Creative Destruction in Multilingual Sound Poetry: The Case of Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl

Karin Nykvist
Lund University

In 1980s Sweden, everyone watched *The Muppet Show*; in those days, there was not much else on. Although Kermit and Miss Piggy may have been the stars of the show, the one all the kids loved was the Swedish Chef figure. He was funny in a nonsense sort of way, made a mess out of cooking, and spoke a gibberish that nobody understood. Part of his popularity was the fact that he was supposed to be Swedish—a fact that suggested to my ten-year-old self that Americans actually had heard of my tiny country. I marvelled over the fact that the outlandish garble of sounds that came out of his mouth was supposed to be what Swedish sounded like to a non-speaker, someone outside of my language.

Listening to the Swedish Chef is the first metalanguage experience that I can remember. It marks my first conscious experience of being othered, and, as a result, of othering myself and others. The babble that was supposed to sound like Swedish made me aware of the language I spoke. Not only that, it made me aware of language *tout court*, a system in which sounds, pitches, tones, and gestures were used by all, but differently in different tongues, and in which the borders these differences created made it possible to be on the outside looking in. The Swedish chef's Swedish used exaggerated melody and repeated syllables containg a soft *r*-sound, like *-urd*, *-burd*. His character—whimsical, content, non-threatening, and utterly incompetent—also made me contemplate things such as national stereotypes.

This article revisits this metalanguage experience and reflects on the significance of conscious poetic engagement with the liminal condition of language in relation to other modes of expressions. With the help of contemporary Scandinavian multilingual sound poetry, it considers the philosophical, ideological, and political implications of language mashups and mimicry. The questions addressed here concern how multilingual poetry performances explore questions and challenge

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assumptions about language and nationality, ethnicity, and identity. The article investigates how in poetry the presumed borders between languages, as well as between sense and nonsense, semantics and noise, are examined, and openings are found. It also explores the philosophical and ideological potential of the possibly offensive and painful act of othering—of oneself and of others—and contemplates whether such play with stereotypes and clichés can ever be of any use in the investigation of the multilingual complexities that make up the contemporary global soundscape.

The article focuses on the work *Scandinavian Series*, created by the Icelandic author, poet, and performance artist Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl (1978-) in 2007, as it is available on the *PennSound* website.[1] It argues that, even as this work is bound to make its audience laugh and cringe at the same time, much like the gibberish of the Swedish Chef, it is a deeply political, angry, and vulnerable work, much like the poetry of the Dada artists was in its day. This analysis will demonstrate how poetry can pose and problematize questions on the ontology of language while being an ideological and political intervention in the world.

Background and Aims

In the years following the turn of the millennium, Scandinavian poets such as Örn Norðdahl, as well as his fellow writers and artists Cia Rinne (born in Sweden in 1973) and Leevi Lehto (Finland, 1951-2019), have investigated the liminality of language, and the (im)possibility of stepping outside of language in different ways, especially through language mimicry and different multilinguistic strategies. Cia Rinne explores and sabotages the presumed borders of languages in works such as *notes for soloists* (2009), later partly reworked in collaboration with Sebastian Eskildsen into the multimedia piece *sounds for soloists* (2013), and *l'usage du mot* (2017). Her works use multilingual homonyms to break down the barriers between languages. In the suite "notes on war & god" (Rinne, *notes* n.p.) the words "war was" uncannily move between German and English and the words become homeless, in a way. In his 2007 sound poetry work "Norwegian Ords" [Norwegian Words], Leevi Lehto reads a poem in Norwegian in front of a Norwegian audience, without understanding Norwegian himself, and thus places the work in a liminal area of language, between the decipherable, semantic content and language noise, in which the linguistic competence of the audience and the lack thereof of the performer are important parts of the work. Rinne and Lehto are in turn part of a larger international movement of multilingual poetry that pursues what can be regarded as artistic translingual research into the liminal spaces of and between what is traditionally meant by languages, where poets such as Yoko Tawada (born in Japan in 1960), who works in German and Japanese and many other languages, Christian Bök (born in Canada in 1966), and Caroline Bergvall (born in Germany in 1962) are a few of many who are making important contributions.[2]

Works produced by the many contemporary poets working multilingually and translingually point to important theoretical questions about multilingual poetry performance and its relation to what Yasemin Yildiz has called *the postmonolingual condition*. Yildiz addresses what she regards as the conflict between the monolingual paradigm that has been dominant in "European and European-inflicted thinking" (2) and the multilingual attempt to overcome this idea. For her, the monolingual paradigm does not only entail the presence or use of one language only; as she writes in her study on multilingual practices, the monolingual paradigm permeates society in many ways:

> […] it constitutes a key structuring principle that organizes the entire range of modern social life, from the construction of individuals and their proper subjectivities to the formation of disciplines and institutions, as well as of imagined collectives such as cultures and nations. (2)

As Yildiz sees it, the monolingual paradigm shapes both society as a whole and individual identities:

> According to this paradigm, individuals and social formations are imagined to possess one "true" language only, their "mother tongue," and through this possession to be organically linked to an exclusive, clearly demarcated ethnicity, culture, and nation. (2)

From Yildiz's perspective, some—but not all—of the vast and increasing number of multilingual practices, within and outside of the arts, can be interpreted as struggling against this monolingual paradigm, thus shedding light on, creating, and perpetuating a postmonolingual condition. The postmonolingual is then understood as a "field of tension in which the monolingual paradigm continues to assert itself and multilingual practices persist or reemerge" (5).

Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl and *The Scandinavian Series*

Throughout his career, the Icelandic poet and author Eiríkur Örn Norðdahl has experimented with various literary genres and creative formats. He has published novels as well as poetry collections and essays, and his poetry takes the forms of sound files, *YouTube* shorts, and concretist works that border on art pieces. Emblematic samples of his work include the 2012 novel *Illska* (*Evil*), about homegrown Icelandic Nazism; the 2013 poetry collection *Hnefi eða vitstola orð,* about the Icelandic financial crisis in 2008; and the 2001 essay collection *Booby, Be Quiet!*, which mainly discusses his own works and their poetics. He has also translated many prominent Swedish literary works into Icelandic, such as Athena Farrokhzad's *Vitsvit* (*White Blight*, 2013; translated as *Hvítsvita* in 2016) and novels by Jonas Hassen Khemiri.

In his work, Örn Norðdahl revisits the connection of language to ideas of ethnicity, nationality, geography, and power, and to questions of how these categories are

interconnected. One of his recurring themes is the workings of inclusion and exclusion that are brought to the forefront through the uses and misuses of language, often by using the potential of sound. Örn Norðdahl often plays with languages that he does not speak, or does not speak well. Sometimes he even makes up languages that do not exist. In *The Dictator Series* (2006), he uses pitch, tone, and sound to mimic languages spoken in totalitarian regimes of the present and the past, while playing with stereotypes. The work ventures close to children's schoolyard ways of mimicking language; one such example is the poem "Li Peng! Li Bang Bang!" in which recurring monosyllabic words ending with *-ng* mimic the act of mimicking Chinese. In this series, the use of aggressive pitch and tone and the repetition of sounds conjure up the aggressive, repetitious nature of dictatorship and the sounds of an unknown language being listened to by a non-speaker, thus playing more with the outsider position than with anything else. Örn Norðdahl has written about this work himself, and expressed his ambiguous feelings toward it: is it just rude stereotyping, maybe even smacking of racism, or is it something more? Can it even be interpreted as politically subversive? In an article on the subject of mimicking languages one does not speak well or at all, with the telling title "Mock Duck Mandarin: The Sound and the Fury" (2019), Örn Norðdahl tells the story of how he once performed the poem "Swing Ding Deng Xiaoping" in front of the Chinese poet Tian Yuan, and that the situation made him "surprisingly self-conscious and uncomfortable" (*Booby* 80), so much so that he nearly took it off his program. Afterwards, he did not dare ask for the poet's opinion on the matter, "partly because he spoke no English and partly because I was too timid to ask his interpreter, afraid that I might've insulted his tender sensibilities with my loud western arrogance" (*Booby* 80). The story illustrates the complicated act of language mimicry, which potentially evokes strong feelings in the performer and the audience, in the mimicker and the mimicked. It is ironic and somewhat telling that Örn Norðdahl evokes linguistic hindrances in his dealings with his fellow poet.

The Scandinavian Series offers a similar experience to the listener, as it combines a sense of dislocation with complex, contradictory affects and easily identified stereotypes and clichés. The first impression is that Örn Norðdahl simply plays out a poetic take on the Swedish Chef, mimicking languages that a listener who is somewhat familiar with Scandinavian languages may recognize in an eerie kind of way, while not speaking any intelligible language at all. To the casual listener, these are poems in some mysterious, opaque, and *unheimlich* Norwegian, Danish, and Swedish, that are not really Norwegian, Danish, or Swedish. This, however, is not the case. The poems of the core of the series are all written in Icelandic, while the two poems that Örn Norðdahl calls its "half siblings" (*Booby* 83) are written in English and Finnish. It is, however, the performance of the series that brings the other Scandinavian languages into play. Thus, the core of the series consists of three poems whose spoken language is Icelandic, but in which other Scandinavian languages are mimicked and evoked through the use of melody, prosody, pace, intonation, and accent.

The series is not all that easy to make sense of. On the one hand, it is possible to

read it as a challenge to chauvinistic ideas of linguistic, cultural, and ethnic purity and essentialism. The poem "Heidi (fyrir Manga)," included in the file series on *PennSound*, but not mentioned in Örn Norðdahl's own writing on the series, is a heavily distorted, aggressive-sounding reading on top of a botched organ rendition of the Icelandic national anthem: a move that signifies an antinationalist stance and renders the series with ideological import. On the other hand, the series can be perceived as simple appropriation, clowning around, an unfortunate reinforcement of the stereotype instead of a challenge to it. The tension between these two tendencies, a tension that, to borrow Deleuze and Guattari's term, I call its reterritorializing and deterritorializing forces, is the source of a discomfort that I have definitely experienced myself and observed in listeners while playing some of these works to students and colleagues, in class, at seminars, and at conferences. The complicated affects and reactions that some of this work inspires—and, possibly, is inspired by—are explored here, as intimate and difficult emotions pertaining to the experiences of belonging, inclusion, and exclusion are explored and laid bare in this work, emotions that play an important part in the production of identity, nationalism, and language.

The title of the series suggests a Scandinavian situatedness, both geographically and linguistically. The notion of situatedness is important to bear in mind when discussing the work, as one can argue is the case with all multilingual literary practices (Nykvist). As most of the Nordic languages are closely related, and there is a historical discourse of kinship—as well as family-like competition, and a history of sealed and broken unions, war and peace—among the Nordic countries, this particular situatedness plays into the work of Scandinavian poets who explore and challenge the bordering of languages. The term "bordering," borrowed from Naoki Sakai, points to the fact that borders between languages are arbitrary and political, perpetuated by linguistic practice.[3]

Once a person has entered language, is there ever a stepping out of it? For Ferdinand de Saussure through Roland Barthes and Jacques Lacan to Fredric Jameson, the answer is no. They, along with other philosophers, critics, and linguists, have sought to convince us that once we are inside, language is always there, and there is no stepping outside again. Obviously, our experience may sometimes suggest otherwise. There are languages that we do not understand; the sensation of being outside of language can be quite real and acute when travelling, for instance. However, even at that moment, we are not outside language as a system. On the contrary, as humans we are constantly aware of where we are situated: outside of Japanese, moving on the border of French, et cetera. After we have entered the system of language and become agents of unconscious and conscious signs, we are forever trapped in its echo chamber.

Is it possible to other our linguistic phenomenological experience in any way? Can we step outside and have a look? Yes, although it may be impossible—or next to impossible—to step outside of what Fredric Jameson famously called "the prison house of language," poets constantly try to get a better idea as to what this prison house really looks like, and from their efforts, we get a feel for its moving walls and

sometime deafening echoes. Poets and poetry constantly make new attempts at poking holes in the presumed borders between languages, creating mirrors in and between languages, and moving beyond what we think of as language. In the case of multilingual poetry that targets and explores the language system, that exposes its structures and unspoken rules, such poetic exploration of language is ever-present.

Humans tend to find spatial metaphors useful when talking about language, and indeed, language and place are intertwined in common conscience. Jameson's use of the image of a building, as well as metaphors such as "border," "inside," and "outside," all suggest that language is a place; so do the terms *deterritorialization* and *reterritorialization* when used to talk about language, as they often are. Obviously, language is often connected to a place in the existing world, to geography, often to a piece of geography that makes up a nation, but the spatial imagery often used when talking about language can also be seen as a conceptual metaphor, in Lakoff and Johnson's sense of the term. Language is always situated in literal or metaphorical space, in ways that seem, but seldom are, unproblematic, and that need to be explored and considered. In *The Scandinavian Series*, both reterritorializing and deterritorializing forces are at play. The title situates the series geographically, but the distortion of the Scandinavian languages and the oscillation between sense and nonsense deterritorialize it. The human voice of the poet signals that language is being used, but not even an Icelandic native can make sense of all that is being said, as the language hovers on the border of noise.

The Potential of Sound Poetry

The human voice is an inherent part of *The Scandinavian Series*. If forced to categorize it, I would not hesitate to call it sound poetry: its acoustic qualities matter more than its semantics. As such, the series moves quite freely between identifiable language and non-identifiable language noise. It is an heir both to the *poésie pure* and to the dada movement of early modernism.

In his lecture on the poetic function of language, Roman Jakobson quoted Paul Valéry, who saw poetry as "the hesitation between the sound and the sense" (367) and went on to state that poetry "is a province where the internal nexus between sound and meaning changes from latent into patent and manifests itself most palpably and intensely" (373). Jakobson was clearly, albeit implicitly, referring to spoken poetry in his lecture, as his examples are all about rhythm and sound. I agree with Jakobson that the sound of poetry—and, therefore, also the genre of sound poetry—is well suited for exploring certain aspects of the ontology of language. I would especially suggest that it opens readers/listeners up to explorations of the border territory in which sounds may or may not be linguistic. Sound poetry that moves in the very intersection of sense and nonsense, or in which semantic language seems to tip over into language noise, may offer ways of illuminating, challenging, or perpetuating the

supposed binary of meaning and nonsense, or sense and nonsense, many of which cannot be achieved in printed text in the same manner.

The intersection of sense and nonsense is an important starting point in Craig Dworkin and Marjorie Perloff's 2009 work on sound poetry, *Sound of Poetry/Poetry of Sound*. Dworkin points out that one of the definitions of sound in the *OED* is "Mere audible effect, without significance or real importance" (9), and finds that sound is sometimes understood as the opposite of sense. Dworkin is, however, more inclined to believe the formalist Jan Mukarovsky, who proposed that sounds "have a semantic nature themselves" (qtd. in Dworkin 10), because when is sound ever without any potential of interpretation, and thus without meaning? In an essay on Dada, "Mind the Sound," Örn Norðdahl reflects on the relationship between language and the human voice, noting that as humans, we cannot help but to look for semantics, "because one's head interprets a spoken voice as language, and interprets language as being something that inherently has a meaning one can look up in a dictionary" (*Booby* 51), even when the case more often than not is that sound poetry only "resembles" language, "mimics language" (*Booby* 51). Dworkin's conclusion is that "sound is never inherently noise or message; instead, sound and sense are located at the intersection of social bodies in particular spaces" (14). For him, the situatedness of the poem, the where, when, who, and how, is the key.

Dworkin's claim is important to bear in mind while listening to *The Scandinavian Series*. It points not only to how the significance of the work is generated, but also to the obstacles of the process of signification. His evocation of "particular spaces" seems to point at the specificity that is brought about by traditional poetry readings of performances and the obvious situatedness of these events. For Dworkin, the intersection of sound and sense is created when the listener is part of an audience that can interact with the performer, and the performance is thus meaningfully situated in time and place.

However, contemporary sound poetry is seldom limited to an obvious and particular space, and does not have to be a social event played out between social bodies. It is not always performed on a stage, in a specific place, within a definable context. In the twenty-first century, sound poetry may well be—and surprisingly often is—experienced live, in performances at special venues or as livestreams on radio, TV, or the Internet on mobile phones or computers. However, it may also be in the form of files stored on the Internet or available on discs. When recorded and uploaded to the Internet, the performance loses its immediate situatedness—even though it is sometimes possible to see when and where the recording was made. The sound becomes unanchored much in the same way as a printed poem is—if the author of the written poem is "dead" after Foucault and Barthes, the performer of the recorded poem can be thought of as a "ghost." "Indeed, one of the fundamental conditions of the gramophonic voice of the poet is its ghostly presence" (144), as Charles Bernstein points out in an article on sound recordings of poetry. "Listening to such recordings, we hear a voice, if not of the dead, then one that sounds present but is absent" (144), he adds.

However, the ghostliness of the recording, when listened to over the Internet, provides another kind of situatedness: an uncanny unboundedness in which the material can be experienced by a specifically situated listener as paradoxically lacking the anchors of space and time. The poem is everywhere and nowhere, and can be experienced at any time; it is anchored with every new listener, rather than to the context of its performance. Such a lack of anchoredness and its sense of deterritorialization obviously do not mean that the recorded poem lacks context and is situated by other factors than the situatedness of the performance. This becomes apparent in Örn Norðdahl's *The Scandinavian Series*, in which many different contexts, such as language and geography, provide important and changing anchors—and as such, reterritorialization—for the different parts of the work.

In short, listening to a poetic work performed live in a set venue compared to listening to it as a sound file on the Internet profoundly changes its potential to signify, with the reader and the audience clearly situated in a geographical and linguistic setting and the language competence of the majority of the listeners also adding to the production of meaning in the work, adding to it the important aspect of the feedback loop between performer and audience.[4]

A Six-Language Scandi-Mashup

The violence of the language mixing in *The Scandinavian Series* is apparent to anyone familiar with Scandinavia and its languages. Örn Norðdahl distorts Icelandic phonetically, to the point of being unrecognizable, through the evocation of Danish in what he himself calls Mock Danish, Norwegian in Mock Norwegian, and Swedish in Mock Swedish. The result is that all the languages involved are violently handled in one way or another. With the exception of two of the poems, in which he obviously speaks Finnish and American English—both of which I would not hesitate to also call Mock Finnish and Mock American—the series is in Icelandic throughout. However, it gives the impression of total polyglottism, as it uses five Nordic languages in addition to English. The only point in which the series sounds Icelandic is in the digitally distorted voice in "Heidi (fyrir Manga)," mentioned above. Instead, the poem that most clearly mentions Iceland is the "Iceland Report on the Observance of Standards and Codes," a rambling text delivered in an exaggerated American vernacular, with amplified vowels and long US *r*-sounds.

The first poem of the series is the Danish-sounding "Besta orðið mitt," which follows the series' core aesthetic as the reading of an Icelandic poem evokes another Scandinavian language through the use of sound and the way it is read. The stress and lower pitch at the end of each phrase mimics the rhythm and melody of Danish, but the effect of Danish is most effectively created by the characteristic use of what is called *stød*, a sort of glottal stop on stressed vowels. Taking his time in the performance of the poem, Örn Norðdahl speaks slowly, and with an exaggerated assurance

—a way of speaking that evokes the stereotypical image of the Dane widely circulated in the rest of Scandinavia and believed to show off self-importance—or, in a more positive tone, self-assurance and composure. The repetition of the word "jeg" —Scandinavian for *I*, here pronounced in an exaggeratedly Danish manner—stands out and underlines this imagery.

The title of the poem translates as "my best word." The phrase is never spoken in the performance, but the listener who has found the file online has read the titles, and for such a listener, the title points to the possibility of a metapoetic reading that reflects on the poem itself. Is Danish the poet's "best word"? Here, Scandinavian history becomes an important context, and the historical presence of Danish and Denmark in Iceland comes into play. Iceland was under Norwegian, and later Danish, rule for centuries, first as part of Norway, later as a result of the union between Norway and Denmark from 1397 to 1523, and later still as a part of the Danish Monarchy. Throughout this joint history, Denmark was the ruler, and Iceland's relationship with Denmark is still complex. Iceland did not become wholly independent from Denmark until 1944. Danish is still taught as a second language in Icelandic schools today, although it is not mandatory, and students can choose between Danish and English. The poem's Icelandic and Danish language mashup puts political history, power relations, and language hierarchies into play in the series from the beginning. The question of hierarchy is problematized by the fact that although Denmark —and therefore Danish—has had the ruling position, Icelandic is considered purer and more ancient than Danish in Icelandic nationalist circles, in which Danish is regarded as a later, less pure and authentic version of Norse. To read an Icelandic poem as if it were a Danish one is to engage with the deeply entangled political and hierarchical relationship between both languages.

Using Icelandic and Danish together this way, with the one violently distorting the other, can be understood as a deeply symbolic and political move: a comment on a difficult history and on present-day chauvinism. Reading the poem alongside Örn Norðdahl's other works highlights this political stance. Örn Norðdahl is clearly wary of the purist sentiments and policies surrounding Icelandic. In an article with the telling title "The Importance of Destroying a Language (of One's Own)," he contends that the myth about Icelandic

> is that it is a purer language than that spoken by our brethren in Scandinavia, which at best is considered to be some sort of pidgin Icelandic. The reason for this is that Icelandic is believed to be much closer to the language spoken in Scandinavia a millennium ago and thus being a living language history. (Örn Norðdahl, *Booby* 14)

As he sees it, the myth of purity leads to language conservatism and isolationism, and he calls for action: "The need in Iceland to overthrow the language regime is quite dire," he says, and warns about language rigidity as "a pathway to fascism" (Örn Norðdahl, *Booby* 15). He explores these very motifs in *Illska*, as the novel thematizes Icelandic nationalist chauvinism and the celebration of that which is purely

Icelandic, and how these seemingly harmless practices are closely related to xenophobia and neo-Nazism in Iceland.

A completely different prosody is used in the reading of the—just as Icelandic—poem "Kennara með köldu blóði" (A Teacher with Cold Blood). A listener familiar with Scandinavian would easily recognize the Norwegian sounds: the pitch is higher, and the reading very melodic. All the phrases also end on a distinctly higher pitch, which is typical of Norwegian speech. The material of the poem consists of clippings from the Internet, found via *Google*, a practice that Örn Norðdahl himself calls a "google sculpture" (*Booby* 83). Not only the language that he mimics, but the words themselves, are not his own: inauthenticity as poetic strategy. Furthermore, since it is almost impossible for the listener to discern what is being said, language is reduced to noise and sound bits. The poem is not a switching of codes but a blending of them, in a way that, in Örn Norðdahl's own words (*Booby* 14), "destroys" both languages used. What we get is a Norwegian signifier devoid of Norwegian signified. The listener who can discern the Icelandic that is hidden in the Norwegian-sounding soundscape hears phrases with no logical connection to one another, in verses without meaningful content.

In the Swedish-sounding poem of the series, "Sjö sje á sjó-sjó," Örn Norðdahl changes his tone of voice, pitch, and tempo in order to mimic the dialect of Southern Sweden: the pace is much slower than in the Norwegian-sounding poem, and the melody completely different. The *r*-sound that to a Swede is characteristic of Southern Sweden is joyfully exaggerated and repeated. The title of the poem itself is a play with what is commonly thought to be one of the most difficult sounds that a foreigner encounters when learning Swedish, the *sje*-sound. Combined, the tempo and the exaggerations evoke the stereotype of the Southern Swede: a bit slow-witted, but happy and content. The reading is also what some would find annoyingly loud, since the Southern Swede is not known to be shy.

In the Finnish poem of the series, one of its "half-siblings," Örn Norðdahl chooses a completely different take. Here, he is actually reading in Finnish in a way that mimics Finnish intonation, and the text is not his own at all. Instead, it is an Internet collage poem in which the Finnish poet Rita Dahl combines found sentences that use the world "helvetti" (hell). Örn Norðdahl is, however, performing in a language that he does not know at all, hence its translingual quality. By using another poet's text in his "Finnish" reading, Örn Norðdahl turns the poetic text into something completely different. He breaks not only the unwritten rule that the poet is expected to use his/her own poetry in live performances, but also the implicit rule that a poet is supposed to perform in a language he/she understands, preferably his/her first.[5] Even so, he poses as "the author" of the work, thus questioning tacit expectations of poetic authenticity.

Language-wise, these moves create an interesting paradox: the poem is in Finnish, but it is obvious that the semiotic content is out of bounds to the performer. The result is a poem that is not *in* Finnish—as in expressing a certain content in a

language that happens to be Finnish—but rather *signals* Finnish, as in the language Finnish. Borrowing an expression from Belgian sociolinguist Jan Blommaert (29), one might suggest that the use of Finnish had an emblematic function rather than a linguistic one, signalling meanings associated with Finnishness. It is a violent move, but also one that makes the audience laugh. In this way, the strategy of the poem is much the same as that Leevi Lehto uses later in his "Norwegian Words": reading in Norwegian, a language he does not understand. However, these two poems are still different: Lehto's poem was performed at a poetry festival in Bergen, at which a majority of the audience was Norwegian, thus using othering—of the audience and of the poet himself—as an important part of its aesthetic. The situatedness of Örn Norðdahl's "Helvetti"-poem is much more complex: it may very well be performed, or played, with no Finnish people listening at all. That fact increases its violent character. The violence of the poem is also apparent in its use of pejorative stereotypes. In Scandinavia, historically and, of course, unfairly, the Finnish stereotype that is perpetually repeated in popular culture is that of an uncivilized male, drunk on vodka, and angry, more often than not carrying a knife that he does not hesitate to use. Örn Norðdahl reads the words of the poem in an aggressive, very macho-sounding tone of voice, all of which is further exaggerated with the sounds that are added to the soundfile post-performance.[6] Even to a listener who knows Finnish, the semantic content is secondary, as it consists of unrelated sentences piled on top of each other. Instead, the work is a play on national stereotypes through the use of sound and recognizable, othered language. However, the poem illustrates the point that spoken sound always means something to the listener, even if he/she does not understand it: the voice itself evokes the notion of language and (possible) communication. The title word stands out: "HELVETTI." It is Finnish for "hell," and can be understood by all Scandinavian speakers: its Swedish and Norwegian equivalent is "helvete"; in Danish, the word translates as "helvede"; and in Icelandic, it is "helvítis." As it is the only word in the poem that the Scandinavian non-Finnish-speaking listener understands immediately, its coarseness underlines the Finn stereotype.

The other "half-sibling" of the series, "Iceland Report on the Observance of Standards and Codes," stands out as it is neither written nor read in any Scandinavian or Scandinavian-sounding language. Instead it is delivered in an exaggerated form of US English and read in a theatrical, somewhat mocking way. It does, however, evoke Iceland, as it talks of the artist Björk and of life on Iceland. The undertext here is Icelandic: the fluid narrator—and it should be stressed that there is no clear-cut protagonist here, instead many voices that mend into one amorphous whole—is supposedly not speaking in her/their mother tongue, and neither is Örn Norðdahl in his performance of the poem. In his exaggerated use of American English, he mimics the act of mimicking language, in a multilayered language play. As with many others, this poem is also a result of Internet searches; here, Örn Norðdahl is cutting and pasting from the most banal and unoriginal finds. As such, it is sad, humorous, and violent, and results in a political performance that touches upon Icelandic

chauvinism and identity, and comments on Iceland's complex twentieth-century history. The poem itself is monolingual; it is the context and the reading aloud of the poem that makes it multilingual.

The historical context, then, with a heavy North American presence in Iceland throughout the twentieth century, is clearly important to the situatedness of the poem. Some figures illustrate it well: Iceland has a population of just 340,000 (*Worldometer*), but welcomes close to 2.5 million overnight visitors every year. The majority of those come from North America, with US citizens making up one of every five visitors in the summertime and almost two of every five visitors in the winter (Icelandic Tourist Board). In addition to tourism, Iceland has also had a history of strong US military presence, with US military bases and US-run NATO bases having existed in places such as Keflavik since the Second World War. In the main shopping road in Reykjavik on any day of the year, North American English is heard and spoken everywhere, and Icelandic sweaters and souvenirs are sold to the many visitors in almost every shop, turning the small city into a place directed more at its visitors than its inhabitants.

The mock military title of the poem, with its reference to "standards and codes," makes fun of the current and historic military presence in Iceland. Still, within most of the poem, the protagonist(s) come(s) across as both Icelandic and stereotypically feminine. The poem should be understood in light of Icelandic, as previously noted, as a source of nationalist pride and chauvinism. Ideological writings on language purism have been found in Icelandic texts from as early as the sixteenth century, and a notion of language protectionism and an adversary sentiment against loan words can be found throughout the island's history (Bandle 1343). Whenever a new technological product comes around, an Icelandic word is invented for it, even if that word may not stick. Still, Iceland is the Scandinavian country where the presence of English is most strongly felt.

A Work of Language Mimicry, Power, and Othering

Örn Norðdahl has described *The Scandinavian Series* as "foolish, childish, and mostly pointless" (*Booby* 98). It can be understood that way, but it does not appear that even Örn Norðdahl believes it is only that. Instead, no matter how silly it may be, the series can be said to raise many important questions about language, identity, and power. At the heart of the series' aesthetics is the act of language mimicry, and this is the part of the work that evokes both laughter and offence, because language mimicry, like all mimicry, is a complex activity that is always more than it seems.

In the beginning of a person's life, language mimicry is simple, even necessary; that is how language is learnt. In the fourth chapter of his *Ars Poetica*, Aristotle writes that mimicry, and the delight that humans take in mimicking, is the road to knowledge.

As adults we also, for the most part, learn languages through mimicry; however, for an adult, mimicry is not pure delight, but can be shameful and embarrassing. The reasons are many and complex. First, mimicking a language that one does not speak smacks of inauthenticity, and can be seen as making a spectacle of oneself. Second, complex questions of power and hierarchy between languages and humans are also important factors that come into play when adults mimic languages, often creating feelings of unease and discomfort. Sometimes the one doing the mimicking lacks power, because of his/her inability to speak in a language that may be expected in the given circumstances. One example that readily exposes the power structure of language is the phenomenon of American Accent courses in India, in which students who are proficient in English pay significant prices in order to learn how to mimic the American accent in order to "pass" as American native speakers, such as when working in call centres (Blommaert 47-61). Sometimes mimicking gives the mimicker power, or underlines the power they have, as is the case when underprivileged languages spoken by underprivileged people are mimicked.[7] For example, my French was once mimicked by a clerk selling tickets in the Paris metro in a demonstration of power that, because of the long line, had a good-sized audience. My instant feelings of shame, powerlessness, and inferiority taught me an important lesson on language and power, even if the power relations of the situation were complicated, as I was a far-from-underprivileged visiting scholar at a Paris research institute at the time. A better example would be Peter Sellers's accent in *The Party* (1968), in which he not only performs in brownface, but mimics Indian English and plays a small-time actor who has a great party experience in Hollywood because of his naïveté and overall cluelessness. The implicit message is not only that Sellers's character's accent and his total lack of sophistication go together, but also that the childlike oriental is more authentic than his host and fellow partygoers, who are all spoiled by Western civilization.

As Blommaert and other scholars interested in language and power, such as Pierre Bourdieu and Louis-Jean Calvet, have pointed out, the who, where, and what are important factors here. Adult mimicry is rarely about the pure delight that Aristotle discusses, even when it starts out as such. Although it is an intrinsic part of language learning, mimicking someone can easily be considered rude. It may also put the one doing the mimicking in a somewhat infantile position, hence the shame and discomfort. Viewed from another perspective, the experience of being mimicked may also be experienced as shameful. Mimicking language simply is risky business, while simultaneously being an inevitable part of acquiring a language. When watching the Swedish Chef on *The Muppet Show*, one can easily find the liminality of languages a playful and uncomplicated source of fun. It is, however, impossible not to become aware of the difficult power structures that are at play in any language mimicry, the many and difficult affects that it evokes, and the fact that it is often violent.

The fine line between delight and offence can be experienced in the use of language mimicry in jokes, comedy shows, and commercials. One crucial reason has to do with

the performance of mimicry as an act of othering, both of oneself and of the other.[8] Language, especially spoken language, is a sign in itself no matter what is said (see Blommaert 43; Bourdieu 67). One could say that language can take on an emblematic rather than a linguistic significance. Spoken language makes power structures manifest by actualizing preconceived notions of how speech is associated with identity and with a set of characteristics such as class and hierarchical position. When these notions are put to exaggerated and simplified use in *The Scandinavian Series*, the work borrows its signification from different Scandinavian stereotypes, the practice of stereotyping being something that, in the words of Stuart Hall, "reduces, essentializes, naturalizes and fixes 'difference'" (247). What these stereotypes do in the work is, however, not readily apparent. Do they perpetuate the bigotry of the stereotype, or do they call it into question? Which force is stronger, the reterritorializing or the deterritorializing?

Creative Destruction: Some Concluding Remarks

The Scandinavian Series creates a "Scandinavian" soundscape of recognizable but undecipherable language noise that comes across as eerily multilingual even when the individual pieces, as in the case of "Icelandic Standards and Codes," are decidedly monolingual, turning listening to the series into an unplaceable yet familiar—thus thoroughly *unheimlich*—experience. The complex situatedness of the work is important, in terms of performance, listening, and the contexts that the work actualizes and/or in which it is actualized. The facts that the series has no physical home other than cyberspace—that it can be listened to anywhere, any time, by someone online—and that the performer is not geographically situated but a voice, simultaneously present and absent, add to the uncanniness of the experience.

What, then, is the main significance of this poetic practice? It is clearly a provocative piece, as Örn Norðdahl moves across difficult territory. On the one hand, mimicking and appropriation easily come across as violently distasteful, as it uses clichés and stereotypes in a reterritorializing practice that could be seen as enforcing the monolingual paradigm. On the other, one could suggest that through the act of othering and self-othering, and through the layering and distortion of languages, Örn Norðdahl challenges that very paradigm to a deterritorializing effect. The question is, though, if the deterritorializing forces of the work are stronger than the retererritorializing forces. Either way, there is no simple answer to this query. As Christopher Bush cautions in his article on othering and self-othering in literary theory and practice, "one cannot moot the political and ethical questions surrounding a given use of cultural difference by claiming that it is citational rather than representational, particularly when the citation is indirectly representational" (171). This may be the case here: Örn Norðdahl's work challenges the idea of language purity and Herderian ideas of language, people, and nation intrinsically bound together (Yildiz 6-7), but in

order to do so, it uses—and possibly perpetuates—those very ideas. Still, whenever the act of representation is involved in cultural practices, ideas of culture and identity are negotiated (see Hall), and *The Scandinavian Series* can be understood as a thought-provoking, and uncomfortably funny, intervention in this continuing negotiation.

One way of approaching the series is to take note of the ever-changing way the work is situated in the world. In a thorough reflection on Scandinavian languages and peoples in an international context and as part of a larger power structure, one can begin to see the work it does in perpetuating and disrupting ideas on the relationship between languages and cultural identities. In a global context, not many people speak or understand Scandinavian languages. The mere existence of the Swedish Chef points to the fact that Scandinavian languages are experienced as opaque and, therefore, somewhat funny, and that this funny language might mirror a certain slow-wittedness in the national character. Scandinavians are used to belonging to a linguistic minority. When travelling abroad, even within Europe, they are often asked what language they speak and where they come from. This context of experienced outsidership plays into Örn Norðdahl's series. But Örn Norðdahl is also a well-travelled poet, and, as a white male European, privileged in many ways. As many of his contemporaries, he is a welcome guest of international poetry festivals and a popular performer at international literary events. He is, however, aware that the majority of his audience does not speak his native language (Örn Norðdahl, *Booby* 75). The implied listener here, then, is one who may speak any or many languages, sometimes including, but most often excluding, Icelandic. Both the implied and the actual listener may be situated anywhere. Örn Norðdahl then plays with dislocated language, language that is on the verge of becoming noise, or language that just signals language-ness, a kind of language noise, thus destroying most of the common idea of language as, in the words of *Wikipedia*, "a structured system of communication," and turning languages as a whole, such as "Swedish," "Finnish," or "Norwegian," into emblematic signs rather than tools for meaningful communication.

Is it thus possible to read *The Scandinavian Series* as an attempt to pinpoint the liminal space between the inside and the outside of language? Örn Norðdahl's method is aggressive: he relies on violent mimicry, sound distortion, and destruction of semantics. I would suggest that, especially in his performance, Örn Norðdahl does many things. For a start, he goes to great lengths to deconstruct the idea of the poetic subject and the voice of the poet and to dissociate the categories from one another: he adopts a way of reading that mimics an Other, and he uses phrases and languages that are not his own. The poet himself becomes an echo chamber for language. However, he does not stop there. This attempt to place oneself and one's work outside of its semantic content while paradoxically being an echo chamber for language—an attempt that seems destined to fail—opens up to the coming together of the possible philosophical and ideological aspects of the work. Through strong affects, such as laughter mixed with shame, *The Scandinavian Series* makes the listener experience the idea that language is never just semantics. Even when semantics are taken out,

language signifies. It is filled with ideological and political traces, connotations to geography and nationhood, and identity markers pointing toward gender, ethnicity, age, class, and other categories. It perpetuates hierarchies between humans. Through the violent use of mimicry, Örn Norðdahl's performance of *The Scandinavian Series* may make the listener experience how a speech act never can be unsituated, and how it always connotes places, identities, nations, and other classifications, even when it sounds empty.

This article explores how language mimicry, and language destruction and distortion, in sound poetry and oral poetic performance may investigate the (im)possibility of stepping outside of language. It shows how multilingual sound poetry, among many other things, can be used in order to conduct lyrical research into language and the deterritorializing, reterritorializing, and bordering forces and mechanisms inherent in language use and play. It also discusses how translingual and multilingual poetry can be understood as political, artistic research into language as a power structure, a container for signification that transcends the semantic content of the words used. In the practice of many contemporary multilingual poets and performance artists, Sound Poetry is a genre in which the notion of national identity, xenophobia, and prejudice may be explored in complex ways. The multilingual practice and performances of sound poets such as Örn Norðdahl and his contemporaries raise, address, and explore necessary and complex questions about national identity and the limits and permeability of language. It is up to the heterogeneous audience to reflect on the possible answers.

Notes

1. *PennSound* is an archive of sound poetry and other recordings related to contemporary poetry, such as readings, interviews, and podcasts, initiated by Charles Bernstein and Al Filreis in 2005 at the Department of English at the University of Pennsylvania. As of 2018, the archive consists of thousands of files submitted by hundreds of contributors from all over the world.

2. Here, I want to point out the relevant critique that the notion of "language" as a countable phenomenon with easily identified borders has received from linguists and philosophers as well as from scholars in other fields. See, for example, Huss and Tidigs 17; Sakai 72-74.

3. The usefulness of the term bordering to the study of multilingual poetry has been explored in the work of Markus Huss and Julia Tidigs, and I draw from their insights here.

4. On the feedback loop at work in live performances, see Fischer-Lichte.

5. Charles Bernstein (142-44) writes that, typically, poets are only expected to read other poets' work at memorials and similar events.

6. On the significance of digital editing of contemporary sound poetry to the poetics of sound poetry, see, for example, Bernstein, and Spinelli.

7. For a discussion of the inequalities of languages and language varieties, see Calvet 2-5.

8. The fact that stereotyping based on ideas about nationality, ethnicity, class, race, and other factors lead

to and are perpetuated by othering, as well as complex self-othering, is the subject of many studies, ranging from classics such as Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) and Naoki Sakai's *Translation and Subjectivity* (1997), to newer essays with a narrower focus and more specialized theoretical scope, such as Christopher Bush's "The Other of the Other: Cultural Studies, Theory, and the Location of the Modernist Signifier" (2005).

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