

A polyglot writer is always weaving carpets:

A talk about linguistic hybrids with Sabira Ståhlberg

Marianna Deganutti and Sabira Ståhlberg

An interview is an exciting opportunity to delve into how writers incorporate multiple languages into their work and above all how they mix them. This process is particularly interesting in an author such as Dr. Sabira Ståhlberg, one of the most polyglot writers in the world, whose work showcases a remarkable range of multilingual strategies. These strategies evolve from the subtle, hidden forms in her debut novel, *Molnvandraren/Pilvivaeltaja*¹ to the openly multilingual practices of her recent poetry and story collections: *Polyglotta Sabirica*.² *Wan Sun* (Anthropocene),³ *MoonSoon mišmaş* (multilingual brains, food and oceans),⁴ *tauray* (script-switching),⁵ *Balalar of imperier – Children of Empires*,⁶ *Desert/ed Trail* (lost languages in the heart of Asia),⁷ *Multilengual kreativ riting*,⁸ or *AllþaBeet* (polyglot writer's kitchen).⁹ These works incorporate sometimes more than fifty languages including English, German, French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Finnish, Estonian, Hungarian and many Finno-Ugric languages, Swedish and other Scandinavian languages, Greek, Romanian, Albanian, Bulgarian, Russian and several more Slavic and Balkan languages, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Turkish, Tatar, Uyghur and a wide range of Turkic languages,

¹ Sabira Ståhlberg, *Molnvandraren* (Swedish) & *Pilvivaeltaja* (Finnish) (Basam Books, 2006).

² Sabira Ståhlberg, *Polyglotta Sabirica* (Lecti Book Studio, 2015). German translation *Polyglorica+* (Hochroth, 2017); English translation *Polyglotta Sabirica englisch* (Lecti Book Studio 2017).

³ Sabira Ståhlberg, *Wan Sun* (Bokpil 2021).

⁴ Sabira Ståhlberg, *MoonSoon mišmaş* (Colorit rf, Loom/Mool series, 2023).

⁵ Sabira Ståhlberg, *tauray* (Colorit rf, 2025).

⁶ Sabira Ståhlberg, 'Balalar of imperier – Children of Empires', *Journal of Literary Multilingualism*, 1 (2023), pp. 294–299.

⁷ Sabira Ståhlberg, "Desert/ed Trail: A Journey" into Unknown, Forgotten and Lost Languages in Eurasia' in *Code-Switching in Arts*, ed. by Deganutti, Domokos and Mudriczki, (L'Harmattan-Károli Books, 2023), pp. 223-234.

⁸ Sabira Ståhlberg, *Multilengual kreativ riting*, in Domokos and Deganutti, *Literary code-switching and beyond* (L'Harmattan-Károli Books, 2023), pp. 199-206.

⁹ Sabira Ståhlberg, 'AllþaBeet', in *Multimodal Code-switching, Orpheus Noster*, 16.3, 2024, pp. 97-111.

Mongolian, Tungus languages, multiple Southeast Asian and Pacific languages, minority and endangered languages, pidgin and creole, invented words and expressions, and historical forms of modern languages as well as ancient and extinct languages such as Latin, Sanskrit, Cuman, Khitan or Jürchen.

In all these works, code-switching and code-mixing are the norm rather than the exception, and it should not come as a surprise even to find languages written in one or more different scripts than the commonly used ones for a specific language. Often Dr. Ståhlberg's use of multiple languages becomes so interwoven that it is impossible to pinpoint a single dominant language or underlying structure. In these cases, the languages simply blend together freely and creatively with the result of creating linguistic hybrids. In this conversation I invite Dr. Ståhlberg to disclose her sophisticated – in her own words, 'wild and unbound' – multilingual cosmos. This interview tackles some key aspects of her literary production spanning the resources, influences and challenges of a multilingual poetics, linguistic choices, the presence or absence of a matrix language, literary hybridism and the author's relationship with the reader.

1. MD: At the beginning of your literary career, *Molnvandraren* (Swedish) and *Pilvivaeltaja* (Finnish) was written simultaneously in two languages, but published in separate volumes. However, it did not include the remarkable linguistic diversity your subsequent literary and literary-artistic production openly displays. This trend – from less to more visible multilingual practices – is also evident in other authors, such as James Joyce, who switched from the *Dubliners*' relatively homogeneous language to the *Finnegans Wake*'s multilingual explosion. How do you explain the progressive incorporation of more languages in your literary production, and also that your artworks feature an increasing number of scripts and tongues?



A polyglot art picture on multimodality by Sabira Ståhlberg, created for the anthology *Code-Switching in Arts*¹⁰.

SaS: There is one main reason for this change: finding the courage to finally break out from the common social norm and nationalism-based focus on monolingualism as the only possible way to exist in this world. The process was not progressive but a terribly bumpy road with several wrong turns, and many external factors and conscious choices contributed to this development. Only around the mid-2010s I felt safe to raise my polyglot sails, having gained enough writing and creative writing teaching experience to explore languages and creativity in new ways. Writing skills are not a divine gift that falls from the skies; they are developed through writing, more writing, and experimenting. Writing is inspiration but also a craft which has to be learned, trained and carried out regularly.

In my early writings, publishers refused manuscripts with ‘too many’ other language elements, so I had to hide these elements and foreign words and expressions went undercover. This problem was solved around 2014, when I established a new publishing company with some colleagues. I could publish in any language and as multilingually as I wanted.

¹⁰ Marianna Deganutti, Johanna Domokos and Judit Mudriczki, *Code-Switching in Arts* (L’Harmattan-Károli Books, 2023).

On the personal level, I was still struggling with identity issues and bullying, xenophobia and discrimination traumas when I wrote the novel *Cloud Wanderer*. I was born into a multilingual and multicultural family in a society with very few Others. I had tried hard since early childhood to fit in and adapt to the surrounding linguistic and behavioural models, yet failing miserably: I was rejected by all groups I should have the right to belong to because of family background. I was perceived as an Other by all and belonged nowhere. During my research for the novel and talks with others in similar situations after its publication, I realised that I am multilingual and multicultural and have always lived in diversity. Writing the novel turned my earlier perspectives inside out and revealed that I could – and already did – live happily with all my multiple languages and cultures. I was free and could choose any identities or definitions myself, if I wanted to. I did not need to ‘belong’ and limit myself to a single language or culture, group or society, or try to fit into any narrow norms and petrified models established by others.

The third reason for using more languages in my writing is purely political. Since the 2010s, there has been a lot of absurd and inane talk about multicultural societies, mostly serving populist goals. I decided to counteract these trends by showing through my writings that multilingualism and multiculturalism are perfectly natural and normal.

2. MD: In your poems you employ a huge number of languages which could hardly be counted. The languages you use differ in their phonetics, morphology, semantics and syntax; they belong to widely different language families; some of them are ancient, lost or endangered, and they employ different scripts and writing systems. You also include dialects, pidgin, creole, invented words and expressions, slang, and other varieties of languages. What are the sources of your multilingual writing?

SaS: For topics – life itself is my main inspiration both in terms of topics and languages; the world, events, people, natural and human environments, reading widely and passionately, audiovisual materials... and insights. For style – I am inspired by extensive reading of a great variety of literature in multiple languages, even in languages I have never learned. Entering into

a new language dimension means to discover lots of things about the language and to train the brain to analyse, catch meanings and deconstruct words, phrases and concepts, among many other aspects. I also listen a lot to people, radio, music, etc., and I like to talk with people everywhere.

In my everyday life I play with languages all the time, often stumbling over linguistic similarities and coincidences, inventing funny combinations and new words, combining languages or parts of words from different languages, using a word which sounds similar instead of the word in the language I am talking, and de- and reconstructing words, phrases and common expressions. It is a constantly developing play with languages, and fortunately I have multilingual people around me who are doing the same to different degrees. My brain is all the time actively producing language, toying with and breaking rules. Funny words and expressions are continuously popping up. It is even more enjoyable when I communicate with someone who can answer in the same way, mixing, combining, finding or coming up with new meanings... In short, my daily input-output and language processing are the foundation for my multilingual writings.

3. MD: Writers such as Rabelais, Shakespeare, Twain, Swift, Dante, Njegoš and many others are considered wordsmiths of the language they contributed to create. Some of the words or expressions they introduced were simply invented, some loanwords, others were portmanteau and neologisms generated by hybridization. For instance, one of your poems is entitled “Einleitanzung”, which derives from the German word “Einleitung” (Introduction) plus the verb “tanzen” (to dance)¹¹. Have you been inspired by other poets or writers who forged linguistic hybridizations, neologisms and portmanteau?

SaS: Certainly, and I think any writer who reads a lot cannot help being influenced by other writers. I could provide a long list of archaic, ancient, classical, marginal, forgotten and modern writers whose language have reverberated with me linguistically, some far more than these most famous

¹¹ Sabira Ståhlberg, *Wan Sun* 3.

ones. My main inspiration for hybridization comes from reading a huge variety of literature in various languages and formats, and watching and listening to audiovisual materials in lots of languages, all of which reflect diverse cultures and time periods. Besides novels, short stories and poems, diaries, letters, songs, epitaphs and other writings by travellers, authors, artists and other keen eyewitnesses from different periods, who write multilingually to different degrees, are a treasure trove for a multilingual writer. I often pick up words, ideas and expressions from books, poems or other texts, films, music, theatre or other performative arts, and create my own hybrids, often introducing new words or expressions into my everyday life.

4. MD: Let us now focus more closely on your literary production and the processes shaping it. Do some languages tend to work prevalently together?

SaS: For texts which should be understood without a dictionary, I tend to combine certain languages from the same family, for example English-German-Dutch-Nordic languages, such as in the poem *Winging it*:

Fjärran gök kallar. [Swedish]
 Ich klettere auf das Dach, [German]
 spread my wings, [English] huutaen. [Finnish]

Moss [English] eet de tegels – [Dutch]
 smuldrende [Danish] murstein [Norwegian] faller på [Swedish, Norwegian] gaten. [Norwegian]
 Transience of things? [English]

[Far cuckoo calling.
 I climb up onto the roof,
 spread my wings, shouting.

Moss eats the tiles –
 crumbling bricks drop on the street.
 Transience of things?]¹²

¹² *Wan Sun, 22.*

The word forms are fortunately often close to each other in related languages (Finnish is here the cuckoo's egg). But mostly I enjoy mixing and experimenting with languages without restraint, except when I have a specific goal in mind, political, linguistic, social, cultural or other. In the Anthropocene collection *Wan Sun* there are several poems with obvious political-linguistic messages, which directly influenced my selection of languages. They also carry heavy meanings, such as in *Nur* – *Only* about the Lop Nor (or Nur, Mongolian for 'lake'), a region used for decades by PR China for nuclear tests. The English 'translation' is actually a separate poem. In *Nur* it explains the words in Loptuq (spoken by the people who were displaced and then forcibly assimilated), Uyghur (oppressed in China) and the crude comments and exclamations in Simplified Chinese script, which refer to the state, its brutal policies, and majority attitudes toward minorities. The deleted words reveal what has been irreversibly destroyed.

توگە	魔鬼	沙
قۇم	核弹	
چوپان	湖底	星星
baliq qamış بۇرە	toshqan қоян	түлкә توگۇر
سازلىق	晚了!	yolwas
ھازىر ئۇلار:	忍受 生存 坚持. 谁在乎?	

[Camels are gone. Traces wiped away by devils, roaring sand.
 Brilliant fungi shatter skies, raining ions, shake dunes awake.
 Epilated bottom scintillates, pondering star competitors.
 Turn back, you fish reed wolf hare fox boar tiger!
 Even the swamp is better, but it is too late!
 Now they say: you can endure survive subsist persist
 and not go extinct (honestly, who cares about you?).¹³

Language choices depend on the poem's topic, aim and format and also on which words or structures I happen to like or which are uppermost in my mind at the moment of writing. These often originate in things I have recently read,

¹³ *Wan Sun*, 36.

talked or listened to, or new languages I am absorbing. Language elements are continuously being processed during creation and sometimes I change words or expressions even moments before publishing to make them more suitable to what I want to say.

I try consciously not to get stuck in specific language combinations. In my first book *Polyglotta Sabirica* there are more poems containing English, German, French and other European languages, because I was worried about readers mainly in Europe and North America not understanding. With time and experience, I set my linguistic boat free and simply provide self-translations.

5. MD: Do you usually privilege certain languages to address certain topics or are languages completely unrelated to the topics?

SaS: When a topic ‘requires’ a language, meaning that the topic has logical or conscious connections to specific languages, I use those languages, like in the poem *Nur* above, or *Seahorse*¹⁴, where I put in languages from countries which continue to fish for seahorses despite global efforts to protect the animals. Or then I use some complete other language – just to create a contrast and shake the reader awake, to ask: why do I use another language or script than the “obvious” one for you? My language choices are mostly conscious, but there is also a serious influence of subconscious: if I have watched a film, read a book or article, or listened to something interesting, I might have a preference for a certain language or connect a specific language with a specific topic or situation in my mind. Also, in certain languages some things are said ‘better’, that is they mirror more clearly the issues or emotions I want to express. Then I choose those languages – or if I think another language might do as well, I transfer the expression into another language as a calque, direct translation, in another script, mixed, or some other form.

¹⁴ *Wan Sun*, 39. The Seahorse poem has been discussed by Johanna Domokos, ‘On semantic and semiotic multilingualism in earlier and latest works of Sabira Ståhlberg and Tzveta Sofronieva’, *The Romanian Journal for Baltic and Nordic Studies*, 13.1 (2021), pp. 29-46.

Then there is the audio aspect: when a word or sentence in one language sounds or echoes 'nicer' than another – I read all poems aloud several times, in the time-honoured way of poets – I might exchange a logical choice for an unrelated one. I often do illogical, random choices of languages, just because I feel and fancy a word in another language suits better. My answer is therefore yes, there are certain languages chosen for their logical connection with certain topics, but no, there are lots of illogical, unconnected choices, too.

MD: You just now mentioned the audio aspect of your poems. What is the role played by sounds in your work?

SaS: Essential. If in poetry or prose the sounds do not fit, if there is no melody, no rhythm, or they are disrupted, I edit the text until the sounds echo in the way I feel is right. This is not to say that sounds have to be only beautiful or like a sweet song. Sounds can be ugly or horrible if required. Just like sounds all around us are of different character, neutral or causing enjoyment or irritability, the sounds I use vary widely but they all carry information and messages in addition to (non-)aesthetic aspects. A poem's sounds have to resound with the reader or listener directly and quickly, so they have to be very clear to catch for the ear. Prose contains another kind of sound system, because of diverse voices in dialogues, and there are more possibilities due to the length of phrases and expressions to play with rhythms, pitch, tones, speed, etc.

This sensitivity to sounds has been developed not only through writing, but also through musical activities. I have trained my ears through sound engineering, freelancing for radio stations and editing speech and music recordings. I play several instruments and sing since childhood and often think of poems accompanied by or played with a certain musical instrument or several together. Some poems are 'flute' poetry, others are 'drum', 'zither' or 'ukulele' poetry... music is always present and I listen to all kinds from various corners of the world.

6. MD: Do you think that the material qualities of the poetical tool – the way poetry looks on the page, the way it sounds, the way it engages with the reader – might facilitate linguistic hybridization? If yes, how?

SaS: On one hand, yes: in comparison with prose, with shorter lines, more sonorous choices of words and expressions, and the traditional freedom of poets to invent new forms and play with language, the poetry format offers an easy way to create hybridizations: compare for example macaronic poetry or (post-)modernists. Yet, some hybridization might disappear when performing, for instance when reading aloud a poem written in another script than the expected or “usual”, while the visual element is not simultaneously shown to the audience. On the other hand, it is a question of the author’s skill. It took some years to develop my polyglot writing before I could hybridize prose as well and be satisfied with it. Now I do not see any difference between my poetic and prose hybrids, but I had to do quite a lot of writing, thinking, exploring and experimenting to reach this point.

As a multilingual writer, I am constantly on the move in terms of languages. I am pondering daily on new kinds of tools, expressions and formats. When writing, to choose the ‘right’ ones often feels like a question of intuition and personal preference, but each choice is the fruit of a long maturing process in my mind. If this or that tool is the right one for the reader nobody knows, because there are very different readers and they all read in individual ways. But the writer herself has to be satisfied with all aspects of the poem, including the visual aspect, audio effects, contents, etc. before publishing.

7. MD: In your works we find both the alternation and the hybridization of different codes. When do you use linguistic hybridization – meant as a new linguistic unit deriving from at least two different languages – and when code-switching – meant as the alternation of different languages?

SaS: For a reader, code-switching may be easier to grasp, because it only requires a dictionary, while hybridization also requires knowledge of the language(s) and maybe the scripts, and quite a lot of imagination. English or German written in Cyrillic script, for instance, can be a great challenge for a

reader who is not familiar with the script; for instance in *Wan Sun* the English word “Freedom” is written in Cyrillic (Фрийдом) (*Wan Sun*, back cover), and I have written several poems in mixed or what readers would perceive as ‘wrong’ scripts.

I am not sure that the border between code-switching and hybridization in my poems can be clearly defined anymore, because I like to blur the lines between them. In my first efforts to write multilingually, I used more code-switching, but in my later works I more often hybridize or combine many methods, thus providing a serious challenge for researchers to disentangle. The choice depends much on the poem and the linguistic or thematic issue I want to bring to the reader’s attention. I often use both or mix them together in the same line, expression or even the same word. I am always curious to see what happens when they are thrown into the same pot and the tastes of the different ingredients blend. Usually interesting language dimensions open up in this text ‘cooking’ process.

8. MD: In your poems, hybridizations work on different linguistic levels. We find neologisms, languages written in different scripts than the conventional ones, suffixes, grammars, additions or removals of letters, new compounds or pronunciation of a language applied to another. In one of your poems, 空 ‘Void’¹⁵, you use basic English written in Romanian script mixed with Japanese Latinization and Japanese pronunciation. Do you think that hybridization corresponds more to a process of breaking the conventional rules or as the fusion/incorporation of different codes?

SaS: Hybridization is, in my view, both about breaking rules *and* combinations of codes, and I would add a further aspect: *playing and creating*. Playing includes the element of experimenting, feeling free and safe to try out different possibilities, building, breaking and demolishing and then constructing again in a different way, modifying, testing, keeping if it functions well or discarding if not, and having no limitations to materials or tools, except one’s own

¹⁵ *Wan Sun*, 50.

imagination. The borders of imagination can be pushed probably into infinity. I have not reached the limits of my linguistic universe yet.

Rules for language and poetry have been created by others, and I know them, but if they could create rules, so can I: in the process of writing polyglot poetry, the poet is the creator of languages. Rules and codes from the outside world may or might not apply depending on many factors. It is my inside world that counts and within which my poetry is formed. Yet, nothing is fixed in my writing. Least of all do I use any specific methodology, except if I want to for example test a theory or academic hypothesis about multilingual writing, like in the poem *Balalar of imperier – Children of Empires* where I applied a new theory about gradual code-switching. My way of writing is unsystematic, unpredictable and undomesticated, in other words: wild, and always multilayered with many meanings, codes and associations.

MD: How would you define gradual code-switching? What specific methodology did you want to test in *Balalar of imperier – Children of Empires*?

Gradual code-switching is an effort to identify degrees of code-switching in a text or poem. It starts with zero code-switching, where codes are embedded and hardly visible, and moves through levels of increasing code-switching up to having no discernable matrix language. The theory was first published by Johanna Domokos¹⁶ and then refined in *Literary Code-Switching and Beyond*¹⁷. I wanted to see if it was possible to write a poem which reflected those levels, increasing the degree of code-switching with each step. It worked but in the process I could map out several more aspects than just code-switching which need to be taken into account when discussing polyglot writing. Hybridization is one of them.

9. MD: Do you consider hybridization more as a process:

¹⁶ Sabira Ståhlberg, *Endangered Literature: Essays on Translingualism, Interculturality, and Vulnerability* (L'Harmattan-Károli Books, 2018).

¹⁷ Johanna Domokos and Marianna Deganutti, *Literary code-switching and beyond* (L'Harmattan-Károli Books, 2023).

- A) which expands languages by finding new ways of expressing ideas and identifying new concepts?
- B) which reshapes the boundaries between different tongues?
- C) which reminds us that languages and words are not as fixed and crystallized as we usually think?
- D) which rejuvenates our perceptions and unhinge conventions?
- E) of linguistic creativity and a way to create one's own idiolect?

SaS: All of them. Languages are not something fixed, limited or conventional as is commonly believed; they change constantly both on the individual and social levels. If we place norms and rules before reality, we will find ourselves very far from a writer's creative universe. Through hybridization I can express more than in a single language or only with code-switching (A). The boundaries between different languages are mental constructs. When I hybridize, I do not only reshape and transform them but often make away with limitations completely (B).

The same goes for C: if we flip our learned and ingrained concepts about 'foreign' and 'native' languages and 'fixed' rules, the other side reveals that they are illusions we try to cling to, mostly to satisfy a need for order, structure and meaning. Chaos can be intimidating at first but when one gets used to it, lots of possibilities and ways to explore open up (D). I do not see why I would need to create an idiolect, that is too simple and not challenging enough. On the contrary – I try to break out of anything I have done before with each new writing process. I am creating fresh poetic polyglot language at every step I take and with every poem or text I write (E).

10. MD: In some of your poems, it is possible to identify a matrix or dominant language, in others not, such as in the poem dedicated to orchids, in which you employ Turkish, Tatar, Uzbek, Qazaq, Turkmen and other Turkic languages, Chinese and Japanese, yet there is no dominant tongue:

Bize 不給 Latince.

Біздің 名字 muhim emas.

Бир гана 水 ve ыақтылык.

Күнге қарай 脸 yüzleşmeliyiz.

Karanlık のみ vermes içindir,

һәм алар 很少 gülümserler.

Don't give us Latin.

Our names are not important.

Just water, and light.

We must face the sun.

Darkness is only for worms,

and they seldom smile.

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How is it to write without a matrix language (and therefore a dominant set of linguistic rules to be followed)?

SaS: A matrix language can but does not necessarily have to push the text in a certain direction. Obviously it offers security, stability and structure to both writers and readers: it is easier for the writer to follow regulations when writing (a straight road); the writer provides readers with something they can understand (traffic signs and a paved road) and digest without much extra effort, and readers can follow a linguistic path they probably already have at least some idea about (driving safely on known roads).

But I do not need this safety net anymore. I want to take my readers for a wild ride to linguistic and thematic places they have never been before. I even modify a matrix language, including its grammar, to suit my goals. If I decide not to have any matrix language, I simply work out an idea simultaneously employing and combining several languages and structures. Many of my

¹⁸ Wan Sun, 15.

poems appear more or less spontaneously, I often hear the lines before I write them down, and words or expressions from different languages find their places by themselves.

It is also possible to create other structures than using a matrix language. In this poem, the Turkic languages provide the rhythm, the orchid flowers on both sides of the stem – the East Asian languages in the middle. The poem is also graphic in addition to containing a musical beat, alliteration, grammar play and messages about human-nature relationships, among other things.

I have never been much for following rules, yet I know that grammar is important to learn: I can only break rules if I know them. I have studied many dozens of grammars and enjoy exploring the structure of a new language, comparing and incorporating it into my motley carpet of languages, so that it can contribute to the creation of innovative combinations. Listening to people speaking in any language, one can clearly hear that they do not talk according to the book. People often speak creatively and bend grammar according to their needs of expression. This is what I do to a high degree.

When a matrix language is lacking, or even when I have one, as a polyglot writer I happily employ my 'fool's freedom', *Narrenfreiheit*, to modify all levels of language. Having no matrix language does not mean I do not have any linguistic rules at all – the difference is that I make them up myself, often on the go, and they might change at any moment. Instead of fixed rules, my regulations are unwritten and usually not even completely conscious. They are principles created for a goal – expression of a certain feeling, idea, atmosphere, etc. I change my principles suddenly and unexpectedly, like the rhythms in a Balkan melody, according to context, sounds, rhythm, pitch, voice, emotions, taste or simply feeling. I also put them into play together with other elements and layers in the text, and they are naturally transformed by this interaction. Naturally, not seldom I decide to skip rules altogether just for the sake of sound or visual aspect.

11. MD: It is not uncommon, in your poems, for the English language to be the matrix language and at the same time be hybridized by other tongues.

Here there are three examples of English, written according to different non-English pronunciations and using transliterations from various languages, taken from the poems *All är en är ghee*, *Bulut* and 空 'Void' respectively.

a. snizin' in de mornin' san is ap hav to rice runnin' nous
lou enerzhi bulb klaud kolor or heyzy fogi kover on skays¹⁹

b. triängjulär ajländ inn aasurr skajj
år iss itt de sii?²⁰

c. Painu buranciu poințu isuțuvarudusu:
uorudusu șudu bī sukețırudu raikku kounusu.
Gurou nyū uonusu iiciu dōnu.²¹

What tools could a reader use to decode something which might at first appear incomprehensible or only semicomprehensible?

SaS: Empty the mind first of all pre-conceived ideas about how a text should look and sound. *Visual scanning*: identify the script and non-standard letters. Find any identifiable words. *Read aloud*: identify more language(s) and words. *Explore*: find out about pronunciation and check unknown words; read again aloud. *Test*: if some words still defy understanding, write them in different ways in various languages and phonetically. *Guess*: always a good method. It can help find a solution. Our brains are capable of coming close to solutions – or finding new solutions – when guessing. And finally: *enjoy* and accept that you cannot understand everything, but that you can enjoy the poem also without grasping all elements.

12. MD: Lack of understanding is usually conceived as a negative aspect. Is there any advantage in acquiring only a superficial perception of the multilingual amalgam present in a text?

¹⁹ *Wan Sun*, 54.

²⁰ *Wan Sun*, 16.

²¹ *Wan Sun*, 50.

SaS: Yes, absolutely, every small piece is important and meaningful. Readers tell me they enjoy discovering even one word they can recognize. But why should 'not understanding' be something negative? Because it makes readers feel insecure? The failure to grasp meaning, to me, is rather a way to gain understanding and to explore various possibilities. I like this state of not understanding, because I know that it will open up new dimensions. Why give up easily – and miss lots of opportunities to learn and develop? Even if a reader picks up only a small crumb of a text, it can trigger insights and questions which were not there before, like in a haiku poem – three short lines unfold a whole universe. We should not underestimate readers and their language resources and competences. A reader could get interested, too, in finding out more about the topics or languages and to start working with the text until it is more or less completely unravelled. That can be very satisfactory, like solving a puzzle and finally seeing the whole picture.

13. MD: What is the role played by obscurity being part of the message conveyed by the hybrid?

SaS: Obscurity is always present with hybrids, but hybridization can also be a mechanism to trigger it – or to introduce clarity. Paradoxically, obscurity must always contain clarity and vice versa. I have to be clear about my message to be able to obscure it; covering up shortcomings in a text through hybridization does not work. I use hybridization to discover new aspects and to create space for expanding my own and the readers' understanding and meanings. Obscurity is not necessarily something bad, because with and within it new understanding can be formed. The challenging and fun part of hybrid writing is to try to invent various ways of conveying both the *sayable* and the *unsayable*, the *manifest* and the *hidden*, and leave to the readers to find out the rest for themselves. Readers sometimes surprise me when they have discovered something I have not spotted myself in my poems.

14. MD: Indeed, a reader might understand something which is not expressed in the text. How do you play with ambiguity?

SaS: Every reader creates their own experience and interprets my texts in their personal way. I cannot and do not want to control that, but as a writer, I have a responsibility: to create space and scope for imagination and to use language(s) in a way which is enriching and electrifying. Ambiguity definitely belongs to multilingual writing and is one of the crucial elements. The same word or similar words might have different meanings in diverse languages, so using those words will provide scope for many possible interpretations and imaginations. This *kaleido*-scope is one of the aspects I like most in polyglot poetry – shake the poem and it will change meaning, form, aspect, sound, thoughts, views...

Ambiguity does not need special attention or techniques, it appears by itself, except when I want to make something very obvious to the reader. Then I mark it through changing script or put it into a context or hybridize it so that it shows more or less distinctly. Otherwise I just leave any ambiguities to float around and they will appear or not appear in the minds of readers.

15. MD: Are there hybrids which are more successful than others?

SaS: Yes, but it depends for whom and what we mean by 'successful'. The poet might find something successful one reader does not catch at all, while another reader thinks it a failure and not understandable – or the opposite, a reader might find it a stroke of genius. Some hybrids appear spontaneously, but others require time to prepare so that they become understandable not only to the poet but also to the reader. Using hybridization wisely means that the poet knows when to use it and when not to, and for what ends. Hybridization should not be used as a fancy tool to cover up flaws or lack of depth in poetry, or prose either. I am not a wise user of hybrids, but I also do not try cover up any mistakes using them. I often put in very personal or fuzzy hybrids, despite knowing that maximum one other person in this world will understand what I am referring to. But I trust that even a reader who does not share my specific story or insights has experienced something similar which will awaken emotions or memories. I

trust that because we are all human, we have many things in common, and therefore readers are able to connect with my texts.

16. MD: Literary hybridization, especially in the past, has not always been positively accepted by scholars. What could be seen as an interference, for instance, could be also conceived as an error. Where do you set the threshold between the two?

SaS: Scholars are often more conservative than readers. I do not set a threshold, but of course my hybrid texts are often over-corrected by well-meaning editors who think that *I hāv meid mantipl typrning errors*. Errors can be deliberate or involuntary but if they function in a polyglot text or poem, they should be left in peace. The problem of academic research on literature is that it has for a couple of centuries followed nationalist policies too closely and missed the fact that language and creative writing are much more than a small paddock with a fence, where rules apply and you can only run in circles. We polyglot writers are galloping madly through the endless steppe, climbing mountains, diving into rivers and seas, and roaming at will in deep forests.

A creative person, a writer, a polyglot writer, always has interferences, inferences, errors and all kinds of other “strange” or “non-standard” elements in their writings, and that is absolutely the way it should be! Even when talking in one language, those who think they are monolinguals have interferences from other languages, dialects, slang, etc., and nobody talks or writes without errors. That is why I also let spontaneous ‘mistakes’ remain in texts, although I did not plan them, as they add to significances and multiple meanings. Many funny and interesting hybridizations actually appear from mistyping or writing a word and thinking of another.

17. MD: A provocation: In nature, hybrids could be sterile. Mules, for instance, are a sterile hybrid of a male donkey and a female horse. Is a hybrid or mixed literary language sterile – in the sense that it cannot further ‘reproduce’?

SaS: Did any of the ‘classical’ multilingual writers imagine their words would be used today by you and me? Some certainly, but most probably not. I wonder –

why should hybrids be *required* to reproduce, when much of literary language itself does not reproduce? Where should it reproduce, in spoken or written language? Why do scholars focus only on ideas like progress or efficiency, usability or reproduction, when our human existence evolves and revolves around constantly playing, experimenting, trial and error, and trying out different ways of doing things?

History shows that hybrid and mixed languages in literature, songs and through other channels have contributed words and expressions to different languages. Nobody can predict exactly if and why a neologism or an expression from a book, film, internet or other media will be picked up by speakers, and for how long they are going to be used. Also, words and expressions may be used only by certain groups like readers of specific books or film or game fans. Hybrids are all around us, not only on billboards or in TV advertisements. Nobody even blinks because they are so common. Hybrid language is in fact as natural as language which is supposed to follow a set of rules.

For a writer the question is: does it need to reproduce at all, or do we just produce it because it is a function of human brains to want to play and create? Do we need to think of reproduction when writing? In my view, no. The multilingual writer must focus on being creative and whatever happens afterwards is not the writer's concern.

18. MD: In the famous rabbit-duck illusion, you either see a duck or a rabbit. Once you realize the duality of the image, you may also see a 'rabbit-duck'. How do you make the rabbit coincide with the duck linguistically speaking?

SaS: In my writings, there are also elephants, penguins, frogs and bugs, and all kinds of other animals and plants. In polyglot poetry, the number of linguistic and cultural, environmental, zoological and botanical aspects far exceed the binary two. How my capacity to write and create with increasing complexity linguistically and in terms of multilayered content has developed can be observed especially between *Polyglotta Sabirica* and *Wan Sun*: I set out to explore languages and writing multilingually in new ways, including audio and video, and to *MoonSoon mişmaş* I added language art, cooking recipes and

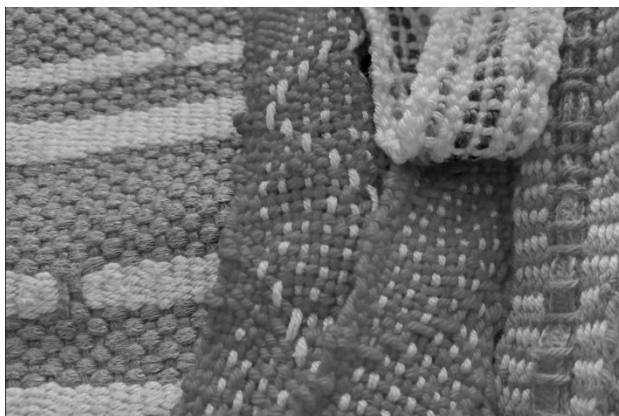
other formats and ways of dealing with languages. In *tautay*, I processed my relationship with various scripts.

Poems are not only visual, but also contain a package of audio and visual effects (this becomes especially visible in my poetry videos), linguistic choices and contents which reflect not only languages, cultures, societies, politics, economy, environments and other dimensions, but also the writer's knowledge, attitudes, viewpoints, experiences and much more, including many personal experiences and insights, which will remain concealed to readers except to those who have been present or have learned about the background story from the writer. When a reader enjoys (or dismantles) the poem, the reader's understanding depends not only on linguistic, cultural, social and other skills and competences, but also on attitudes, experiences, knowledge, personality, imagination and much more.

A polyglot poem could be seen as an intriguing, multicoloured, -patterned and -layered silk carpet, woven with diverse techniques, containing millions or even billions of tiny fine filaments or fibres and knots creating the whole. When you brush the carpet in one direction, it shows a different picture than when you brush it in another direction. Your understanding of it depends from which angle you are looking at it, your knowledge and experience of carpets, carpet weaving techniques, and how your mind works. This becomes especially apparent when I am confronting readers with languages, writing systems, cultures and history they have never heard about, like in *Desert/ed Trail: A Journey into Unknown, Forgotten and Lost Languages in Eurasia*. It did not require much time to write – inner Eurasia is one of the scholarly fields I have spent a lifetime exploring – but readers need not only to get acquainted with totally new languages, concepts and writing, but also to take in much novel historical information which potentially could change their world view.

As a poet, I can only weave my poetic and prose carpets as well as I am able to, and readers will discover, recognise, pick up and take home what they are able to. Some of my carpets are flat-weave *kilims*, embroidered, hooked or braided rugs or *trasmattor* (rag rugs), while others turn into complex silk carpets and even large tapestries. My goal is always to weave texts that readers can return to again and again, brush in different directions, and each time discover new nuances and insights.

The relationship between handicrafts – I am knitting, crocheting and weaving real things, too – and writing should be explored more, as there is a close connection: implementing and inventing complex handicraft patterns are reflected in my writing, and my writing influences my creativity in other realms. One could say all my books are woven, the processes are so similar: I make decisions about materials, threads, pattern, warp and weft before starting to write. Then I weave line after line, seeing how the text grows in my hands, until I can see the whole pattern, which often surprises me although I thought I had it planned out in detail from the beginning.



Weavings by Sabira Ståhlberg

19. MD: Bakhtin says that ‘languages throw light on each other: one language can, after all, see itself only in the light of another language’²². Is looking at languages through hybridization one of the most effective ways to understand them?

SaS: The mirroring effect of one to one sounds is too limited. We need language to understand language, but we should not forget that a language first and foremost reflects itself. A speaker does not necessarily need another language to understand the workings of their language. When more than one language is involved, the languages mirror and throw light on each other, and translation and interpretation help highlight differences and similarities. They interact because speakers interact. But languages interact also even within one person.

²² Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. by M. Holquist (University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 12.

If we look at hybridization not from the monolingual point of view or even through the bi-noculars of bi-lingualism, but from the multilingual point of view, seeing and understanding languages through code-switching, hybridization and other linguistic concepts become the norm. We know today that the majority of the world's population always has been and is multilingual. Hybridization is extremely common and used daily by millions, billions of people in speech and writing; it is one of the ways languages change and develop. A monolingual view distorts the question of hybridization and then it might look as a 'privilege' or a more effective way to understand languages, but this is an illusion. If we see hybridization as habitual I think we are closer to reality, and then the questions of higher or lower efficiency and mirroring become redundant.

20. MD: Do you think that linguistic hybridization could be seen as a meaning accumulator?

SaS: Hybridization certainly increases the possibilities and amount of meanings – it is like augmented reality: we see within reality other layers of significances and connotations. But it depends on the author's writing skills and complexity of thinking how much meaning a text will contain – quite independently of the amount of languages or hybridization.

In recent years, I observe an increasing amount of literature without meaning, also multilingual literature containing fancy use of words to tell threadbare stories in a standardized way. There is less multilayered literature now, for several reasons which must be discussed elsewhere. I prefer intricacy, depth, broadness, and multiple dimensions. I cannot write in this 'modern', in fact commercial, mass consumption, 'the way literature should be written today in order to sell' manner. I just *have to* put in many levels of meaning in anything I write, otherwise I am not satisfied. I use hybridization automatically or consciously to add further levels, which make my poems and writings too complex for a general public, yet hopefully more rewarding for those who take the time and effort to discover various layers and aspects. I am writing for those who, like me, enjoy a good adventure on all levels including the linguistic ones, and elaborate patterns in carpets.

MD: Thank you, Sabira!