Toward a Literary History of “Broken Language”:
Reading Accent in E.T.A. Hoffmann, K. A. Tavaststjerna, and Vilhelm Moberg

Markus Huss | ORCID: 0000-0002-7306-2160
Associate professor, Lecturer in German, Department of Slavic and Baltic Studies, Finnish, Dutch and German, Stockholm University, Stockholm, Sweden
markus.huss@tyska.su.se

Julia Tidigs¹ | ORCID: 0000-0003-3862-7477
Associate professor, Lecturer in Nordic Literature, Department of Finnish, Finno-Ugrian and Scandinavian Studies, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland
julia.tidigs@helsinki.fi

Received: 27 October 2022 | Accepted: 25 September 2023 | Published online: 27 November 2023

Abstract

Ever since the shibboleth narrative in the Book of Judges, the consequences of linguistic passing or non-passing have been demonstrated in literature. The article analyzes so-called “broken” or accented speech in terms of embodied and affectively charged nodes of linguistic entanglements: between belonging, affect, proficiency, ownership as well as inclusion and exclusion. The function of accented speech is in turn shown to be highly contextual, depending on socio-historical and cultural settings, as demonstrated in the article’s three case studies: E.T.A. Hoffmann’s “Der Sandmann” (1816), K. A. Tavaststjerna’s En patriot utan fosterland (1896), and Vilhelm Moberg’s Nybyggarna (1956).

Keywords

literary multilingualism – accent – “broken language” – the uncanny – affect

¹ The authors contributed equally to this work.
Introduction: Reading Accent in Literature

This article is a study of so-called “broken” or “accented” language in three literary works published between 1816 and 1959 in Germany, Finland, and Sweden. Our aim is to approach literary multilingualism from the vantage point of “broken language” and “foreign accent” in a selection of canonical literary works, in order to show how the inquiry into these phenomena has the potential to expose linguistic entanglements between belonging, affect, proficiency, ownership, as well as inclusion and exclusion. In doing this, we center a literary phenomenon usually regarded as marginal within the field of literary multilingualism studies. Literary multilingualism (in the sense of the presence of words from several languages within one text) and accent are related yet distinct phenomena; in literary texts, they often occur simultaneously—for example, in the depiction of the speech of non-native speakers.

By “foreign-accent speech” we refer to the speech of the non-native speaker when this is marked as strange or foreign. In some cases, as we shall see in our examples, it is a question of the speech of the “ex-native speaker,” that is, the speaker who has become estranged from her or his presumed mother tongue. By “broken language” we refer to the embodied metaphor, commonly used in several languages to denote foreign-accent speech, of a language being corrupted by the influence of another language, “broken” when the non-native speaker takes it into her or his mouth. In the case of both “foreign accent” and “broken language,” a linguistic othering is embedded in the term, whereby either the language or the speaker is regarded as foreign or nondomestic, and thus deviating from an often nonarticulated yet powerful understanding of language as pure and whole.

This positioning is inherently problematic, since it presupposes the existence of a language as a given whole, which in turn would be “broken” or corrupted by the non-native speaker. We nevertheless claim that the metaphorical concept of “broken language” has the potential to expose difference on multiple levels in literary works: linguistic, cultural, aesthetic, societal, political, and historical. Here, our stance resembles Yildiz’s approach to the problematic yet forceful concept of “mother tongue,” which she attempts to work through, instead of ignoring it and thus sidestepping its continued influence (13–14). In a similar manner, we argue for literary multilingualism research that thinks through and beyond concepts of nationalist language ideology, such as “broken language” (cf. Tidigs, “Inscription of Difference”). The accent, and the figure of the foreign-accent speaker, is an embodied and affectively charged node where the entanglements of language, competence, belonging, and affect can be explored and made visible. As Wirth-Nesher has eloquently stated, “the very
concept of ‘accent’ is the interface of race and culture, of body and language. It is an emblem of the inescapability of personal history; it is the writing onto the body of collective history and often of collective destiny” (75).

Taking “foreign accent” and “broken language” as the point of departure enables us to start not from a conception of languages as naturalized entities or from an supposed “original” state of infinite linguistic variation, but rather in existing entanglements of different conceptions of language(s), competency, affect, and belonging.\(^2\) In our reading of accent in the chosen literary texts, we ask: How is the relationship between languages in instances of foreign-accent speech depicted and conceptualized? We particularly look at depiction and conceptualization in terms of perspective (narrator and focalization). Since we regard accent as part of a larger repertoire of questions concerning language, ownership, and belonging, we explore how foreign-accent speech is framed in terms of affect, corporeality, gender, and sociocultural context. What setups of entanglements can be uncovered by the exploration of accent in these literary examples?

The consequences of linguistic passing or non-passing have been demonstrated in literary works ever since the shibboleth narrative in the Book of Judges:

And the Gileadites captured the fords of the Jordan against the Ephraimites. And when any of the fugitives of Ephraim said, “Let me go over,” the men of Gilead said to him, “Are you an Ephraimite?” When he said, “No,” they said to him, “Then say Shibboleth,” and he said, “Sibboleth,” for he could not pronounce it right. Then they seized him and slaughtered him at the fords of the Jordan. At that time 42,000 of the Ephraimites fell. (Judges 12:5–6)

In this instance, the correct pronunciation of a word is a question of life and death, and of passing as a member of a linguistic community.\(^3\) In his reflection on shibboleth, Derrida highlights the accent as “an inscription of difference.” Central to shibboleth is that this is an inscription that must be performed: “It is not enough to know the difference; one must be capable of it, must be able to

---

\(^2\) In this respect, our approach is analogous to that of Pollari et al. (24), who propose entanglement as a starting point in the investigation of national literatures and canon, since it “[...] liberates us from the national category on the level of explicit discourse, whilst not precluding attention to it. Thus, entanglement as a term enables an acknowledgement of both the lessening significance and the persistence of the national category and the nation state in a globalized world.”

\(^3\) Wirth-Nesher (59) has discussed accent-free speech in terms of linguistic passing, and its racial overtones, in connection to Jewish American literature.
do it, or know how to do it—and here doing means marking” (Derrida 26). It is not enough to know how shibboleth ought to be pronounced; one must be able to perform it bodily, produce the correct sounds with one’s own body. What the accent marks is belonging (or non-belonging) into a linguistic community; the ability to pronounce shibboleth is not natural and is not a result of an inherent articulatory ability but instead a result of one’s introduction to a linguistic community. Indeed, Wirth-Nesher speaks of the accent as “the body remembering” (56). Accent is a bodily performed testimony to the speaker’s linguistic history and the community of which she has been a part. Following Derrida, we trace the inscriptions of difference that accent marks in literary texts—on the language of the texts, and in the bodies of literary characters. Just as accent is something performed by the speaker and comes into being in concrete utterances, “broken language” is created and re-created in the texts. The feature of brokenness is ascribed to language by literary characters and narrators; because of this it is an amorphous, fluid, and context-bound phenomenon.

The texts that serve as our examples are E.T.A. Hoffmann’s story “Der Sandmann” [“The Sand-Man”] (1816), Karl August Tavaststjerna’s novel En patriot utan fosterland [A Patriot without a Motherland] (1896), and Vilhelm Moberg’s novel Nybyggarna [The Settlers] (1956). The examples consist of literary works from three countries—Finland (Tavaststjerna), Germany (Hoffmann), and Sweden (Moberg)—and two languages—German (Hoffmann) and Swedish (Tavaststjerna and Moberg). We have chosen examples spanning a period of 140 years in order for works of different genres and historical contexts to be represented; however, the examples are not to be considered as shorthand for a general description of their respective countries, languages, or periods of origin. Moreover, our examples have been chosen because they render and imagine—in short, do—accent and “broken language” very differently and on multiple levels of the text. Indeed, in one of the texts (Tavaststjerna), foreign-accent speech is not even present on a discursive level; it is spoken of, yet never represented, in the text. As our analysis shows, accent and broken language in literary texts are deeply entangled with the texts’ specific socio-historical and cultural contexts, but also with their linguistic and literary strategies.

In addition, our examples consist of texts by canonical authors within their respective cultural and linguistic traditions that have been assumed monolingual and, therefore, have usually not been treated as objects of research within the field of literary multilingualism. Through these seemingly monolingual examples, the phenomenon of accent in literary works can be differentiated by demonstrating its heterogeneity: not only as a question of the rendering of accented speech in dialogue, but as a notion haunting the text on multiple levels. By extension, through tracing entanglements of accent and “broken language”
in canonical literary texts from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a new perspective on literary history can be opened up. Here, our endeavor is inspired by the “philology of literary multilingualism” proposed by Till Dembeck, and more specifically his call to take on literary multilingualism beyond a focus on the workings between standardized national languages in literary texts (26).

The Uncanny Accent as Doppelgänger of German in E.T.A. Hoffmann’s “Der Sandmann” (1816)

In E.T.A. Hoffmann’s famous Dark Romantic story “Der Sandmann” [“The Sand-Man” in J. T. Bealby’s English translation], a recurring phrase rendered in a supposedly accented or broken German spoken by an Italian peddler forms the leitmotif: “sköne Oke” (Der Sandmann 27); “Fine eyes-a”4 (“The Sand-Man” 202). The standard German orthography of the phrase would be schöne Augen. Sköne thus replaces Schöne since ch is pronounced like a k in Italian; the reason for writing Oke rather than Augen remains peculiar, however, since the diphthong au is fairly common in Italian. Then again, the articulatory and typographic difference between Augen and Oke, and therefore its perceived acoustic strangeness, is accentuated this way, serving an important narrative purpose. The story revolves around the young student Nathanael, whose disturbing and haunting childhood memory of a certain lawyer Coppelius later in life is triggered by the unexpected visit of “ein Wetterglashändler” (Der Sandmann 3), “a peddler of weather glasses and thermometers” (“The Sand-Man” 183), bearing the name Coppola and resembling Coppelius. When Nathanael is a young boy, an old nurse tells him the story about a sand-man coming to steal the eyes of children who refuse to go to sleep. In Nathanael’s mind, this horror story is superimposed with recollections of visits by Coppelius to his family home, occasions on which the lawyer performs occult alchemical rituals together with Nathanael’s father. This culminates in a horrific scene in which Coppelius reaches for Nathanael’s eyes, ignoring the father’s desperate cries to spare his son. The childhood memory of Coppelius, recounted by Nathanael in a letter to his friend Lothar, blurs the boundaries between reality, nightmare, and the ghost story, foreshadowing the madness that will ultimately lead to Nathanael’s violent death.

4 In the English translation of the phrase, a final “-a” has been added to the standard English “Fine eyes,” most likely to mimic the vast majority of Italian words ending with a vowel rather than a consonant.
The uncertainty as to whether Coppelius and Coppola are in fact the same person is central to the story and the creation of Nathanael as an unreliable narrator. An Italian professor named Spalanzani, whose lectures Nathanael attends, reassures him that Coppola is Italian, and Nathanael furthermore identifies Coppola as “Piedmontese” judging from his “accent” ("The Sand-Man" 193)—in the German original, his “Aussprache” (Der Sandmann 16), that is, his pronunciation. Coppelius, on the other hand, is described as “a German” by Nathanael, albeit “no honest German" ("The Sand-Man" 193). Coppola’s accent is, in other words, understood as proof for a certain national categorization and exclusion from the designation as German. Hoffmann’s choice of an Italian name and a literary rendition of a supposedly Italian-accented German follows a tradition in German literary Romanticism in which Italian names tend to designate “artists, composers and crooks” (Reitani 83). Loquai has convincingly demonstrated how Hoffmann in numerous stories consciously plays with contemporary German imaginings of Italy, oscillating between the idealized image of the country as the epitome of art on the one hand, and the “satanic-murderous, carnelavesque-chaotic, and mannerist South” on the other (42). Despite Spalanzani’s claim that Coppola is Italian, Nathanael is “not quite satisfied” with his assertions, and in the next sentence he mistakenly calls the peddler, who is said to have left town, Coppelius ("The Sand-Man" 194). In the focalized perspective of Nathanael, Coppola and Coppelius are later in the storyline referred to interchangeably, as though they in fact were the same person (210–11). Coppola’s accent when he describes his goods for sale, his “eyes” (single-tube binoculars), are by association linked to the nightmarish visions of Coppelius’s/the Sand-Man’s handling of human eyes. Thus, the categorization of Coppola as Piedmontese, pure and simple, is rendered unstable, since the sight of him triggers the specter of the dishonest German Coppelius.

In the light of our initial discussion of accent as shibboleth, whose function is to mark and perform a difference, to draw a line between us and them, the accented German in “Der Sandmann” becomes unmoored, at least in the focalized perspective of Nathanael. Rather than providing a reassuring source of information regarding the peddler’s country of origin, the accented speech

5 The story opens with three letters (two of which are written by Nathanael to Lothar), after which an unnamed narrator claiming to be a friend of Nathanael continues to tell the story from the position of a seemingly omniscient narrator, whose perspective often is focalized through Nathanael.

6 The sheer number of “Italian villains” in Hoffmann’s oeuvre is striking—Loquai lists nineteen examples in a preliminary overview (41), but the character Coppelius is the only one who actually says something, rather than just laughing ominously like the rest of them.
comes to signify a haunting instability, namely an uncanny or unheimlich sensation, blurring the lines between self and other, between one’s own speech and the speech of the other, as we shall see.

In what is probably the most famous interpretation of Hoffmann’s story, Sigmund Freud uses “Der Sandmann” as a means to discuss the category of “das Unheimliche,” in English usually translated as “the uncanny.” According to Freud, “the uncanny” is often defined as a feeling of dread and horror and draws on the ambivalence inherent in the German word heimlich: “on the one hand it means what is familiar and agreeable, and on the other, what is considered concealed and kept out of sight” (225). In his reading of Hoffmann’s story, the “feeling of something uncanny is directly attached to the [. . .] idea of being robbed of one’s eyes” which he in turn regards as originating—according to psychoanalytic theory—in a dread of being castrated (230–1). Even though Freud does quote Coppola’s accented speech in his summary of Hoffmann’s story, he does not address Hoffmann’s use and effect of accent in his discussion of the uncanny (229–30).

In Yildiz’s reading of Kafka’s 1912 speech on Yiddish (30–66), in which she also draws on Freud’s “das Unheimliche” as an analytic lens, she underscores how Freud’s concept has a “distinctly linguistic side, situating it between mother tongue and foreign language” (54). In order to identify the uncanniness in a given language, we—according to Freud—need to be “intimately familiar” with this language, since otherwise “the distance is too large and the effect is lost” (54). It is thus not the language cast as foreign and alien that produces the uncanny sensation, but the language considered intimate, the mother tongue. In our exploration of the rendering and use of accented speech as a literary device in Hoffmann, Freud’s uncanny, and Yildiz’s interpretation of it, provides a useful point of departure.7

At one point in his essay, Freud describes “the unheimlich [as] what was once heimisch, familiar; the prefix ‘un’ [un-] is the token of repression” (245). If we choose to regard Coppola’s accented speech from this perspective, together with the ambivalence inherent in the word heimlich [homelike; something hidden or kept out of sight], then Nathanael’s dread when hearing “sköne Oke, sköne Oke” is a result of experiencing something profoundly heimlich [the German language] as being haunted by a hidden and repressed quality inherent to it, as if the accented speech would in fact lie within the realm of one’s own language. The story indeed reaches its dramatic apex when Nathanael, in a fit

---

7 For a similar take on the uncanny effects of language use between that what is considered foreign and familiar vis-à-vis a standard language, see Morris.
of madness triggered by the sight of Coppelius, jumps from a tower to his death while articulating the very same accented speech earlier produced by Coppola: “[...] mit dem gellenden Schrei: ‘Ha! Sköne Oke – Sköne Oke’, sprang er über das Geländer” (Der Sandmann 42) [With a piercing scream, “Eh! Fine eyes-a, fine eyes-a!” he leaped over the railing (“The Sand-Man” 214)]. The “broken German” of Nathanael therefore comes to epitomize his mental collapse and the fatal influence of the Coppelius/Coppola Doppelgänger character(s). Put in other words, this “broken German” turns out to be a haunting Doppelgänger of Nathanael’s native tongue, once hidden in its depths but now unveiled.

An earlier passage of the story foreshadows this mental collapse, a scene in which an analogous breakdown of Nathanael’s German takes place albeit without fatal consequences. In order to come to terms with his nightmarish childhood memories of Coppelius’s visits to his family home (which has come to darken his relationship to Lothar’s sister Clara), Nathanael composes a literary work, a poem in meter:

[...] er feilte und besserte an jeder Zeile und da er sich dem metrischen Zwange unterworfen, ruhte er nicht, bis alles rein und wohlklingend sich fügte. Als er jedoch nun endlich fertig worden, und das Gedicht für sich laut las, da faßte ihn Grausen und wildes Entsetzen und er schrie auf. “Wessen grauenvolle Stimme ist das?” (Der Sandmann 24)

[...] he filed and polished every line, and as he had chosen to submit himself to the limitations of meter, he did not rest until all was pure and musical. When, however, he had at length finished it and read it aloud to himself he was seized with horror and awful dread, and he screamed, “Whose hideous voice is this?” (“The Sand-Man” 199)

Despite all efforts to create a “pure and musical” poetic language through writing, the author’s very own voice appears as if it would have been seized by an alien, monstrous ghost, foreboding the uncanny accent from Nathanael’s lips in the end story’s conclusion.

If we, to conclude, return to Yildiz’s reading of Kafka referred to earlier, striking similarities with Hoffmann’s story published almost a century earlier emerge. In her analysis, Yildiz convincingly demonstrates how Kafka, via his 1912 speech on Yiddish, brings forth the uncanny qualities of German—that is, the one language Kafka is so intimately familiar with—but was simultaneously, as a German-speaking Jew in Prague, excluded from it due to the ideological and political nationalist logic of monolingualism (cf. Yildiz 30–33; Deleuze and Guattari 16–17). In Hoffmann’s “Der Sandmann,” the site of Nathanael’s native
tongue German is haunted by an uncanniness produced by an Italian accent, which in turn is linked to strong feelings of dread and horror. This accented German refuses to stay put in the fenced-off language of the foreigner, despite the assurances of Nathanael's professor, and instead emerges from within Nathanael's own native German. In contrast to Kafka's position in the ideological force field of monolingualism of early twentieth-century Prague culture, Nathanael is not excluded from a certain linguistic social community but rather by—and from within—his "own" language. Even those individuals considered to belong to a certain language community, according to the ethno-nationalist logic of monolingualism, run the risk of producing just those uncanny accents thought only to characterize the speech of linguistic others, Hoffmann's story seems to suggest. In his reading of Hoffmann's Italian villains referred to earlier, Loquai (52) shows how the author's playful and ironic use of clichés ultimately exposes national characteristics and essentialist identities as inherently ambivalent, theatrical performances. Our reading of Hoffmann's "Der Sandmann" has illustrated how the literary use of accented speech performs an analogous task, pertaining to language: The peddler's accent opens up a rift at the very core of the mother tongue, causing Nathanael ultimately to lose his footing and fall to his death.

**Accent as Part of the Bodily Repertoire of the Quasi-National in K. A. Tavaststjerna's *En patriot utan fosterland***

In the beginning of Finnish novelist Karl August Tavaststjerna's (1860–1898) *En patriot utan fosterland* [A Patriot without a Motherland] from 1896, the narrator, a Finnish writer traveling in southern Italy, encounters a subtly strange couple. What ensues is a process of linguistic and national classification, never providing quite a satisfactory result.

The narrator's first impression is that the von Stevens "kunde vara nordbor men väl voro engelsmän" [could be Northerners, but probably were English]
Tavaststjerna 10. They are introduced to him as Swedish and they first address him in Swedish, only for Mr. von Steven to declare: “Själf är jag också född finne, fastän omständigheterna ha fört mig långt ifrån det forna hemlandet” [I am myself also born a Finn, although circumstances have brought me far away from my former homeland] (13). Despite this declaration, the narrator feels that the couple cannot be satisfactorily placed in this national category:

Han talade ifrigt och småleende, och hans blick hvilade hela tiden på mig med ett egendomligt välvilligt, nästan smeksamt uttryck, som var mig svårt att förklara. Jag tyckte jag kände igen det uttrycket som tillhörigt en hel stor klass människor, jag någongång träffat, men kunde för ögonblicket ej klargöra för mig hvad det var för en klass. (13)

He spoke eagerly and with a little smile, and all the while his gaze rested upon me with a peculiarly benevolent, almost affectionate expression, that I found difficult to explain. I thought that I recognized that expression as belonging to a whole, great class of people, that I had met sometime, yet I could not at present clarify to myself what class that was.

The narrator’s suspicions grows when he hears Mrs. von Steven speak: her Swedish had “en stark utländsk brytning” [a strong foreign accent] (14). Significantly, the adjective used is “utländsk,” which literally means “outlandish” and is thus nationally and geographically foreign as opposed to “foreign” in a general sense.

The narrator’s first impressions give rise to mild reserve, and he reclassifies the von Stevens as his “kvasilandsmän” [quasi-compatriots] (14). They are too friendly, something that he associates with the “class of people” he has yet to ascribe them to: “Fru von Stevens främmande brytning hade redan ledt mig på rätt spår, men jag tappade det [...].” [The foreign accent of Mrs. von Steven had already led me on the right track, but I had lost it [...] (14). Mr. von Steven also had “en viss utländsk brytning, som han förklarade att kom sig af hans lån-ga utrikesvistelse och af att hans samtalsspråk med sin hustru var tyskan” [His Swedish also had a certain outlandish accent, that he explained came from his long sojourn abroad, and from the fact that his language of conversation with his wife was German] (15–16). Von Steven shares that his wife was indeed born in Dorpat (Tartu in today’s Estonia) and is “således mera tyska än ryska”

---

10 Translations from Swedish here and in the following are ours.
11 This time, her accent is described as “främmande,” foreign in a more general sense.
[thus more German than Russian] (16)—a reference to the German-speaking minority, Deutsch-Balten, that dominated the nobility and urban middle classes in today’s Estonia and Latvia. Interestingly, Mr. von Steven’s description of his wife as German brings on a eureka moment for the narrator, who declares:


They were Russians. It was the Russian cordiality, the Russian benevolence in their gaze, the Russian obsequiousness in their mode of being. Not a trace of the representative solemnity of the Swede. I had let the butler’s information regarding their nationality completely mislead me.

Swedish, Finnish, German, Russian—the process of determining the von Stevens linguistically and nationally does not end here. Von Steven relates that he was born in Finland, later relocated to Sweden, lived for a long period in Russia and in southern Europe, that he is nowadays a Swedish citizen and “således svensk till nationaliteten” [consequently, Swedish by nationality] (16). This equation of citizenship and national belonging—that one becomes Swedish, in a deeper sense, as soon as one receives a Swedish passport—is so absurd to the narrator that he loses any wish to question von Steven further: “Hvad angick mig hans nationalitet?” [What did his nationality concern me?] (17).

Still, that is precisely what it continues to do. Triggered by the von Stevens’ accents and mannerisms, the narrator cannot help but being fascinated, all the while feeling an instinctive distaste for the couple. It is intriguing to encounter a person “af rent kosmopolitisk typ” [of a purely cosmopolitan type] (19), he concludes, and wonders how a person of this kind can display any kind of patriotism, any love of one’s native country. After leaving them, he exclaims: “En svensk ryss, som födts i Finland?! Hvad var det för en bastard?” [A Swedish Russian who was born in Finland?! What kind of mongrel was that?] (22). In the Swedish of the day, the word bastard described not only illegitimate children but also children of mixed racial descent, as well as the offspring of different breeds or species (saob). It is a choice of words not unusual in its time, and it is significant in the context of contemporary language ideology as well as in the context of this specific novel. The very concept of a mother tongue, of course, invokes a familial chain of metaphors (Yildiz 10–14). The word bastard links the familial with the national and linguistic, a linkage that is persistent in the novel and which we will return to further on.
Swedish, Finnish, German, and Russian: “Hvem och hvad var herr von Steven? Och hvad ville han mig?” [Who and what was Mr. von Steven? And what did he want from me?] (15). One moment von Steven declares himself Swedish; the next, he proclaims himself to be “i grunden finne ännu i dag” [essentially, to this day, a Finn] (18). Suddenly, the narrator accepts him, only to call him a “mongrel” a few pages later. On the next visit, they are at first “landsmän” [countrymen] (29), then “svenskryska landsmän” [Swedish Russian countrymen] (31), and a bit later “halfryska landsmän” [half-Russian countrymen] (37). The narrator takes all his “frinsinthet och kosmopolitism till hjälp, men ändå ville det icke lyckas” [I took all my broad-mindedness and cosmopolitanism to my aid, and yet it would not succeed] (37).

What von Steven is, is one of “våra landsmän” (our fellow countrymen): a historical phenomenon and literary trope of nineteenth-century Finland, then a relatively autonomous grand duchy of the Russian Empire. “Our fellow countrymen” was the phrase used to describe Finnish (Swedish-speaking) noblemen in Russian military service, and their achievements in service of the empire were often reported upon under this headline in newspapers of the day. In literary form, the fellow countryman is a figure through which questions of national allegiance are played out. Often, the motif of linguistic loss is developed through the figure of a Swedish speaker who forgets his mother tongue when he is put under increasing Russian influence, often in the shape of a Russian wife (cf. Tidigs, “The Glory and Confusion”; Engman). The literary discourse on “our fellow countrymen” enacts Finnish fears of increasing Russian interference and domination during the late nineteenth century.

Evident in the never-ending process of determining von Steven linguistically and nationally is that the accent is a part of a larger bodily repertoire of the quasi-native speaker. Von Steven speaks “nervöst och oafbrutet” [nervously and incessantly] (15), and the narrator starts to suspect that he is dealing with a “nervös sjukling” [nervous invalid] (17). He describes von Steven as follows:

Men min landsman framför mig var en nervös och finlemmad herre med en något närsynt, ljusskygg blick, som dock var allt annat än fränstötande när den hvilade vänlig på en. Hans yttre var hälften en diplomats, hälften en förfnad och ömtålig sjuklings, och hans stämma hade helt andra, diskreta tonfall än hvad kommandot öfver soldater brukar gifva. (19–20)

But my countryman before me was a nervous and slender gentleman with a somewhat near-sighted, shadowy gaze that, however, was anything but repulsive when it rested friendly upon you. His appearance was partly that of a diplomat, partly that of a refined and fragile invalid, and his
voice had an altogether different, discreet tone than what the command over soldiers usually bring.

Von Steven is furthermore “försagd och finkänslig” [timid and delicate] (36) and relates that he has always been “sjuklig och nervös” [sickly and nervous] (43). When speaking, his limbs move more than what is usual and his voice is “sensitive” to the ear of the narrator (44). The image of the cosmopolitan is one of declining health and effeminacy; being without a motherland seems to have robbed von Steven of masculinity as well as health. Through physical attributes—encompassing body, motions, and speech—his linguistic and national non-belonging becomes audible, visible, and tangible to the narrator (and to the reader), resulting in the mixture of revulsion and intrigue.

Notably, and in contrast to the case of Hoffman discussed previously, Tavaststjerna’s characterization of the foreign-accent speaker occurs without the accent of von Steven ever being made present in his lines of dialogue—for example, through deviating orthography, syntax, or grammar. The main part of the book is a pseudo-translation, the narrator’s translation of von Steven’s memoirs said to be written in German originally—a language equally absent in the text. The narrator declares that he has not even attempted to translate the strange tone of the original (66). However, in the initial part of the novel, von Steven is viewed through the eyes of the narrator who, his obsession notwithstanding, chooses to render von Steven’s speech in flawless Swedish. The narrator is fixated upon von Steven’s accent, yet it resists depiction; the very marker of foreignness is absent in the depiction of this foreignness. This, in turn, adds to the uncanny qualities of the accent, even as it is filtered and purified through the narrator.

On an extratextual level, the absence of textually marked accent can be understood in the context of the ongoing discussion on literary language at the time: authors of Swedish literature from Finland were under increasing pressure to demonstrate their ability to write in a “correct” Swedish that did not differ from Swedish spoken and written in Sweden. In this climate, as risky a variety as accented Swedish could perhaps not be ventured upon; indeed, there are several examples of writers who did use a more heterogeneous Swedish and, consequently, were mistaken for the linguistically lost characters they depicted (see Tidigs, “The Glory and Confusion”).

Through the figure of von Steven—accented, subtly effeminate, and sickly—Tavaststjerna, on the one hand, attaches himself to a European nineteenth-century tradition of depicting cosmopolitanism as artificial, suspect, even traitorous (cf. Guldin 97–100, 126). One the other hand, Tavaststjerna’s cosmopolitan is of a distinctly local variant. While in different parts of Europe
and Russia cosmopolitan became an interchangeable term for Jew during the latter half of the nineteenth century, a stereotype culminating in Nazism's and Stalinism's characterization of Jews as "rootless cosmopolitans" (see, e.g., Miller and Ury; Gelbin and Gilman 9), Tavaststjerna's rootless cosmopolitan as "our fellow countryman" is thoroughly anchored in his specific geographical and socio-historical setting. As a Swedish-speaking Finn raised in St. Petersburg and a member of the Russian military, von Steven is a product of Finland's older and newer history. As a character, he embodies both the historical presence of the Swedish language in Finland because of Finland's many centuries as the eastern half of Sweden, as well as Finland's then-current status as a Russian grand duchy.12

What's more, the outsider's view on von Steven is traded for an insider's rendition of cosmopolitan plight. Upon reading von Steven's memoirs, the narrator's distaste gives way to friendship. After being brought up in St. Petersburg (with summers spent at the family estate in Finland), von Steven moves to Helsinki in the 1850s, working as adjutant to the governor-general. He falls in love with Finland and spends his time with student radicals at that historical moment when Finnish national consciousness and thoughts of Finnish independence had just started to awaken. Although loyal to his Finnish friends, von Steven is unjustly accused of being a spy on behalf of the Russian administration. If an anxiety of the period was cosmopolitans “adopting, performing or inventing identity (rather than ‘inhabiting’ or being ‘rooted’ in identity)” (Taylor-Batty 57), Tavaststjerna offers the insider's view on what it is like to be rejected by one's perceived motherland.

Von Steven moves to Sweden with his first wife, but is plagued by the influence of her Russianness. Finally, he manages to leave her. He meets his current wife in Riga, and they eventually make a life for themselves in Italy. The reader is informed about the languages von Steven speaks, but never which language is his mother tongue. Interestingly, this lack of a mother tongue does not seem as acute to von Steven himself as it is for the narrator. Von Steven mentions that “Äfven med en otympligt svarfvad fras på svenska lyckas jag göra en del af mina landsmän mig mera bevågna än genom den elegantaste franska tournur” [Even with a clumsily crafted phrase in Swedish I manage to make some of my countrymen more sympathetic to me than through the most elegant French

---

12 Tavaststjerna scholarship has consistently read the character of von Steven as an expression of Tavaststjerna's own beliefs regarding patriotism and cosmopolitanism. Opinions of whether the portrayal is a successful one has, however, varied (cf. Kihlman 251–5; Engman 384–6).
tournure] (Tavaststjerna 72). His knowledge of Russian and French saves him financially, and his ability to work as a translator of Russian literature into Swedish turns his life around. Moreover, he is given the opportunity to work as a translator in spite of his accented Swedish; accent apparently does not have the uncanny effect on the publisher that it did on the narrator (230–2). Although inscribing difference in his body, the accent, and the linguistic indeterminacy that it marks, is not to be equated with the tragedy of his life—that of being a patriot without a motherland. To von Steven, the crucial and painful issue which is never resolved is that of nationality. In the epilogue, he makes an emphatic appeal to “heliga moder Ryssland” [holy mother Russia], followed by “karga, dystra och frostiga Finland” [barren, bleak, and frosty Finland], and, last, “gamla Sverige, du tog emot mig som den barmhärtige samariten” [old Sweden, (… that) received me like the good Samaritan], asking them all in turn if they are his mother, yet concluding: “Hvar har jag då mitt land och min mor? Är jag den ende moderlöse i alla land, eller äro alla land i lika grad min moder?” [Where then do I have my country and my mother? Am I the only motherless in all countries, or are all countries in equal measure my mother?] (276–8). Orphan, rather than bastard, is the kinship metaphor that prevails in the novel.

Von Steven is neither the untrustworthy cosmopolitan (Guldin 98) nor the “funny foreigner” (Taylor-Batty 55–61) so prevalent in literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Following our initial discussion of Derrida, von Steven’s accent is a bodily inscription of difference and of linguistic as well as national indeterminacy. In a socio-historical climate where linguistic and national categories were frequently conflated, and where patriotism and cosmopolitanism were to an increasing degree viewed as opposites, von Steven’s love for Finland went unrequited.

Accent as Anxiety, Loss, and Betrayal of the Mother Tongue in Vilhelm Moberg’s Nybyggarna

The novel series Utvandrarna (The Emigrants) (1949–1959) by the Swedish author Vilhelm Moberg is generally considered to be among the most well-known and loved pieces of twentieth-century Swedish literature among the

---

13 This can partly be explained by the translator being Swedish and not a Swedish-speaking Finn such as the narrator. A Russian accent carries very different connotations in the grand duchy of Finland, where Russian pressure was increasing, than in the sovereign state of Sweden.
The adaptation into two feature films by Jan Troell of the novels *Utvandrarna* (*The Emigrants*) and *Nybyggarna* (*The Settlers*) in 1971 and 1972 contributed to its fame, along with Benny Andersson’s and Björn Ulvaeus’s musical *Kristina från Duvemåla* [*Kristina from Duvemåla*], first staged in 1995. The cycle of four novels follows the plight of the Swedish farmer Karl Oskar Nilsson, his wife, Kristina, and their children as they leave the southern province of Småland, Sweden, and settle in the US in the 1840s and early 1850s. The first wave of Swedish emigration to the US had taken place in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when over a million Swedish emigrants were driven away by crop failure and population growth. It is a story about the struggle of emigrants trying to find their way in a new environment and, not least, a new language. In his dissertation on the novel series from 1974, Eidevall shows how Moberg used authentic language instruction textbooks for Swedish immigrants when describing Robert’s (the younger brother of Karl Oskar) efforts to learn and pronounce basic American phrases (86). Karl Oskar and Kristina react to the new linguistic environment in very different ways, which in turn expose the emotional stakes involved when trying to learn a new language, in this case American English. The result is a literary Swedish settler accent that comes across most vividly in the third novel *Nybyggarna* [*The Settlers*], which will be the focus of the following analysis.

In order to create a convincing portrayal of the language of Swedish farmers in Minnesota around 1850, Moberg studied settler diaries among other sources at the Minnesota Historical Society Library in St. Paul, Minnesota (Liljestrand 563; Eidevall 185–6). In these accounts he found examples of settlers’ creative amalgamations of Swedish syntax and pronunciation of American verbs, such as skvatta [*squat*], drafta [*draft*], and vota [*vote*]. In *Nybyggarna*, Karl Oskar is a frequent user of such words in conversation with fellow Swedish settlers, who answer him in the same manner (Liljestrand 564). In Karl Oskar’s letters to his relatives back in the old country, this usage continues, testifying to his growing adaptation to the American language and culture. Kristina, on the other hand, goes out of her way to avoid using them. Eidevall has pointed out how the use of Smålandic dialectal words and phrases permeate not only the dialogue and

---

14 The television show *Röda rummet* [Swedish Television] conducted a survey in 1998 asking for the most influential work of Swedish literature. The majority of the seventeen thousand viewers who took part voted for Moberg’s Emigrant series, followed by Harry Martinson’s *Aniara* and Frans G. Bengtsson’s *Röde orm*. [http://runeberg.org/admin/19980525.html](http://runeberg.org/admin/19980525.html).
thoughts of the characters but the voice of the heterodiegetic narrator as well (185). This is equally true for the use of American English influences, gradually transforming the Smålandic dialect into Moberg’s rendering of an American Swedish–accented amalgam language.

Moberg’s literary rendition of settler Swedish sparked criticism, initiated by an article published in 1960 in the second-largest daily newspaper in Sweden, Svenska Dagbladet. According to its author Jöran Mjöberg, the settler Swedish amounted to an aesthetically unappealing mixture of languages, difficult to comprehend. Professor of Nordic languages Einar Haugen had gone even further and called it a “hodgepodge of absurdities,” an unrealistic rendering of American settler Swedish solely made up by Moberg (Eidevall 188–9; our translation). Moberg furiously replied that he based all his writings on historical sources (Eidevall 188). Moberg also repeatedly stated that the only guiding principle for his writing was his own aesthetic conscience striving for absolute accuracy and realism (180). The controversy testifies to the linguistic stakes of writing accent in Swedish literature at the time, partly echoing an inflammatory debate a decade earlier on Moberg’s use of profanities and obscenities. The writer Ebbe Reuterdahl, in a call sent to all Swedish American newspapers and congregations, accused the author of The Emigrants of staining the memory of the Swedish settler community (Eidevall 180; Liljestrand 508–9).

In the English translation of Nybyggarna by Moberg’s Swedish American friend Gustaf Lannestock, the marked Swedish has in many cases been translated into English without any corresponding foreignizing literary devices, thereby losing a crucial stylistic and thematic aspect of the storyline. In Lannestock’s memoirs depicting his friendship with Moberg in America, it becomes clear that the American publisher on numerous occasions made substantial omissions and alterations in the published English translations (Lannestock 61–62; 74; 124). In the beginning of Nybyggarna, for example, the fellow settler Petrus Olausson poses the following question to Karl Oskar, whose surname “Nilsson” is Americanized into “Nelson” by Petrus: “Vilken träsort jusar du, när du makar träskor, Nelson?” (Nybyggarna 16). The two adaptations of the English words use and make into settler Swedish, jusar and makar, are absent in Gustaf Lannestock’s translation, where “Nelson” oddly enough is “corrected” into the Swedish original “Nilsson”: “What kind of wood do you use for your wooden shoes, Mr. Nilsson?” (The Settlers 9).

In light of our opening definitions of the literary use of foreign-accent speech, Karl Oskar’s and Petrus’s settler Swedish is the speech of the ex-native speaker. This, at least, turns out to be the case for Karl Oskar, who—during a conversation with Kristina and a local store owner named Klas Albert—comes to realize the full extent of his altered Swedish (the following quote in English
in our translation, since the final pages of the chapter containing the dialogue have been omitted in Lannestock’s translation15):

Karl Oskar had been quiet for a while. Kristina invariably caught him mis-speaking words, but the way Klas Albert tried to gloss over it in order to comfort him felt even more degrading than the taunts of his wife. So it was true, he could not ignore it: He spoke his own mother tongue in an awry manner! [...] Yes, it was like that: He was no longer sure, he did not know which words originated in the old motherland and which ones belonged to the new one, he did not know if he spoke Swedish or if he spoke English. [...] It was humiliating for a grown man that he could not speak the language of his homeland properly and clearly. And he felt deeply ashamed: It was as if he would not have recognized his own old mother.

The accented, awry speech produces feelings of degradation, humiliation, and shame on Karl Oskar’s part, since a proper and clear command of Swedish is so intimately associated with maturity and an unbroken connection to his country of origin. The description of his use of the mother tongue as awry, followed by comparing his flawed Swedish with an inability of recognizing his own mother, follows the logic of the mother tongue-metaphor in terms of a linguistic family romance as discussed by Yildiz, the “affective knot at the center of the monolingual paradigm” (10; cf. our discussion of “bastard” in Tavaststjerna above). Kristina’s habit of poking fun at Karl Oskar’s Americanisms is linked to yet another nexus of negative emotions, in her case her own relationship to the English language. As opposed to Karl Oskar, who despite many difficulties has his

15 The publishing company Simon & Schuster, which first published the English translation, is most likely responsible for this omission (Liljestrand 865).
mind set to adapt to the new environment and call it his new home, Kristina is throughout the novel series suffering from loneliness and homesickness. Trying to speak in the new language is associated with a fear of becoming the laughing stock of the locals, but also to a physical inability of producing the right sounds, as described early on in Nybyggarna: “Men när en skulle framstånga engelska ord, så måste en vrida och vränga på munnen och vricka på tungan, menade Kristina: Det kändes för henne som om hon skulle stå och förskapa sig och göra sig till, när hon skulle tala det främmande språket. Hennes tunga dög inte för detta underliga mål. Och hon fick ont i huvudet när hon lyssnade till engelskan, språket passade inte heller för hennes öron” (59–60). [“But when she wanted to use the English words she had to twist and turn her lips and loosen her tongue, insisted Kristina. She felt as if she was playacting, making a fool of herself, when she used English. Her tongue was not made for this strange language. And if she listened to others speaking it, she got a headache; it did not suit her ears either”] (The Settlers 35). Considered against the backdrop of our initial discussion of shibboleth, Kristina is unable to perform the right sounds, which would make her pass as a member of the new linguistic community.

One chapter in particular conveys the consequences of this linguistic relationship for Kristina’s sense of non-belonging in the United States: “Att plantera hemlandet” [To plant one’s homeland] or, in Lannestock’s translation, “planning and planting.” In order to create a sense of homeliness, Kristina decides to build a flower garden outside their homestead. This requires flower seeds from the local store down in Taylors Falls, whose owner is Scottish. Her vision of a beautiful bed of flowers overrides the fear of speaking the foreign language, as she utters the following sentence for the first time: “I wanta planta bloom- ms . . .” (Nybyggarna 85) [“I wanta planta blooms...blommer . . .”] (The Settlers 50). Here, Kristina uses the same kind of settler Swedish as Karl Oskar in the first example quoted above; in this case, however, it is also rendered visible in Lannestock’s English translation, but with the addition of “blommer,” a colloquial spelling of the Swedish word for flowers. She is not ridiculed by the shop owner, who instead painstakingly tries to understand what she needs. Kristina struggles to explain that she wants flower seeds, but as a result of miscommunication, she walks home with a bag of fodder grass seed. As the weather grows warmer, Kristina and Karl Oskar start to check on the flower bed, expecting to see buds shoot out of the soil. One morning Karl Oskar calls her outside to inspect her crop: “Hon var brådstörtat ute vid sitt land: Små sylvassa stråändar stack upp i jordkanten. De sken ljusa i solen som stråna av nyuppkomen säd. Men det var inga spåda stjälkar till blommor, som hade börjat komma upp: Vad hon såg strax ovan jord, det var topparna på små strån av gräs!” (Nybyggarna 88) [In a headlong jump she was out of bed: small, awlsharp blades were
shooting up from the earth. In the early sun they glittered like grain shoots. These were not tender flower stems; what she saw were shoots of grass”] ([The Settlers] 52). Kristina deeply regrets her decision to speak English, despite assertions from Karl Oskar that he has made numerous similar mistakes himself when speaking English: “Och hon borde nu ha hunnit lära sig det: Det var och förblev evinnerligt besvärligt att plantera hemlandet i en främmad jord” ([Nybyggarna] 91) [She should have learned this much by now: it was, and remained forever, difficult to transplant the homeland in foreign soil] ([The Settlers] 53). She decides to pull up the grass plants in her garden—these incarnations of her lacking language skills—“och satte ner vitkålsplantor istället” ([Nybyggarna] 91) [and planted cabbage instead] ([The Settlers] 53). “Ett var visst” ([Nybyggarna] 91) [One thing was sure] ([The Settlers] 53), the narrator concludes the chapter, “Det skulle dröja innan hon hänfäst försökte tala engelska” ([Nybyggarna] 91) [It would be sometime before she again tried to speak English] ([The Settlers] 53).

Moberg’s literary rendition of accented speech as an amalgam American Swedish settler idiom links it to strong emotions of identity loss, shame, guilt, and inability. The early criticisms directed at Moberg’s settler language testify to similar discomforts: in the eyes of these critics, the use of a literary accent experienced as strange had tainted the national cultural memory of Swedish emigrants. The omissions and alterations in the English translation, in turn, transform this settler Swedish into a commercially acceptable American English, silencing the sound of accent on a discursive level. This sets Lannestock’s English translation of Moberg apart from those works by American literary modernists such as Henry Roth and Gertrude Stein, who were able to expand and push the boundaries of American literary monolingualism (Miller).

**Conclusion: Toward a Literary History of Accent and “Broken Language”**

If we return to our main research question posed in this article's introduction, concerning the possible role of accented speech and “broken language” as embodied and affectively charged nodes of entanglements on different levels, then our readings have demonstrated the workings of three such nodes.

The literary examples of accented speech demonstrate great variation in terms of use and perspective: Whereas Moberg and Hoffmann explicitly create instances of literary accents on a discursive level, Tavaststjerna solely approaches the phenomenon indirectly via a narrating listener who tries to make sense of what he is hearing. In Hoffmann, accented speech turns out to be an inherent quality of the mother tongue itself, rather than a straightforward trait
of the Other’s/the foreigner’s language. In Tavaststjerna, accented speech is a marker of linguistic and national indeterminacy and a part of a broader repertoire inscribing difference into the body of the cosmopolitan. In Moberg, the vastly different linguistic strategies of two ex-native speakers of Swedish being confronted with American English are presented, in the form of a new accented American Swedish on the one hand (Karl Oskar), and of Kristina’s refusal to utter these disturbing foreign sounds on the other.

These differences aside, our readings of accented speech in Hoffmann, Tavaststjerna, and Moberg also testify to numerous similarities. The most eye-catching feature is how instances of “broken language” produce an abundance of affects. Accented speech creates feelings of dread, horror, and loss of subjectivity (Hoffmann); ambivalence, suspicion, and fascination (Tavaststjerna); shame, guilt, and loss (Moberg). As perhaps contrary to expectations, literary uses of accented speech are in these cases employed not only as a means to construct an image of an/the Other (the foreigner, the one not belonging to the linguistic and cultural community of the narrator/protagonist), but also to evoke a sense of deeply felt ambivalence und uncertainty on part of the narrator/protagonist (Hoffmann, Tavaststjerna, and Moberg).

In all three cases, the use of accented speech not only coincides but in fact is fundamental to what is usually considered the core themes of these works. In Hoffmann and Tavaststjerna, the difficulty and even impossibility to classify a person in terms of language and nationality produces feelings of uncanniness, haunting the narrators and protagonists. Categories considered fundamental for human subjectivity as well as a national political community—according to the logic of the monolingual paradigm—are rendered unstable, all because of the introduction of accented speech. Our analysis furthermore demonstrates the importance of the study of the literary treatment of accented speech, by extension paving the way for a literary history of “broken language.”

Accented speech is moreover strongly linked to and dependent on the specific linguistic and socio-historical contexts of the literary work. The particular uncanniness of the “broken German” in Hoffmann is produced in the intersection of prevalent imaginaries of Italy, Italians and Italian in the German-speaking world of the time. These imaginaries are, in turn, functionalized by Hoffmann in order to destabilize distinctions between self and other, German and Italian, the sane and the insane. Hoffmann’s ironic play with stereotypes turns into an interrogation of the German language as a supposedly stable and clearly definable mother tongue.

In Tavaststjerna, the ambivalence felt by the narrator upon hearing accented speech is intrinsically linked to Finland’s current sociopolitical situation as a grand duchy of Russia, and to emerging and contested notions of Finnishness.
with regard to language. In the figure of von Steven, Tavaststjerna works through tensions of linguistic and national allegiance common to the monolingual paradigm, yet his cosmopolitanism is of a distinct Finnish, historically situated variety.

In Moberg, accented speech is directly linked to a politics of national identity, a tug-of-war between loyalty to one’s mother tongue, which in turn is linked to one’s country of origin (Kristina), and a dire need to adapt and assimilate into a new national context, while at the same time experiencing feelings of guilt and inferiority (Karl Oskar). Some critics’ strong objections to Moberg’s literary rendition of accented American Swedish testify to the stakes involved when an author pushes the boundaries of the Swedish language in the early post–Second World War context, especially in a literary work that was regarded to be a contribution to the future national cultural memory of Sweden.

“Broken language” or accented speech can be seen as a liminal form of literary multilingualism. Through literary means, a palimpsestic effect is created where one language is haunted by traces of another. Accented speech is the continued tension of a language reverberating within another, simultaneously being absent and present. By being an “interface of race and culture, of body and language” (Wirth-Nesher 75), accented speech brings together the workings of the monolingual paradigm into affectively charged concentrates or nodes. As we have tried to demonstrate in this article, a working through of “broken language,” including its monolingual premise, is made possible by studying the various forms and functions of accented speech in literary history.

Works Cited


