representation which can be analysed both in the texts students view and in those they make. Self-expression becomes self-representation. By a curious series of political inversions, the radical creativity of the Romantics, opposed to the inhuman technologies of the Industrial Revolution, has become a conservative force of natural selection; while technology has become the champion of the democratic and inclusive impulse in education. However, like many binary oppositions, this is a false one. These comfortable rhetorics don't fit a multimodal English curriculum. Teachers of poetry need to understand the semiotic power of new technologies and the creative processes they contribute to expressive work. On the other hand, media educators, traditionally uncomfortable with talk of bodies, voices and feelings, need to build into their model of creativity some way to recognise that the 'hard' technology of digital editing and three-chip cameras fuses, in the creative act, with the 'soft' technologies of voice, face, gesture. From a semiotic point of view, these are all representational resources that need to be thought about in an integrated way.

Beneath all of these arguments, there is another theme which I will address explicitly – that of performance and identity, the performance of self. Whenever a child makes a text, they are saying something about themselves. In moving-image texts, especially when it is their own voice or face they have framed, modelled and edited, such representation is strongly performative. In the examples considered here, this is especially true, as the explicit theme of the pieces is identity and bilingualism.

Making the films: poetry and the kineikonic mode

A couple of years ago I worked with my Year 11 group on the poem 'Search for My Tongue' by Sujata Bhatt, part of an anthology of set texts for GCSE English, in a section many readers of this journal will remember, ethnocentrically entitled 'Poems from Other Cultures and Traditions'. The poem evokes narratives of bilingualism, diaspora, the loss and rediscovery of mother tongue, and the way identity is not only expressed in language, but is made out of the stuff of language, amongst other things. It is also a poem about the body – specifically, about the organs of speech. It operates organic metaphors of plant life to signify the decay and regrowth of Gujarati in the mouth of the speaker – her tongue, literally and figuratively.

The poem proved difficult for the class to engage with. It seemed remote from the experience of many of them. So we got together five bilingual students in the year group, and asked them to write, perform and film poems modelled on Sujata Bhatt's. The films considered in this article are

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by Ayi, who speaks Mandarin and English, Fatima and Nayana, who speak Bengali and English, and Sophie, who speaks French and English.

We gave them a day off timetable to make short films of their poems. Two further signifying systems came into play. First, performance – they had to perform their poem to the camera. Second, the signifying affordances of camera and editing software – they had to do the filming and editing (on the digital video editing system Media 100). The films themselves can be viewed while you read on the Moving Words website www.open.ac.uk/movingwords.

These short films of the students' poems are what Kress and van Leeuwen call 'multimodal ensembles' (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001). They combine a variety of signifying modes – speech, facial expression, posture and gesture, the built environment, music – and the two representational systems which together make up the mode of the moving image – filming and editing.

The first point to make about multimodality is to note how the spoken performance of the poems changes the written versions they bring to the filming day. The speech used by these young poets is not the speech of oral composition – there is no improvisation, formulaic composition, or any of the other elements of traditional oral craft. These are recited poems – in fact, they are partly read from improvised autocues held up off camera by their friends. Still, they do privilege the oral mode in many ways, and the written poems become secondary in some ways, preliminary to the performance and filming. And, as in any speech, there are improvisatory elements – the tonal contours, the tempo, volume, vocal timbre – all of these are not merely material appendages to the signifying properties of language, but contributors to the meaning. For instance, in Nayana's English/Bengali poem, 'Brothers and Flowers', there are the lines:

*I imagine my two tongues, each budding out of my mouth.
My physical tongue, the stem of two flowers, each flower
A marked presence in my personality,
Colouring my thoughts, scenting my dreams, shaping my life,
Shaping me.*

In the written form, the four clauses making up the last two lines are a repeated structure, a present participle followed by its object. In the spoken form, the second one is different, marked out by a rising tone on the word 'dreams', suggesting either a note of question, or incompleteness, or an invitation to assent by the listener.

Fatima, in her English/Bengali poem, imagines her two languages as 'un-identical twins', who behave differently, so that one can become disobedient and needs to be quietened. The command to be quiet employs the emphatic features of volume and a decisive falling tone, both in the English 'Quiet!' and in the Bengali 'Cup thako!', as well as Fatima's use of the so-called paralinguistic sign of a stern frown to accompany the imperative.

Already, a monomodal view of language as a single signifying system is beginning to break down here. Not only does this look like two systems – writing and speech – but the frown extends the repertoire to a complex signifying system of human expression central to the moving image, a mode which has its own history of representations of the human face in close-up.

If we stack up word, speech, gesture and facial expression, we get something which is integrated, in which the separate modes produce articulated meanings; something which, in short, is a performance. In a small way, these are dramatic texts, though the students wouldn't have thought of it in that way, and neither did I at the time. But they are dramatising something specific – the bilingual identities of the young poets. It is identity across languages, cultures, countries and communities which is represented in the central metaphors of Sujata Bhatt's poem, and of these teenage responses to it. These performances, then, are what the sociologist Erving Goffman called, in his classic study, 'the presentation of self in everyday life' (1959, p.). But they are more than the daily enactment of bilingualism in the home and school – they are self-consciously artistic expressions of these selves, so that the performance of selfhood is not only of someone who is bilingual, but someone who is a poet, a film-maker, an exam candidate, a school student. All of these selves and their respective social motivations inform the construction, performance and reworking of these pieces.

This work of construction also employs the signifying properties of the moving image. David Parker and I have coined the term 'kineikonic' for this mode (literally move + image), since no neutral term exists for this mode; words like 'cinematic' and 'filmic' privilege cinema, which we do not wish to do (Burn and Parker, 2003). For us, though, the kineikonic mode has a double meaning. It can never simply exist as filming and editing – it is always dependent on other modes such as speech, costume, visual design, music, gesture, script, dramatic action. The point is to consider how they all work together.

Let's take, then, a central idea of these poems, and see how the modes combine to deal with it. The central paradox the poems deal with is the schism and the unity of bilingualism – how it makes a whole person in whom the two languages are harmoniously united; but at the same time is an effect of cultural difference. Fatima says:

*My life is split into two pieces
Like a fruit that has been cut into two halves.*

For her, the difference between Bengali and English is a marked thing: the voices jostle for control, like disobedient children, emphasising the schism of bilingualism, the split between worlds and cultures it enacts. She is also cannily aware of the confusion and difficulty of language, how it can trip you up as well as bravely represent your dual identity:

Voices can make a fool out of you.

She chooses to perform against a stark brick wall, whose uncompromising materiality carries messages of its own. She decides to film it from two different angles, so that she is shown in three-quarter profile, from one side for the English parts, from the other for the Bengali. This strong device is a visual transformation of the first lines of her poem, but says something different from the fruit simile – something more like 'I am a speaker who faces in two directions'. The distinction between the languages is sharply marked by the transition between the alternating shots, which is always a cut.

She also chooses different framings, which change the meaning of the lines. The command to one of the voices to be quiet, cited above, is a good example. The English version – 'Quiet!' – shows a head-and-shoulders close-

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up, facing left; the Bengali version – ‘Cup thako!’ – is an extreme close-up of her mouth. The second shot associates the spoken Bengali more emphatically with the organ of speech, representing this language more intimately.

Nayana’s poem, ‘Brothers and Flowers’ (also in Bengali and English), uses an editing technique to distinguish between the two languages – she makes the English sections black and white, and the Bengali sections sepia, which suggests a kind of starkness across the whole poem, but one tinged with nostalgia for the Bengali shots. She speaks with a serious, musing tone of voice – the paradox here seems more to do with the way bilingualism is for her a completely everyday fact, but at the same time a fascinating mystery:

*Everybody says that it is amazing.
I never saw anything great about it.
It's just me, a part of me, the way that I always have been.
...
Two tongues – a strange thought.
I look in the mirror – I open my mouth.
Go cross-eyed in the attempt to focus
On the pink muscle that is the source of this mystery,
The solution to which remains
Forever elusive.*

Where Fatima has used a constant camera distance and frame (a head-and-shoulders close-up), Nayana uses in the first three shots a long shot with a slow zoom in to close-up, situating her in a wider outdoor landscape with trees, houses, roads, before emphasising her speaking presence. She also locates herself in different positions – against a tree; walking from an open background; sitting on a park bench. The effect, in combination with the words, is to suggest both an exploration of a self constantly on the move; but also to suggest a self-confidence – the positions are controlled and calm, and the camera angle is often low.

Ayi’s poem in English and Mandarin uses quite different camera techniques – dramatic close-ups, sharp variations of horizontal angle (frontal, profile, back view, mobile frame moving around her). These techniques are more reminiscent of the audiovisual forms of popular culture, especially music video. This, along with her leather jacket, her proud movements, her confident voice, the smile which lightens the tone of the whole piece in the penultimate shot, means that the very specific aspects of selfhood in this piece are represented in these modes, rather than through language. The words, unlike Nayana’s and Fatima’s, set up a formulaic structure representing her tongue as the actor in each line, the author of her experience of migration:

*My tongue tells the story of my life
My tongue tells that I am leaving
My tongue knows when I am sad*

In many ways, the poem is not about the two distinct languages of bilingualism; for her, English is a recently learned language, and less eloquent, so that sentences begin in English and end in Mandarin. It is a poem about herself, about her leaving of Hong Kong, about her mixture of sadness and excitement at the turbulence of the past year. And, just as the words do not construct the duality of bilingualism, neither does the

sequence of shots in her film. There is no parallel structure as in Nayana's and Fatima's poem – rather, a single structure of montage, stitching together a representation of Ayi herself.

The other mode she employs, unlike Fatima and Nayana, is music. She chooses a piece written by a GCSE music student from the year before, in a traditional Chinese style, using the pentatonic scale and an electronic simulation of a Chinese stringed instrument, such as the *zheng* (Chinese zither), or the *yangqin* (Chinese hammered dulcimer). Unlike the camerawork and its suggestion of contemporary popular forms, this suggests Chinese tradition and amplifies the slight melancholy of the words.

Sophie's poem, in French and English, employs the organic metaphors modelled by Sujata Bhatt, like Nayana: her two tongues 'live' and 'breathe'; they are 'like a pair of twins'. However, some of her imagery represents exactly the performative aspect of language which her video enacts – the twin languages both speak, but 'sound different, like an actress who plays a part with many characters'.

Her video begins with a medium long shot of her, sitting cross-legged on a stage block in a studio space, lit with reds and blues, looking down pensively. The choice of space – a drama studio, furnished and lit with the apparatus of theatre – is a visual complement to her image of the actress.

There's a slow zoom into her face, then a dissolve into her speaking face with a blue filter as she speaks the first lines of the poem in English:

*Two tongues occupy my mouth
Both living and breathing inside*

There's then a dissolve into a bigger close-up, in black and white fading into colour, speaking the French lines. The dissolve suggests a continuity between the two identities and languages – the message of the next lines is exactly that:

I start a sentence in English, et je finis en Français

The video continues to alternate between English in medium close-up and French in close-up; the transition always dissolves, the following shot always beginning with the colour washed out and gradually introduced. The camerawork generally locates her in a medium long shot, except for one extreme close-up, suggesting intimacy and, again, complementing the message of the line, which declares her strongest sense of the identity of self and language when she dreams and thinks:

*Et quand je rêve ou je pense
Je sais que ma langue est à moi,
Et ma langue, c'est ce que je veux dire.*

*(And when I dream or I think
I know that my tongue is my own,
And my tongue, it's what I want to say.)*

The case for multimodality and the moving image

What can we say about these short films with regard to the four arguments for the place of the moving image in English raised at the beginning of this article?

Pieces of work like these make the multimodal case very clear. These are complex integrations of a wide range of signifying systems, and to think of them simply as language doesn't do them justice.

In terms of creativity, this can be seen to depend on three things. First, it depends on the motivation to say something important – in this case, to make a declaration of cultural identity, most explicitly about bilingualism, but with important markers of teenage girlhood as well.

Second, it depends on the use of representational technologies, or resources. These include the obvious technologies of digital video; but also the technology of poetic metaphor and structure. They also include the less self-consciously deployed resources of dramatic performance. It also depends on explicit understandings of how these technologies work. The value of the digital technology here is its ability, in the medium of digital editing, to offer the same plasticity and instant feedback to the student editors that the written word does when they rework, revise, edit their poems.

Third, it depends on artistic intentionality. All acts of meaning-making are creative, the banal utterance as well as the self-consciously artistic; but these pieces declare themselves as art. This might mean 'originality', as in the National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education's definition of creativity (NACCCE, 1999); but equally it means modelling, imitation, apprenticeship. Originality, in the post-Romantic conception of creativity, is fetishised, but more importantly I suspect it is confused with the stylistic markers of artistic genres. A child can be original in both thought and expression in a newspaper article or a report on a chemistry experiment; and we would want them to be. Similarly, in their poems and their films, we would want them to be. Here, then, creativity is about making something new – as in any genre. But, paradoxically, to make something new needs competence in the conventions and technologies of that genre; something new is always also something old, or there are no new stories under the sun, as James Joyce once remarked. In the context of media production, David Buckingham gives extensive examples of how really creative production work depends heavily on imitation and apprenticeship, as well as demonstrating how such work is embedded in social motivations and processes (Buckingham, 2003).

In terms of media education, however, the films are unconventional. They exploit the 'popular' medium of the moving image; but they are emphatically not an imitation of a recognisable genre of the mass media – of film or television, for instance. But they are clearly a kind of creative media production, employing the signifying properties of the moving image, and the affordances of digital video, producing texts that can be distributed and exhibited in many different ways. They have, in fact, been screened in a cinema, at an event attended by Sujata Bhatt; and are also on the Worldwide Web as part of a site made by Jenny Leach and colleagues at the Open University (www.open.ac.uk/movingwords).

In fact, Parkside is, it's worth remembering, a specialist media arts college, not a media studies college. This is not to disparage media education in the more conventional sense, which is a vital part of the work of this school. But it is to say that media production, whether in English, Design Technology, Art or Music, may be located in an arts education model as well as in a media education model, invoking pedagogies, cultural preoccupations and forms of evaluation quite different from those of media studies.

So – some challenges here for conventional models of media studies. But also for English. Our way of conceiving of ‘English’ notoriously privileges the written word; and these poems are, predominantly, written texts. But, as we’ve seen, they are also texts performed through voice and facial expression in particular; and made up of other physical signifiers such brick walls, park benches, human faces and musical melody; and of the signifying properties of filming and editing. The subject of English has no way to recognise such a complex of signifying practices. Its curriculum, in the UK, can only conceive of drama as an adjunct to speaking and listening, and so has nothing to say about the body; and can only conceive of moving-image work as an adjunct to ‘reading’, whereas here it’s clearly more like ‘writing’. In any case, these films are unrecognisable by the assessment mechanisms of both English and Media Studies at GCSE. They would not easily fit the assessment criteria of either; though, curiously, they would be admissible as coursework under the national GCSE assessment criteria for Art and Design.

Conclusion: technologies of performance

We have looked, then, at a kind of performance which students enact within media texts, through media technologies.

They show forms of cultural role, in which these young people take on the function of cultural makers, as poets, film-makers, game-players. But they also show how the roles made available by media genres and technologies allow dramatic reworkings of aspects of the world closely related to identity – cultural passions, fashions, play, narratives of self, family and friends. At the same time, it becomes clear that we cannot reduce these representations to disembodied forms of text, whether these be the narrow perimeter of print literacy or the wider field of film, animation or interactive media. Nor can we reduce them to the technologies which provide part of the representational resources of these media. We need to recognise how signification is also made out of the material properties of voices, faces, fingers, bodies, trees, bricks and guitar strings; how the signifying apparatuses of the body integrate with those of the digital media of video, animation, game, to produce the elusive thing we call ‘text’ – something woven, as Walter Ong (2002) and others have pointed out, citing its derivation from the Latin verb *texere*, to weave.

In practical terms, the obvious message is that Drama, Media and English teachers need to talk to each other more, and overcome their separatist histories: Drama emphasising the value of unmediated dramatic presence; Media ignoring the bodily semiotic of face, voice and gesture in the vast majority of its textual canon; English blind to the extra-linguistic. In a world where texts are increasingly multimodal, then to profitably muddle the regimes of English, Media and Drama is no bad thing. All texts in English are about performance, at least potentially; and many of them (some would say all) depend on modes other than language. Most media texts are about drama. And most of the drama people see, as Raymond Williams once remarked, is mediated through television, contributing to what he saw as a ‘dramatized society’ (1983, p.). What we need to be specific about and clear about is not the illusory subject boundaries and the histories that prop them up, but the common semiotic principles that underlie them. How to practise these, in as wide-ranging and well-resourced a way as we can, and how to help students reflect on

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them metalinguistically, with what Bruner calls the gift of language, its ability to turn round upon itself – these are what we should be about.

More specifically, media education reminds English how important the moving image is in contemporary culture. It also reminds us that a full engagement with the moving image demands production as well as analysis. Nayana, Ayi, Fatima and Sophie don't just use digital video – they learn how to set up and film shots, and how to edit their film in ways closely analogous to the processes through which they edited their poems. In doing so, they build a performance of self and language which points in one direction towards some exam question about the poetic word; but in another direction towards a world where such performances really have the cultural value that, too often, schools can only thinly simulate.

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