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Foreigners and Foreignness

Figure 2 Wallace's Non-Native Dialects.

Distinguishing the Not-American

Almost all of Wallace's foreigners maintain non-native speech patterns, generally presented in fairly broad stereotypes. When taken on their own, each of these portrayals may seem like a crude caricature, even racist, but Wallace's portrayals of US ethnic dialects and white regional working-class US dialects are equally broad (as will be discussed in later chapters). On a practical level, Wallace seemed to be striving for maximal distinctiveness for all the identities represented. On a more philosophical level, I believe he was deliberately trying to provoke readers' language prejudices, only to then subvert these by forcing the reader into an empathetic response to the character: the stronger the initial reaction, the bigger the potential payoff.

It is a common observation in Wallace criticism¹ that one of the author's main preoccupations was with defining, representing, even cataloguing millennial "America." In a 1996 interview, Wallace said that he wanted to "do something real American, about what it's like to live in America around the millennium."² Hayes-Brady calls Wallace "self-consciously American," finding evidence for this in his naming practices and in his (mis)appropriation of elements from his American literary predecessors. Thompson³ refers to this critical lens as "Wallace-as-national-metonym."

As interested in language as he was, Wallace could not resist exploring what it means to be a dawn-of-the-twenty-first-century American in linguistic terms as well. In Wallace's world, someone who was not born in the United States can become American (or at least their children and grandchildren can), but the reverse path is apparently unthinkable. (There are no expatriate Americans encountered and Wallace's characters seldom set foot abroad, but there is a steady influx of foreigners into the United States.) There are limits to the ability to assimilate for both foreigners and ethnic "others," and Wallace's work shows that "the melting pot" is more a *loss* of community than it is a way to join a new one. Americans are portrayed as having more power and privilege than foreigners, just as whites have more than other ethnicities, but they are no happier or more successful as human beings. Wallace's white Americans are trapped in their solipsism; they do not purposefully seek encounters with and are only peripherally aware of foreign and ethnic others; Wallace seldom gave foreigners or minorities the opportunity to take center stage, but he never let readers forget about them, either.

Hayes-Brady⁴ describes a "trajectory in Wallace's work that begins with a preoccupation with language and develops into a more explicit focus on cultural systems, with language as one part of the system, finally culminating in a detailed attention to questions of politics and citizenship, which are intimately and explicitly tied to both language and culture."

She chooses to focus on gender as the main source of "alterity" in Wallace and argues that "by refusing to 'speak for' someone else, Wallace is implicitly

¹ Kiki Benzon, "'Yet Another Example of the Porousness of Certain Borders': Chaos and Realism in *Infinite Jest*," in *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, ed. David Hering (Los Angeles and Austin: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010), 101–12; Lee Konstantinou, "The World of David Foster Wallace," *Boundary 2*, 40, no. 3 (September 2013): 59–86; among others.

² Laura Miller, "The Salon Interview: David Foster Wallace," in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. Stephen J. Burn (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2012), 58–65, esp. 59.

³ Thompson, *Global Wallace*, 4.

⁴ Hayes-Brady, *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace*, 9.

assuming and privileging the identity he *does* speak for—White, American, male.” This is undeniable, but it should not be assumed that privileging that identity is celebrating it; rather, Wallace’s extreme self-consciousness provides a constant critique of the centrality of that identity.

Araya⁵ links “recurrent images of paleness” in TPK with “its implied notions about citizenship. . . . If the United States cannot be strong as a nation, Wallace seems to be asking, how can we be strong as a state? If we do not form a strong, or even viable, community when we are similar, how can we do so when we are different?” Wallace’s portrayals of dialects serve both to illustrate individual questions of identity, but also the heteroglossia that exists at the societal level. What does it mean to “sound American”? The positive aspects of linguistic diversity (making room for many voices to co-exist, showing language as a source of playfulness, creativity, and delight) are celebrated, but the multitude of voices may sometimes feel overwhelming, the voices may not easily communicate with or understand each other, and it is clearly the case that the voices do not have equal status or access.

Wallace’s foreigners have little in common with each other. They are French Canadian, German (and/or Austrian), Irish, Latin/South American, Haitian/Caribbean, African; they come to the United States for different reasons and have different status within the country. Nativization is not a necessary or inevitable goal; some want what the United States has to offer but are not willing to lose their own identities to gain it. BIHM features several brief fictions titled “Yet Another Example of the Porousness of Certain Borders,” which Boswell⁶ explains as “situations in which levels of consciousness and/or representation begin to bleed into one another.” Benzon⁷ and Jansen⁸ applied this idea (each using the “porousness of certain borders” phrase in the titles of their respective essays on *Infinite Jest*) to different kinds of systems of categorization that Wallace challenged, with Jansen focusing more narrowly on person/object distinctions and Benzon taking on “boundaries both geographical and social, . . . order and disorder” (103). Benzon’s conclusion that in Wallace’s fiction “mimeticism exists not on the level of representational ‘mirroring’—though detailed descriptions of the material world are a constitutive element,” but rather that the narrative itself “assumes the chaotic properties which pervade physical and cultural spheres” (112). I

⁵ Jorge Araya, “Why the Whiteness?: Race in *The Pale King*,” in *Critical Insights: David Foster Wallace*, ed. Philip Coleman (New York: Grey House Publishing/Salem Press, 2015), 238–51, esp. 248.

⁶ Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, 198.

⁷ Benzon, “Yet Another Example of the Porousness of Certain Borders.”

⁸ Jansen, “On the Porousness of Certain Borders.”

make a parallel argument: Wallace's dialects are not mimetic, except for the projection of his own fictional-but-realistic "Dave Wallace" voice.

The only unambiguously foreign-born character Wallace shows speaking indistinguishably from Americans is "Kenyan prorektor" Tony Nwangi at *Jest's* Enfield Tennis Academy (ETA). Tony presumably came to the United States at an early age, so this apparently native command of the language is not just realistic, it is unremarkable; indeed, neither Wallace nor anybody at ETA remarks upon it. It's possible that Audern Tallat-Kelpsa (who may be named for the Lithuanian/Soviet composer of the same surname) is another such example, although it's equally possible that he is a native-born native-US-American speaker. All that readers are told about him is that he is one of the "sub-14 male Eschatonites" (666), that he is "creepily blue-eyed" (118) and "little" (265). The extent of his direct dialogue is five short sentences that sound like all the other ETA boys: "This is early rounds. The kind they give you only two balls. Honor systems. All of a sudden there he is kertwanging on you. It happens" (118). With "foreign" names but indistinguishable speech, the line between immigrant and native is deliberately blurred.

Non-native speakers who come to the United States as adults typically do not lose all their non-native phonological patterns, whatever level of grammatical competency or idiomatic fluency they achieve. Only exceptional adult language learners are able to achieve native-like⁹ proficiency, and not all have that goal. One international graduate student Levis¹⁰ interviewed in Iowa "did not want an accent that hid her Russianness, an identity of which she was proud" (4). When characters like Gerhardt Schtitt and Rémy Marathe speak in a noticeably "non-native" way, it is not just because Wallace wanted readers to remember their origins and identities, but because *these characters* are affirming those identities. Wallace's delight in non-native linguistic patterns, his inevitable exaggeration of them, should not be misread as mockery of those patterns or of the speakers—except when readers are meant to recognize a focalizing character's racism, as when *Jest's* Randy Lenz thinks about Chinese, "Your monkey-languages' exclamatories have an explosive ricocheting sound to them. As in a component of *boing* to every word" (718).

Not all Wallace characters are quite this consciously and explicitly racist or xenophobic. Don Gately's perception of a "cheery young Pakistani M.D." who'd told him "how Teddibly Soddy he was" (912) that his mother's stroke left her permanently incapacitated is no doubt tinged with racism—Gately

⁹ Alene Moyer, "Exceptional Outcomes in L2 Phonology: The Critical Factors of Learner Engagement and Self-Regulation," *Applied Linguistics* 35, no. 4 (2014): 418–40.

¹⁰ John Levis, "Learners' Views of Social Issues in Pronunciation Learning," *Journal of Academic Language & Learning* 9, no. 1 (2015): 42–55.

is frequently offhandedly racist—but Gately also seems impressed by a foreigner who speaks such impeccable albeit accented English, one who has achieved so much more than Gately has in terms of education and professional success, even though he had to do it in a foreign language. Even in the middle of danger and crisis (the precipitating events that result in his own hospitalization), Gately notices that “Nucks really do pronounce *the* with a z” (611)—seemingly surprised and amused that the stereotype is true, but not apparently negatively judging the Canadians for their accent. For readers, this is one of many reminders that the characters’ negative views of ethnic and racial others precede any personal contact with them. Racism is more likely to cause bad social interactions than to be caused by them.

The perpetually recurring “English First” or “English Only” political movements that seek to enshrine English as official language of the United States or of individual states have rarely been openly racist and classist, with some proponents claiming to want to help immigrants as well as citizens who speak heritage languages. There is often nevertheless a clear undertone of hostility against foreigners who “don’t even try” to learn English. In a meta-analysis of research “that seeks to explain the widespread public support for restrictive language and immigration policies,” Schildkraut¹¹ finds that “the dominant influences on attitudes appear to be conceptions of American identity, education, income, partisanship, ideology, economic perceptions, and identity,” and more specifically that “different conceptions of American identity”—for example, one that prioritizes individual freedoms vs. one that prioritizes “civic republican ideals” lead to different attitudes. Rodríguez, Schwartz, and Whitbourne¹² demonstrate that “ethnic minorities felt less American than Whites and believed that, regardless of their citizenship, they are not perceived as American,” although fewer than 10 percent of respondents cite language as a key characteristic of being “American.”

Linguists have long known that “greater intolerance of immigrants (and their language ability) is attributed to lower-status speakers against whom linguistic prejudices are also strong.”¹³ For the more economically and socially privileged, mastery of foreign languages is seen as sophistication. When Hal Incandenza thinks that “modern German is better equipped to combining gerundives and prepositions than is its mongrel cousin”

¹¹ Deborah J. Schildkraut, “American Identity and Attitudes Toward Official English Policies,” *Political Psychology* 24, no. 3 (2003): 469–99, esp. 470.

¹² Liliana Rodríguez, Seth J. Schwartz, and Susan Krauss Whitbourne, “American Identity Revisited: The Relation Between National, Ethnic, and Personal Identity in a Multiethnic Sample of Emerging Adults,” *Journal of Adolescent Research* 25, no. 2 (2010): 324–49, esp. 325.

¹³ Niedzielski and Preston, *Folk Linguistics*, 145.

(*Jest* 900), it is intended as a sign of his erudition, as well as an explicit reminder that English, the mongrel cousin referred to, is not “superior” to any other language, despite the pride that many Americans have in speaking such a “hard” language, whose opaque spellings, arbitrary constructions, and vocabulary borrowed from so many sources around the world prove so difficult for non-native speakers to master.

Mediated Representation of Foreignness

The most important feature of most of Wallace's representations of foreign speech is that, apart from the French-Canadians in *Jest*, they are mediated: seen through the eyes of other characters. Gerhardt Schtitt, for instance, is almost always seen through the eyes of Hal Incandenza, who, despite being brilliant, still falls into the trap of overgeneralizing about entire nations: “*Like most Germans outside of popular entertainment*” (emphasis added), Schtitt “gets quieter when he wants to impress or menace” (459). Hal adds parenthetically that “there are very few shrill Germans, actually” (459). Indeed, at times, Schtitt takes on the responsibility of representing “most Europeans of his generation” (82). That the foreigners are seen as caricatures says more about the attitudes of the focalizing characters than it does about the foreigners. When Don Gately refers to “Alfonso Parias-Carbo the totally ununderstandable Cuban” (*Jest* 887), readers may feel smugly superior, as they were perfectly able to understand Alfonso's speech earlier in the novel (“I am drug addict, powerless. I am knowing powerlessness since the period of Castro” [187]). The joke is on Don, not on Alfonso.

This “I-know-that-you-know-better” winking at the reader happens even when the perspective is that (ostensibly) of Wallace himself. The nonfiction “Dave Wallace” narrator develops a “searing crush” (296) on Petra, the cabin cleaner in “A Supposedly Funny Thing,” who answers “every question, joke, or protestation of undying love” with either “Is no problem” or “You are a funny thing” (*ASFTINDA* 298). Thompson¹⁴ comments on the “ESL solecisms” of Petra and of the Hungarian waiter, Tibor, but also notes that “Wallace's affection toward them is palpable, and he is clearly kinder to them than many of his fellow cruisers.” Thompson misidentifies Petra as “Asian,” which is perhaps understandable, as Wallace describes her as “epicanthically

¹⁴ Lucas Thompson, “Wallace and Race,” in *The Cambridge Companion to David Foster Wallace*, ed. Ralph Clare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 204–19, esp. 213.

doe-eyed" (297), although he also explicitly identifies her as "Slavonian" in the original *Harper's* essay ("Shipping Out" 46) (unfortunately rendered as "Slavonian" in the *ASTFINDA* collection (298)—an apparent typo). Thompson also mischaracterizes Petra's use of language: "Is no problem" is an elliptical construction (lacking a subject), but so is the equivalent native speakers' formulation ("no problem"), and the grammar of Petra's other stock response is entirely (prescriptively) correct, although its sincerity should certainly be in doubt. The message here is not "haha, foreigners can't speak English correctly," it's that Petra is thoroughly competent and professional, even when harassed by someone she dare not antagonize and whose language she may not understand. Wallace is criticizing himself (and by extension readers who identify with him). Wallace acknowledges the tendency to fetishize the foreign as well as his desire to distance himself from this in an even more blatant example from his fiction: When Lenny in "Say Never" (*GWCH*) speaks of his South American lover's "utterly deadly accent, a fellation of each syllable" (214), readers are meant to find him ridiculous, not her.

Infinite Jest features frequent passing glimpses of non-native background characters who are not even given names, like the "tired Cuban orderly" (17) who gets the last word in the opening section of the novel, "the Pakistani manager" of Store24 (206), "the Saudi Minister of Home Entertainment" (33), "the Near Eastern medical attaché" and his wife (78), and so on. The foregrounding of foreignness makes it clear that this is a noteworthy part of the social system of categorization, while the frequency of such references normalizes the presence of foreigners in the United States, making it clear that they're just regular people going about their business. Although these are often passing mentions, they are nonetheless generally sympathetic and contribute to Wallace's celebration of heteroglossia in America, at the same time subtly reinforcing the idea that America is dominated by (and for) those of Western European descent. When Gately feels uncomfortable around foreigners, readers understand that his xenophobia is regrettable, an illustration of his own limitations; at the same time, they appreciate that his unconscious racism appears to be in tension with his desire to be a good guy. He understands that it's not okay to be racist; he can't even acknowledge to himself that he is racist; he has to frame it as being "solidly pro-American" (479), not "anti-others."

The Latin Lover: Carlina Rentaria-Cruz ("Say Never")

Readers do not hear Carlina speak directly, but when in a letter her lover Lenny quotes her as saying "I hear this in a club on the Loop," he immediately adds parenthetically "(The Looop)" (*GWCH* 214). This echo of spoken accent in a written letter is an illustration of Lenny's fetishization of Carlina's accent—but

also a reminder that Wallace was in the exact same position as Lenny, making the same choices about how to represent her speech. Carlina displays a non-native verb agreement in this quote and elsewhere, and other noticeably non-native syntax (for instance, her formulation “for the screwing in of a lightbulb” in a racist “how many ____ does it take” joke [215]), but Lenny focuses exclusively on her particularly long tense vowels, as seen again when he recalls her saying, “OH LENITO I WILL *EEET* YOU!” (215, all-caps in the original).

The surname Rentaria-Cruz carries the weight of multiple associations. Obviously, there is the cross of Christianity in *Cruz* (she is depicted wearing “Catholic medals” [216]), but an association with “yielding” depends on the reader’s knowledge of the Spanish verb *rentar*. The pre-hyphenated part is more apt to be understood by an English speaker as representing a mercenary quality: Carlina—who has dumped the working-class Mikey, who complains about how much money he spent on her, for his older brother Leonard, who can presumably spend more—can be rented. Despite this, Carlina ought to be judged less harshly than Lenny. Without commitment or responsibility, she is free to enjoy her own sexuality. She appears quite independent in other ways, having found secretarial work in a foreign country at the young age of twenty. She appears to be amused by Lenny, and one can hardly blame her for taking advantage of him when he does not seem to take her seriously as anything other than an object of lust. He is the one breaking vows and hearts—she is a young woman having fun. Carlina makes no attempt to “fit in” linguistically, to lose her accent or “improve” her English; she seems to understand that her foreignness is an important part of her appeal. (This relationship will be explored more in the next chapter, with reference to Lenny’s dialect.)

The German (Austrian?) Fascist (?): Gerhardt Schtitt (*Jest*)

Thompson¹⁵ refers to *Jest*’s ETA head coach Gerhardt Schtitt as “a grotesquely stereotypical, Hollywood-fascist German,” and Hering¹⁶ says he’s “a caricature of fascist disciplinarianism,” although he disagrees with McGurl¹⁷ that “neither Wallace nor Wallace’s novel has any serious problem” with Schtitt’s implied fascism. Any echo of fascism is embedded in the content of Schtitt’s speech, his ideas about discipline, not its form; the treatment of his dialect is no broader nor more stereotyped than that of Rentaria-Cruz or the unnamed “green-card Irishman” to be discussed next. Schtitt’s main dialect features

¹⁵ Thompson, *Global Wallace*, 204.

¹⁶ Hering, *David Foster Wallace*, 66.

¹⁷ McGurl, “The Institution of Nothing,” 40.

appear to be using “yes?” as a tag question, and occasionally exclaiming in German: “Schtitt says *ach*” (82).

Lest readers overlook the importance of language, Hal describes the sounds Schtitt makes while exhaling smoke in technical linguistic terms, as “variant in plosivity between P and B” (80). Schtitt’s use of actual German words is ironically intended to show his softer side: Endnote 31 (994) reveals that Schtitt uses the affectionate term *Lebensgefährtin* for Aubrey deLint, but this note links to Schtitt’s use of this term in the plural—indicating that “he now has all these *Lebensgefährtins*” (79), many “life companions.” Ortho Stice quotes Schtitt to his “Little Buddies” as referring to ETA students as *mein kinder*, which Stice explains “sort of means my family” (119). “He’s not American,” Stice scrupulously adds, as if that might be a deal-breaker in the establishment of relationships of affection, “but I tell you straight out right here he makes me proud to be American. *Mein kinder*” (120).

When the upperclassmen “translate Schtitt into accessible language for the littler kids” (459), it’s not his language that is difficult, but his philosophy. It’s not even entirely clear that he *is* “German,” as he also shares with Mario his “grim childhood experiences” at an “Austrian akademie” (756), “pre-unification” (82), and has an “obscure Austrian blend” of pipe tobacco (80). Either Wallace never made up his mind about this, or Austria and Germany have unified into a larger political unit in the near-future world in *Jest*, or Wallace was spoofing the average American’s inability to distinguish these. He admitted to a German interviewer that he had invented the name Schtitt to “sound German-sounding to Americans”;¹⁸ he did not remark upon the fact that the name is essentially a blend of *shit* and *tit*.

Thompson¹⁹ sees “Wallace’s relentlessly hyperbolic characterization” of Schtitt as conforming to the stereotype of Germans as “stupid, officious, and absurd, but ultimately harmless,” but this misses both the respect accorded to his training philosophy, and the depth of emotion that Schtitt inspires in some ETA students. Ultimately, Wallace rejects Schtitt’s goal of “self-transcendence through pain” (660) and the idea that people should “get lost in something bigger than them” (660), but does not mock that view as inherently stupid or absurd. Stice is sincere when he tells his Little Buddies that they’d be “privileged to ever get an interface” with Schtitt (119), and that “I’d chew fiberglass for that old man” (120). When one of the ETA students says that “Schtitt just does what he’s told like a good Nazi” (104), the locker-room almost explodes into

¹⁸ Lucas Thompson, “David Foster Wallace’s Germany,” *Comparative Literature Studies* 56, no. 1 (2019): 1–30, esp. 22.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

violence. Unlike a Nazi caricature, Schtitt “will yield” (268), and has “a soft place inside for anyone who seems even marginally politically repressed” (307).

Wallace makes one of his most interesting points about Schtitt through the use of Latin rather than German. Schtitt frequently uses, but refuses to translate, the motto “CONTRARIA SUNT COMPLEMENTA” (713), “allowing prorectors and Big Buddies to adjust their translations to suit the needs of the pedagogical moment” (1054, endnote 298). This openness of interpretation is the very opposite of fascism. In fact, endnote 298 mistranslates the motto as “We Are What We Revile,” or “We Are What We Scurry Around As Fast As Possible With Our Eyes Averted”—although it actually refers to complementary opposites, as in a yin/yang symbol, showing not just the slipperiness of language, but its ability to deliberately mislead. This is in contrast to James O. Incandenza’s ETA motto “TE OCCIDERE POSSUNT SED TE EDERE NON POSSUNT NEFAS EST” (81), which offered no such ambiguities (albeit quite a bit of irony), and no opportunities for growth. This motto (replaced by new headmaster Charles Tavis after Incandenza’s death with a trite “upbeat” English slogan) is translated for readers in endnote 32 as “Roughly, ‘They Can Kill You, But the Legalities of Eating You Are Quite a Bit Dicier’” (994)—the “roughness” comes from the hedging on how wrong eating you would be. The Latin makes it quite clear that it would be morally wrong, not just illegal.

The Alcoholic Irishman (*Jest*)

Don Gately briefly recalls hearing a story told at an Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meeting by a fifty-year-old “green-card Irishman in a skallycap and Sinn Fein sweatshirt, with a belly like a swinging sack of meal and a thoroughly visible ass to back it up” (351), a long-haul trucker whose name Gately didn’t catch. The remembered speech is extremely nonstandard, the broadest stereotype of an Irish accent—though Gately is not a reliable narrator on this. Some parts of the representation are plausible (e.g., lexical items like calling the bathroom the *loo* or (less likely) the archaic preposition *twixt*). The avoidance of interdental fricatives (reducing the article *the* to *t’* [e.g., if he can make it part of the onset of the next syllable] or *de* if he cannot, rendering *thought* as *tought*) is a feature of Irish English today.²⁰ Where most Americans would use a mid-central unrounded vowel, the unnamed Irishman has a *oo* spelling (*hoong* for *hung*, *froom*, *oop*, *troock*, etc.), most likely indicating

²⁰ Raymond Hickey, *Irish English: History and Present-Day Forms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 304.

a pronunciation further back and rounded, which as Hickey²¹ notes is particularly associated with “vernacular” Irish English speakers. The *oo* spelling in words where most Americans would have the /u/ pronunciation anyway may indicate a degree of vowel lengthening (as in *prodooeed*, or *too* for the preposition *to*) and the *ewe* spelling of /u/ may indicate fronting and/or tensing of the vowel (*stewed* for *stood*). An /o/ pronunciation is indicated for *drop* by spelling it *droke(d)*, and for *lovely* by spelling it *loavely*.

Much of the representation, however, is not systematic or consistent, and doesn’t seem to correspond to the phonology or the morphosyntax of Irish English, including the rendering of *you* as *yo*, for instance (with *yo new* for *you know*), or *God* as *Good*, or the frequent lowering of high front vowels /i/ and /ɪ/, as in *confarmed* for *confirmed* and *yars* for *years*, etc.) The representation of the pronoun *I* as *ay* is pure eye dialect, which Ives²² defined as misspellings that trigger strong awareness of incorrectness (and therefore perceptions of ignorance and lack of education). The nonstandard use of *were* with singular subjects and *me* for possessive *my* evokes nonstandardness, but neither of these was found for Irish English by Szmrecsanyi and Kortmann.²³ I suspect Wallace just enjoyed the sound of *Har Par* for “higher power,” *rail tard* for “real turd,” and simply could not resist the puns inherent in *Good is me wetness* (351).

Although the heartfelt truth that underlies the Irishman’s joy and relief at finally producing a regular bowel movement (after years of drug and alcohol-induced diarrhea) is appreciated by the crowd, Gately also recalls “falling about” and laughing “from the gut,” apparently as much at the man and his accent as at the fact that he produced this “ode to a solid dump.” The humor in this brief section, and the fact that it is explicitly filtered via the consciousness of a man already known to be racist (and therefore any attitudes expressed are not necessarily those of the author), may have saved it from receiving the same kind of condemnation as the representation of Clenette Henderson considered in the next chapter.

Infinite Jest’s “Thinking in French”

Earlier Seeds

Wallace first tried his hand at representing the English of a native French speaker in “Lyndon.” President Johnson’s assistant has a Haitian lover, René

²¹ Ibid., 317.

²² Ives, “A Theory of Literary Dialect,” 147.

²³ Benedikt Szmrecsanyi, and Bernd Kortmann, “The Morphosyntax of Varieties of English Worldwide: A Quantitative Perspective,” *Lingua* 119, no. 11 (2009): 1643–63.

Duverger, who is not fluent in English; he translates his French word-for-word (“*Elle a tort* . . . She has wrong” because he “had little English he was proud of” (GWCH 99). Although French was the language Wallace was clearly the most comfortable playing with, I can find no evidence that he was able to speak it—or any language other than English. Hayes-Brady²⁴ claims that Wallace “had enough French to read Camus in the original,” but Thompson²⁵ hedges the claim a bit more, saying only that Wallace “was familiar with a wide range of French writers . . . either in the original French or in translation.” He also recounts²⁶ that Wallace signed up for an introductory Russian class at Amherst but dropped it when he discovered he had no talent for it.

Wallace attended the 1995 Canadian Open in Montreal when writing about tennis player Michael Joyce for a 1996 *Esquire* feature, but the extent of the Québécois French included in that article was quoting a couple of billboard advertisement slogans and using the phrase “aller au pissoir” (“go to the public urinal”) in a footnote (ASFTINDA 247). Wallace acknowledges in this essay that his French was “just good enough” to establish that the stories the local reporters were telling in the Press Box were about sexual adventures and were “tiresome” (ASFTINDA 241)—and I suspect he was overstating his receptive competence. It is hard to believe that if he could understand what they were saying, or the conversations of spectators around him, that he would not have incorporated direct quotes overheard. There’s no evidence in the essay that he spoke to anybody other than Joyce and Joyce’s coach during the several days he spent there. Any French Wallace would have studied in a US classroom would have been Parisian French, but Wallace never featured any characters from France. He was no doubt aware that “for the majority of Americans, French accents are positive ones,”²⁷ and he may not have wished to accord automatic prestige to a foreign character.

Mistakes, Names, and Slogans

Wallace did not expect *Jest* readers to be familiar with French, mostly arranging for characters to explicitly gloss and/or comment on the language when used, or having his narrator explain via endnotes (with a few notable

²⁴ Clare Hayes-Brady, “‘. . .’: Language, Gender, and Modes of Power in the Work of David Foster Wallace,” in *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*, ed. Marshall Boswell and Stephen J. Burn (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 131–50, esp. 149.

²⁵ Thompson, *Global Wallace*, 121.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 92.

²⁷ Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent*, 72.

exceptions as will be discussed later). The assumed lack of familiarity may also have made him feel comfortable taking liberties, not concerning himself particularly with getting French right. His biggest howler was the “fauteuil de rollent” (88) for “wheelchair,” a mistake repeated in the full name of Marathe’s terrorist organization “Les Assassins des Fauteuils Rollents” (which drops the unnecessary preposition, but retains the incorrect form “rollent[s]” in place of “roulant[s]”). The full name of the AFR appears over a dozen times in *Jest*, an unfortunate distraction for any Francophone. The *école-spéciale* (481) that the cognitively challenged Lucien Antitoy attended should have been an *école spécialisée*. (Paris has *Écoles Spéciales*, but these are specialized institutes of higher learning, for instance, for architecture or public works.) “Rai Pays” appears to be Wallace’s own invention of an in-group designation or slogan for Québec; it may be a deformation of *vrai pays* (real/true country), or some kind of pun that I’m missing. It doesn’t make much sense on a literal level, as *rai* means either the spoke of a wheel or a beam or streak of light. As it occurs eight times in the novel (with both *notre* [our] and *leur* [their]), it is clearly not just a typo. A female character is given a male name (Thierry) without any clear motivation. The second acute accent mark in the word *Québécois* is omitted throughout the text. As the then-near-future world of *Jest* was intentionally off-kilter anyway, an easy “out” is always available to explain away errors: either usage in this fictional world had always been a bit different than real-world usage, or it was projected to change in these particulars.

English readers may not notice that Wallace didn’t give a French version of “to hear the squeak”—“the very darkest of contemporary Canada’s euphemisms for sudden and violent de-mapping” (1056–7, endnote 304), but they might well experience a bit of frustration when there is no English translation of the warning that the AFR embossed “in tiny raised letters” (483) on their read-only copies of the fatal eponymous film *Infinite Jest*: “IL NE FAUT PLUS QU’ON POURSUIVE LE BONHEUR” (483, 722, all-caps in the original). Literally, “it is no longer necessary to pursue happiness” (with correct subjunctive verb form), this might also be rendered as “we should stop pursuing happiness” (a mild judgment), although the all-caps seems to argue for a stronger interpretation: We must no longer seek happiness; we must henceforth avoid the pursuit of happiness. Obviously a response to the offer of “Infinite Jest” (the extreme pursuit of nothing but pleasure that leads to death), this slogan takes direct aim at the US Declaration of Independence’s claim to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” as inalienable rights. Why should one translate a slogan into English that is not just Un- but Anti-American?

Wallace may have been hoping to trigger some deliberate associations in the French surnames chosen for the Canadians in *Jest*. Although Wallace once

claimed to know a real-life *Antitoi*,²⁸ he must have been struck by the felicity of naming a foreign character the equivalent of “anti-you.” *Fortier*, the name of a river in Québec as well as of quite a few well-known Canadians, evokes comparative strength: *fort/forte* plus the suffix *-er*, a fitting name for the head of a terrorist organization. Guillaume DuPlessis, albeit undoubtedly named for the two-time premier of Québec, has a surname that—to Anglophone ears—sounds a lot like “duplicity.” Poutrincourt is the name of a lake in Québec, but the final syllable (like the English cognate) denotes the space in which ball games such as tennis are played.

Québécois

Wallace went to some lengths to ensure that the same esteem generally given to Parisian French would not attach to Québécois. The derogatory term “Nuck” is used throughout, occasionally with even more dysphemistic variants, such as Pemulis’s *nuckwad* (215). Gately observes the “vaguely non-U.S. beards” (609) of the “Nucks” he is fighting with, also thinking of them redundantly as “alien foreigners” (611). Hal admits that he “has never all that much liked [Québécois], particularly sound-wise”; it seems to him “a gurgly, glottal language that seems to require a perpetually sour facial expression to pronounce” (309). The narrator later comments in endnote 222 that Québécois French “is not good old contemporary idiomatic Parisio/European French,” and that it “is about on a par with Basque in terms of difficulty, being full of weird idioms and having both inflected and uninflected grammatical features, an inbred and obstreperous dialect” (1036). Undercover as reporter, speaking (ostensibly Parisian) French, Hugh Steeply observes that Thierry Poutrincourt “does indeed sound like the real Canadian McCoy, though her accent is without the long moany suffixes of Marathe” (1052, endnote 274). Steeply’s evident command of Québécois—“better than Marathe’s English” (89)—is exemplified by his ability to separate “textbook” from idiomatic usage (“the Nuck idiom *réflechis* instead of the more textbook *reflexes*” 1052); this encourages readers to accept his judgments, including his subjective contempt for Marathe. Complicating this somewhat, however, readers had already been explicitly warned that “Steeply barely got an ‘Acceptable’ in” Québécois “in U.S.O. technical-interview training in Vienna/ Falls Church VA” (1036). The scorn directed at Québécois language and people by both Americans who have little or no direct experience with them and those who

²⁸ Sven Birkerts, “The Alchemist’s Retort,” Review of *Infinite Jest*, by David Foster Wallace. *The Atlantic Monthly* (February 1996). <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1996/02/the-alchemists-retort/376533/>.

are presented as expert—is all the more striking as the Quebec separatists' philosophy is ultimately more successful in this novel than the American "pursuit of happiness."

The United States has always had a fascination with Canada, looking across the border as if at an alternate history, fun-house mirror view of the United States. (What if there hadn't been a US revolution? What if the United States now had Canada's system of "socialized" medicine?) Citizens of the United States call themselves "American" (distinguishing "South America" and "Central America" from their presumed default North "America")—yet Canadians are even Northern-er, and must also be peeled away from the referent of "American." The simplest way to make Canada seem strange and alien, linguistically at least, is to focus on Québécois and its status as the official language of Quebec. Whereas US Americans are overly impressed by any white American who can speak a foreign language fluently, or by a foreigner who has "perfect" English, "Francophones are never impressed that anyone else can speak French" (675). When Lucien Antitoui is represented as "one of the very few natives of *Notre Rai Pays* ever who cannot understand French, just never caught on" (480), even though his brother Bertraund ("forever laughing in Québécois," 480) and his mother are Francophones, readers are meant to understand that he has a serious cognitive disability. That the linguistic deficit, specifically, results directly in his death (as he cannot understand or respond to the AFR assassin torturing him) shows again the importance of language. The torture scene contains several untranslated phrases and one stretch of multiple untranslated sentences—perhaps to encourage the reader to empathize with poor Lucien who also cannot understand them.

Perhaps because of his lack of command of other languages, Wallace understood that his non-native characters' comprehensible English was an achievement to be celebrated. Readers are meant to admire the intelligence of Poutrincourt, Fortier, and Marathe, all of whom demonstrate the ability to "simultaneously speak in English and think in French" (91). Although Poutrincourt speaks "nearly accentless English" (682), numerous examples are given of her obviously non-native syntax and lexicon, for instance "You are here to make publicity a child player" (674). She has to ask Steeply for help selecting the right word: "How you say . . . ?" (674). She gets a "little hyphen of wrinkle . . . between her eyebrows when she doesn't follow something and can't quite tell if it's your English's fault or her English's fault" (1057). Her pauses in conversation are tied to her being a non-native speaker, rather than a sign of deliberate reflection: "Poutrincourt always nodded for a while before she replied to anything, as if things had to go through various translation-circuits" (674). Attention is repeatedly drawn to her being "a

non-U.S. citizen" (673) and to her status as a speaker of English as a Second Language: "No way Poutrincourt'd have spent the time to E.S.L. her way through U.S. Academese this insufferable" (1056).

Avril Incandenza maintains "Canadian pronunciation of certain diphthongs" (744), but as "the only female academic ever to hold the Macdonald Chair in Prescriptive usage at the Royal Victoria College of McGill University" (64), she maintains prescriptively correct usages at all times; her syntax and lexicon are literally held up as examples for all. As an "expatriate Québécois" (1022) from the "L'Islet region" (191) with a French name (Avril Mondragon, literally *April My Dragon*), known to be involved "with certain members of the Québécois-Separatist Left while in graduate school" (64), Avril is never shown speaking any French; she is presumably native in English, but probably fluent in both. Hal and his brother Orin "made dry fun" (744) of her accent, affirming their own native US identity, while showing their mother some passive-aggressive affection. The absence of Avril's perspective in the novel (which would surely be very different from her husband's or sons' and would be able to answer some important questions left open in the novel) is frustrating, but it is not a loss to Wallace's project of cataloguing dialects; without a visual encoding of the different diphthong pronunciations, Avril's dialect would be indistinguishable from her son Hal's.

Marathe's superiors M. Fortier and M. Broullime, and other members of the AFR, "young Desjardins" and "the older and valued Joubet" (725), are barely introduced to readers—indeed, their given names are never revealed. On the few occasions when they do speak, they sound much like Marathe. This may have been a deliberate ploy to conceal which "masked A.F.R. leader" tortured Lucien Antitoy so brutally and so pointlessly (forcing readers to attach some of the blame for this to Marathe, whether or not he was there in person); it may also have been intended to show the loss of individual identity that can come about through assimilation into a corporate identity, an idea Wallace would return to in TPK.

Rémy Marathe: The Ultimate (Unmediated) Foreigner

Marathe enters the novel on page 87. The opening of that section cannot be interpreted as Marathe's internal monologue, as he cannot see himself "redly backlit and framed in shale" (87), yet by the end of the third sentence, Marathe's characteristic French syntax begins to take over: "Not yet quite" (88). The first words he speaks out loud are not visibly accented, not notably foreign, but formal and dated: "Stealth becomes you" (88). Steeply's reply, in stark contrast, is current, vulgar, and emphasizes Marathe's foreignness: "Go

shit in your chapeau" (89). Wallace gave himself an out in his representation of Marathe's thoughts by stating that Québécois "does not admit of easy coeval expression in English" (1036).

I see no particular significance in the name Rémy Marathe, other than the phonaesthetic association of murmuring in the sequence of sonorant /r/ and /m/ sounds, but Kate Gompert begins to "Americanize" Rémy's given name as she warms up to him (or perhaps as she gets drunker), calling him "Ramy" several times (777, 778, 779), nativizing the pronunciation, before finally settling upon "Ray" (780, 781), presumably more acceptable because less foreign. Although Marathe does not claim an American identity for himself, and his speech is notably non-native, she would appear to insist upon projecting this onto him, not understanding that somebody might not want to be American.

Marathe does not claim to speak very good English: After acknowledging that Steeply's Québécois is better than Marathe's English, he nonetheless deems Steeply's pronunciation "horrid," and voices his suspicion that Steeply deliberately mangles his syntax to irritate Marathe (529). When Marathe attempts to infiltrate Ennet House, posing as an addict, Pat Montesian offers him the backhanded compliment that "in the years I've been on Staff here, we've had aliens, resident aliens, E.S.L.'s whose English was worse than yours by a long shot" (749).

Marathe does not fall into the stereotype of the non-native who speaks better than the natives, or the one who is incapable of adjusting his style; he is shown speaking both formally and informally (and vulgarly), and makes both lexical and morphosyntactic errors. For instance, he frequently uses the progressive aspect ("-ing") suffix with stative verbs, where native speakers would use simple present tense (marked -s for third-person singular, otherwise unmarked) (e.g., "you are knowing this" [94, cf. 317, 319 *inter alia*]). When Marathe uses "recircling" for "recycling" (643), Wallace draws extra attention to the usage with an endnote that stresses that this in no way diminishes Marathe's comprehensibility: "Sic, but it's pretty obvious what Marathe means here" (1046). Likewise, readers are informed in another endnote that Pat Montesian does not actually refer to Ennet House's "living" staff (754), that this is just "Marathe's malentendu of *live-in*" (1062). Note, however, that the mistakenly unlauted first vowel of *Bröckengespenstphänom* (641) is unlikely to be a deliberate error inserted to reflect on Marathe's competence in German; given US-Americans' general ignorance of languages other than English and the obscurity of this particular lexical item, Wallace would have known that he would need to be much more obvious to trigger such an interpretation. He may, however, have been spoofing Pynchon, who also included a few examples of faux German in his works.

Even readers unfamiliar with French will intuit that Marathe's frequent use of sentence-initial "thus," "we too," "but yes" and sentence-final "so" are word-for-word translations of French discourse markers *donc*, *nous aussi*, *mais oui*, and *alors*. Some of the idioms Marathe uses appear to have been translated to French and back, as in "We have, as one will say, larger seafood to cook" (91). Marathe is fond of the double-subject construction that places an accusative case personal pronoun outside the syntactic frame, as in "Me, I . . ." (94, 748, 749, 775), "Us, we . . ." (318, 508), another feature quite familiar to French speakers (*Moi, je . . .*). He often uses awkward periphrastic possessive constructions: "of you" instead of *your* (420, 423), "pacemakers of the heart" (470), "his blanket of the lap" (528). He occasionally throws in an actual French word or phrase: "c'était la guerre" (89), "c'est ça" (490), "Annulateur" (490), and the realistically abbreviated "*n sûr*" (93).

Despite the pervasive and heavy-handed depiction of Marathe's non-native dialect, there is no altered orthography to indicate his apparently strong accent; this is not revealed until much later in the novel, through the mockery of other characters. Presumably, Marathe brings what Steeply describes as his "moany" pronunciation of Québécois to his performance of English. When Kate Gompert (who has a long and increasingly drunken conversation with Marathe after being mugged) mistakenly thinks he is making a pass at her, she replies to his question ("You would reply to me what?") with derisive mimicry: "*I voot make ze hreply zat* I've heard that one before, asshole" (782).

Realistically, Marathe's English gets worse as he gets tired ("He had the great fatigue, a time at which English was straining" [747]), occasionally can't find the word he needs ("How does one say?" [108]) or needs to ask for a definition of a word ("But what does this U.S.A. expression want to mean, this *Buckeroo*?" [320], and "What does this wish to mean, this *bonking*?" [426]). When residents of Ennet House helpfully advise Marathe to "pet the dogs" to win Pat Montesian's approval, he does not understand that they mean this literally: "This idiomatic expression was not in Marathe's knowledge of U.S.A. English" (731). Like most speakers (native or non-native), Marathe can often infer the meaning of an unfamiliar expression from context: "There was no way Marathe was going to touch the evident U.S.A. childhood expression *Mummykins*" (639).

Marathe knows that Americans will find his non-native dialect amusing, but instead of passively accepting condescension or mockery, he uses this to his advantage, exaggerating his non-native command of the language when he wants to lighten the mood. For instance, when recounting a troubling story of his youth, Steeply refers to his "kid sister," and Marathe feigns ignorance

of the term: “You are not meaning your sister was a goat. . . . Steeply was not provokable into some different emotion, however” (643).

Readers’ stereotypes of foreign speech (and foreigners) are exaggerated to brilliant effect, forcing readers to consider what it means to sound American, while holding up a not-usually flattering mirror, a glimpse of the United States through these foreign eyes. Marathe comments repeatedly on “U.S.A. English” (88, 89, 423), and the briefest section in the book bears particular scrutiny: a single sentence, only fifteen words long, and not triggered by a change of date, time, location, or characters, yet with its own header to make the section stand out: “Several times also Marathe called U.S.A. to Steeply ‘Your walled nation’ or ‘Your murated nation’” (127). Lest readers miss the importance, Wallace had Marathe later repeat this phrase, explaining the irony: “For your walled-up country, always to shout ‘Freedom! Freedom!’ as if it were obvious to all people what it wants to mean, this word” (320). Kelly²⁹ argues that Steeply’s position on the value of negative liberty (freedom *from*) is “paradigmatically American,” whereas Marathe (as non-American) argues for the superiority of positive liberty (freedom *to*); Kelly points out that Wallace himself appears to have espoused a position closer to Marathe’s in his commencement speech at Kenyon College (*This is Water*).

Wallace’s prescience here is eerie: *Infinite Jest* was published two decades before “Build the Wall!” became a rallying cry across the United States and helped to elect TV star Donald Trump as president in 2016—a frighteningly similar tale to that of *Jest*’s Johnny Gentle, a phobic former Las Vegas singer, elected president as the head of the “Clean Party,” who tries to solve the nation’s waste problem by catapulting it into Canadian territory, thus setting off potentially catastrophic geopolitical warfare. In addition to Trump’s nationalistic stance on immigration and “The Wall,” the 2020 election is shaping up as a referendum on negative versus positive liberty: freedom from (gun control regulations, government control of health insurance, increased taxation, regulation in general) versus freedom to (enjoy life without fear of being shot, access to health care and education).

Wallace’s playful representation of non-native dialects (with hypothesized borrowing and interference from the speaker’s native language) is further support of Hayes-Brady’s observation that “for Wallace, literalization is part of a process of investigation”;³⁰ he used dialects to make social fault lines in US society not just visible but audible. As such, the non-native representations are just the tip of the linguistic iceberg.

²⁹ Kelly, “Development Through Dialogue,” 274.

³⁰ Hayes-Brady, *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace*, 12.