

OTHER

Why Write in English? Non-Native Speakers and Their Love for a Language

by Teresa Sailer



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“My choice of the respective language comes very naturally and without consciously deciding on it, as I feel that I can express different aspects of my life better in one language than in the other ones.”

- Hanna Roth, University of Salzburg

Which Language Does Your Heart Speak?

When it comes to writing, many would instinctively write in their native language. Language can be a very personal way to approach social identity and show belonging to a certain group of people or a culture.

What happens, then, when you live in a country that does not favour this particular language? What about people who grow up bilingually? Which language would they choose? Their cultural and linguistic background would surely significantly influence their writing, right?



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Ultimately, language and our associations with it depend highly on our own identity and our ability to utilize language to express ourselves. In that sense, language can be very subjective and create a way to represent a certain identity or culture. While some might use their native language to express this identity, others might reach out to a different language.

Many bilingual writers, for example, might use the dominant language of the country they currently live in, as opposed to a language that might be limited to their private homes. The matter of accessibility probably also plays a role here. English, for example, as the world's most spoken second language will cater to a much larger audience than more obscure languages. Regardless, the reasons for using one language or another can be numerous and are highly individual — which is exactly what makes the study of non-native literature so interesting.

Why Would Non-Native Speakers Write in English?

Due to the global spread of English as a dominant language, it is nowadays also being taught much more commonly in foreign language classrooms. English departments around the globe offer all kinds of classes, among them literature and creative writing. As a result, many students of English get to a point where they produce creative texts, specifically also poetry, in a language that is not their native language. How is writing in a foreign language then different from writing in one's native language? And is it still 'authentic'?

For a course called "Culture at Work (Publishing Poetry)" held by Dr. Wolfgang Görtschacher at the University of Salzburg, Austria, we investigated writing, particularly poetry, in English as a second or foreign language.

When interviewing our classmates, one reply we received pointed out that authentic writing can be done in any language and that English definitely has obvious benefits:

"As long as the literary work seems authentic to *me*, I don't mind reading English literature by non-native speakers at all; quite the opposite, as a lingua franca, English has the potential to express a voice which cannot only be heard, but also actually understood by many."

- Daniel Lang, University of Salzburg

Many learners of English, particularly English students, have fallen in love with the language and often feel more at home in it than in their native tongue. If a language already feels very close due to continued exposure to it, e.g. through music or literature, it is likely that one will resort to this language to describe one's emotions and thoughts as well. Wouldn't you agree that saying something personal in a foreign language is sometimes much easier than saying the same thing in your native one?

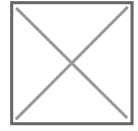
A Non-Native Speaker in an English-Speaking World

Unfortunately, due to their status as L2 speakers of English, non-native speakers' work is often eyed sceptically, especially when it comes from someone who does not actually live in

an English-speaking country.

The concept of a 'native speaker,' however, can be superficial and ultimately says very little about the speaker's actual language level. Being a native speaker doesn't per se make you a superior writer to someone who isn't. The quality of writing that can be found on *Tint Journal*, for example, is a testimony to that.

In our globalized world, many people enjoy reading in English and some even prefer writing in English over their own native languages. Unfortunately, writing by non-native speakers is often seen as inferior to writing by native speakers. Both types, however, can be highly personal, emotional and appealing to readers.



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There are many renowned writers who affirm and explore their language identity through writing. Prominent examples would be Milan Kundera who often writes in French, or Vladimir Nabokov who wrote a lot in English. Additionally, as displayed on *Tint*, aspiring writers in particular often feel drawn to English as a form of expression. In fact, writing in a language that is not the writer's native language is not as uncommon as one is tempted to assume. In many cases, you might not even have noticed it!

In sum, the takeaway here should be that non-native writing shows an impressive degree of control over a language that otherwise often seems to control our daily lives instead. If you feel more comfortable expressing yourself in English, or you feel like English suits your needs better, why shouldn't you go ahead and use it?

Looking at Non-Native Writing Through a *Tinted* Window

For the same course mentioned above, we also looked at different publishing houses and their methods when it comes to publishing poetry. We quickly found that *Tint Journal* and their focus on non-native literature was the most interesting to us and decided to focus on it for this class.

Upon introducing *Tint* to our colleagues in the form of a presentation, we received lots of feedback from our classmates who were just as intrigued by the concept as we were and the discussions we had about non-native writing in class were quite insightful.

From the layout of the website, the general structure of *Tint*, to the audio recordings accompanying the poems, almost everything was seen as appealing and intriguing. What

received praise above all was the fact that the magazine exclusively features creative work of non-native speakers of English. Here are some of our classmates' responses to a questionnaire that we carried out:

“What really appeals to me is the general idea of specifically publishing poetry written by non-native speakers of English. Furthermore, I really liked the website! The design and all the artwork are appealing.”

- Nadine Tanase, University of Salzburg

“Their concept seems very well thought of and diverse. I love the aspect that you can include fragments in another language in an otherwise English poem, which definitely enriches a text in my opinion.”

- Hanna Roth, University of Salzburg

“I think *Tint Journal* is a great platform to submit to. What is appealing is the range of text types that can be submitted, and that the genre of texts is not restricted. Furthermore, I like the audio feature they added so that one can listen to a piece instead of reading it.”

- Veronika Sattlecker, University of Salzburg

From these comments one can already derive that the concept of publishing non-native literature (and doing it with as much elegance as *Tint* does) is received very positively by many students of English in Austria. The assembled authors on *Tint* show that this is also true for global audiences.

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As non-native speakers of English, we believe that there is a richness and value to non-native literature that is often overlooked and underappreciated. The language a piece of literature is written in can have considerable effect on how it is received, but it is ultimately the content, the themes addressed and the stylistic choices that make a piece of writing unique.

There are many aspects accompanying non-native writing, be it in English or any other language, that make for a colourful addition to the literary landscape of our time. As a result, non-native writing enables us to see and broaden our understanding of other people and cultures we might never get the chance to understand otherwise.

We hope that this article made you see non-native writing through different eyes and celebrate its colourfulness as it appears through the glass of a window; not a dirty window, but a *tinted* one.

Parts of this text are taken from a term paper titled “Poetry Written in Non-native Languages” written by Sabrina S.