

**Ferenc Takács**

## **'anythongue athall'**

### **The Metathematisation of Language Identity in *Finnegans Wake***

This paper describes the ways *Finnegans Wake* impresses on its readers both the freedom and the necessity of multiple-language contextualisation of its linguistic items as a way to maximising meaning. As a consequence, this throws into doubt the routine assumption, made as a prerequisite for any act of reading or understanding any text, that the text in question is in a given language, or, in other words, that as an initial move in an act of reading the reader routinely assigns a language identity to the text. Thus *Finnegans Wake* problematises the language identity of its text as well as the routine assignment of a language identity to any text by its reader. In the act of reading *Finnegans Wake*, however, this foregrounding or thematisation gives rise to a concurrent higher-order act of metathematisation, where thematisation itself is thematised, with the result that, alongside specific assumptions about the language identity of a specific text as well as about the routine assignment of such an identity, more general or higher-order assumptions underlying the very notion of language identity are foregrounded and thus problematised. Through the radical "deviancy" of its text, *Finnegans Wake* is essentially "about" its own reading and, through metathematisation, it is also "about" reading, or the interpretative process, in general. The latter will be shown to involve the problematisation of several of our most general assumptions about language and literature we routinely and tacitly make whenever we embark on an act of reading, or interpretation, of any "normal" or "ordinary" text.

Every act of reading is conditional on a number of preliminary choices that concern certain basic assumptions about the nature of the projected object of reading. Logically as well as temporally, the first of these is what I call here the "language assumption": we can read whatever we set out to read only by choosing to treat the piece of language in question as being that, a piece of language. Obviously, this involves an act of identification: we check whether the object of our act of reading satisfies our usual criteria of what language is and what language does. On the procedural side,

this is done by the basic hermeneutic operation: we ascertain the language nature of the object in question by assuming that it is, in fact, language, and on this assumption we check whether it can be made to do what language usually does. Most generally and fundamentally this is, of course, signification signification or meaning: language, as we all know, is a collection of signifiers that stand for a collection of signifieds. Accordingly, we assume, for the purpose of identification, that the graphic shapes and patterns we have in front of us (whether on the walls of Egyptian pyramids, on shepherd’s sticks, on runic stones or on pieces of paper) *are* signifiers, and if, on this assumption, we are able to match them with signifieds we conclude that what we have here is language. (Of course, language in this form we call writing, and it is in this form I am concerned with language here. Naturally, the same holds true for speech: we assume that the sounds a person is making are signifiers, and if we are able to match them with signifieds to a satisfactory degree we conclude that what we hear is indeed speech.)

Thus, any act of reading is predicated on the assumption, tacitly made by the agent of the act, that the object of his act is something “in language,” or is a piece of language. This may sound obvious to the point of banality, and as in the overwhelming majority of cases the choice is made by the reader automatically (that is, without any consciousness of effort on his part) it goes totally unnoticed, so much so that people would deny that the choice is actually made, or that there is any choice involved. If, however, we glance at some cases where routinely assuming the language or sign nature of whatever is to be read is far from the obvious move, where serious doubts arise whether this assumption could or should be made at all, by doing so we can usefully “foreground” both the fact and the function of the language assumption. For instance, whenever we encounter for the first time a form of writing, or script, which is totally unlike the script or scripts we are familiar with, the encounter makes us aware of the fact that we are actually making a choice as we either assume or, alternately, refuse to assume that the thing in question is writing (and not, for example, an instance of some decorative art form). Champollion was able to go on and decipher the hieroglyphic writing on the Rosetta Stone because he boldly assumed that those strange little representations of celestial bodies, household objects, agricultural implements, animals and people were in fact writing. The opposite happens when, on encountering alien speech, people choose not to assume that the sounds these strangers make are in fact speech, that is, language, even if an unintelligible sort. The common Slavonic word meaning “German,” which is also the source of Hungarian *német*, derives from the adjective немъ meaning “mute,” a person who is “unable to speak” (cf. Russian *немо́й*, Hungarian *néma*). Apparently, those early

Slavs chose not to make the assumption that their Western neighbours had the gift of language, that the strange noises they made was actually speech, however unlike their own. These examples, random and anecdotal as they are, all show that making the language assumption is indeed the precondition of the act of reading (or, in the case of speech, of comprehension). Also, they show that the choice involved is a choice in the full philosophical and logical sense of the word: like all choices, it is ultimately an arbitrary one depending on an act of will. This means that you are as free to choose to make the language assumption as not to make it in a given situation of reading or interpretation, quite independently of the specifics of the situation. Still, your choice of making or not making it can be an unreasonable or aberrant one, if, for example, you refuse to accord language status to something that is routinely and safely identified as language by most other people. Conversely, your choice is eminently sane and reasonable if you refuse to make the language assumption *vis-à-vis* something that can only doubtfully and problematically be identified, if at all, as language, or something that normally would not be identified as language.

For some people, James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* comes under the latter heading. Confronted with the text, they refuse to make the language assumption on *prima facie* evidence, and conclude that *Finnegans Wake* is not language at all, that its text is in fact a non-text. Their attempt at an act of reading stops here; surely there is no point in trying to read something that is not writing. Make no mistake: their choice is a perfectly reasonable and sane one. Assumptions are based on the normal, or normative case, and there exists a degree of deviation from normality and the norm where refusal to make the routine assumption is the intuitively right choice. And by all count *Finnegans Wake* possesses deviation from normality to this degree.

Now, while a considerably larger number of readers would see no insurmountable obstacle to deter them from assuming that *Finnegans Wake* is language, they would have some trouble making a corollary assumption, the one I would want to call "the language-identity assumption." Making it is, logically speaking, the second precondition of the act of reading: as language, in the normal or typical case, is always a particular language, we establish the language of that piece of language we set out to read by assuming a language identity for it, and check whether our competence of the language so assumed can make reasonably good sense of the piece of language in question. What we base our choice on is partly *prima facie* evidence: glancing at the text we note that a convincingly large number of words are, say, English words, the text "looks very much like" an English text, so we start reading it "in English," that is, on the assumption that the language identity of the text is that of the English language. If on this assumption we can make reasonably good sense of

the text, the rightness of our choice is confirmed, and we can safely conclude that it is an English text we are concerned with. In normal cases, evidence is also largely contextual in a very basic way: for instance, reading a Hungarian-language newspaper, you reasonably expect every article in the paper to be in Hungarian and you stick, all throughout, to your initial choice of contextualising the text in Hungarian.

There are, however, cases when *prima facie* evidence is radically ambiguous as to the probable language identity of the text and, furthermore, no context is there (or if there is, it is insufficient) to help us in our choice of language for the text. Again, *Finnegans Wake* is a case in point, and that is why its readers have trouble with its language identity. Now, precisely in what ways it is a case in point is something I want to introduce by quoting and commenting on a piece of language somewhat closer to home for most of us here.

In one of his witty newspaper sketches, the Hungarian author Frigyes Karinthy, a distinguished satirist of the mid-war period, discussed a curious phrase of his own coining:

*eleven embercomb*<sup>1</sup>

This little joke is a perfect illustration of my point. On *prima facie* evidence, you cannot assign unambiguous language identity to the passage: the words, in their written forms, make equally good sense whether they are assumed to be Hungarian or English words. Semantics is no great help either, since “tizenegy zsarátnokfésű” (“eleven embercomb”) is as absurd, or as surreally poetic, in English as “eleven embercomb” (“live human thigh”) is in Hungarian. Also, as context, whether of the internal kind (the immediate textual environment) or of the external sort (the broader linguistic and cultural environment) is missing, nothing really tilts the balance of language-identity ambiguity either way. (The missing plural form is, in itself, not strong enough to do this either.)

At the same time, Karinthy’s joke underscores, and rather neatly at that, what I noted earlier about the ultimate arbitrariness of the choice involved in making this or that assumption. Ultimately, the meaning of the passage depends on your arbitrary choice: if you decide that it means “eleven embercomb” in Hungarian, then it means “eleven embercomb”; if you decide that it means “tizenegy zsarátnokfésű” (“eleven embercomb” in English), then it means “tizenegy zsarátnokfésű.” Or you can say that it means both of these things at the same time, and you can add that it can mean

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1. Frigyes Karinthy, “Szavak,” in *Följelentem az emberiséget* (Budapest: Szépirodalmi, 1967), Vol. 2, p. 218.

both of these things at the same time because it is in two distinct languages at the same time. But saying this will, of course, immediately land you in deep trouble about the very concept of language identity.

Or in that deep trouble commonly known as *Finnegans Wake*. Consider, for instance, what happens to language identity while you are reading, that is, trying to make the maximum sense of, this short passage:

*takes a szumbath for his weekend and a wassarnap for his refreskment*  
(129.28–29)<sup>2</sup>

As there is no immediate external context present and internal context (immediate textual environment) is as ambiguous as the “text,” that is, the passage in focus, all we have to go on is *prima facie* evidence. On this sort of evidence, as nine words out of the twelve lexical items the passage contains are English words with their standard spelling, and they constitute a perfectly ordinary and familiar English grammatical construction, a variant of the set verbal expression *to take something for something*, one is prompted to assume English language identity for the passage. By doing so, we get a frame, an internal context which is in Standard English both in its spelling and grammatical form, and we can now use this context to help us in making sense of the remaining three ambiguous lexical items. We do this by assuming that these are also English words except they are spelt, for some reason, in a patently non-standard way, and we go on to find English words with standard spelling, which are close enough in spelling, and also, in the kind of meaning the context can be taken to obviate, to the forms we actually have. Then we substitute the standard or normal forms, or, in other words, we standardise or “normalise” these nonstandard forms to their most probable (that is, nearest) standard forms by what is in effect a form of “editing” or “emending”: *szumbath* becomes *sunbath*, *wassarnap* *waternap*, and *refreskment* *refreshment*. This yields the perfectly intelligible, though pleasingly absurd and comic, sentence or clause: *takes a sunbath for his weekend and a waternap for his refreshment*. And with this, our act of reading is successfully completed.

But this, of course, leaves much unexplained. If these are words of Standard English with their standard dictionary meanings, then why are they spelled in this non-standard way? In other words: what is the point of this whole exercise the text is putting the reader through while he is trying to make sense of the passage? Anyway, there can be no logical objection to his assumption of alternative language identities

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2. All parenthesized references to *Finnegans Wake* are to the following edition: James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975).

for the text, prompted by the ambiguity of non-standard spelling: this will be another, more or less arbitrary choice, in principle as arbitrary as our opting for English. Also, if contextualisation in English yielded this amount of meaning, recontextualisation of the passage in other languages can be expected to yield even more meanings, and this, the maximisation of meaning, is after all both the primary goal and basic motive of reading or interpretation.

Now, if we assume Hungarian language identity for *szumbath* we will find that the most likely (that is, spelling-wise closest) standard Hungarian form *szombat*, meaning “Saturday,” is actually closer to the original ambiguous lexical item than English *sunbath*; *szumbath* needs less “editing” or “emendation” in quantitative terms if, instead of English *sunbath*, Hungarian *szombat* is assumed as the standard or normal target form. Similarly, with some encouragement from *szombat*, we standardise, or “normalise,” *wassarnap* as Hungarian *vasárnap*, meaning Sunday. The result, if recast in English, is *takes a Saturday for his weekend and a Sunday for his refreshment*. An interesting variation on the previously attained meaning, it also paraphrases itself as *weekend*, of course, equals *Saturday* and *Sunday*. *Szombat* is a component part of Szombathely, the name of the place where Leopold Bloom’s Jewish father, Virág Rudolf was born; and an observant Jew always *takes a Saturday for his weekend* as *szombat* is his Sabbath day, not *vasárnap* or Sunday, as with Christians, who attain their refreshment or become again *frisky*, that is lively, fresh and playful on that latter day. Or they experience their weekly coming to life again, their cyclic resurrection (theologically, Sunday commemorates the Resurrection; and this is, incidentally, the literal, or basic meaning of воскресенье, the Russian word for “Sunday”).<sup>3</sup>

At this point, we realise that the text delivers a kind of universal enfranchisement: any language contextualisation that maximises meaning is legitimate. The *fresk* element in *refreshment* is, apart from being a reminder of the Scandinavian themes of *Finnegans Wake*, a nod to Norway and Ibsen, the literary idol of Joyce’s youth: *frisk* in Norwegian means “fresh” and, also, “healthy.” “Sunbath” and “water-nap” have, of course, something to do with both freshness and health. Standardised in German, *Wassarnap* yields *Wassernapf*, “water basin,” of the smaller kind you

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3. Compare the blasphemous passage on Easter Week: “*Loonacied! Marterdyed!! Mad-wakemiherculossed!!! Judascassed!!!! Pairaskivymenassed!!!!!! Luredogged!!!!!! And, needatellye, faulscrescendied!!!!!!*” (492.05–7). Cf. Petr Škrabánek’s commentary on the passage and, particularly, on *faulscrescendied* as воскресенье, in both of its meanings “Sunday” and “Resurrection” (Petr Škrabánek, *Night Joyce of a Thousand Tiers: Studies in Finnegans Wake* [Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 2002], pp. 76–7 and 87).

wash your face and hand in. If for *szumbath* you take English *sunbath* and for *wassarnap*, *Wassernapf*, you can discover an interesting semantic symmetry in *-bath* and *-napf*. And, as László Moholy-Nagy pointed it out, if you replace *szumbath* with English *sunbath* and *wassarnap* with the English-Hungarian hybrid *waternap*, you get a kind of chiasmic structure of interlingual meaning

*sunbath*

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*waternap*

where *nap* is the Hungarian equivalent of English *sun* while it also reproduces, through English *sun*, its own polysemy of *nap* as “day” and *Nap* as “the Sun.”<sup>4</sup> In a cryptic form, this figure hints at one of those basic symbolic oppositions by which one can make sense of *Finnegans Wake*: we have the Apollonian-Dionysian dichotomy, the Sun, the daylight of reason and form, on the one hand, and water as dissolution and fluidity, the medium of night and dreaming, on the other.

So, in the interest of maximising meaning, even multiple-language contextualisation and hybrid-language contextualisation are endorsed by the permissive “openness” or indeterminacy of the Joycean text. By the same token, meaning in the reading of *Finnegans Wake* can be indefinitely maximised, and, in principle, in a theoretically unlimited number of ways; that is why it is impossible, by the nature of the case, to have even the most elementary agreement in answering questions like what “happens” in *Finnegans Wake*, or what it is “about,” or what it “means.” Ideally, *Finnegans Wake* can mean anything we want it to mean.

This holds true, *a fortiori*, for the more specific questions relating to my present topic. Questions like what language *Finnegans Wake* is in, or how many languages it is in are unanswerable for precisely the same reason: *Finnegans Wake* is in the language, or languages, we want it to be in.

On the other hand, this is something it positively “means.” It makes its reader realise that this is in fact what he is doing: by forcing its reader into assuming a language identity for the text and, simultaneously, resisting and frustrating this attempt, it foregrounds the fact and makes the reader explicitly aware that every act of reading involves making this assumption as a precondition of the act of reading. Or, in other words, the kind of reading *Finnegans Wake* both insists on and allows thematises the presence of the language identity assumption in all acts of reading, and,

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4. László Moholy-Nagy, *Vision in Motion* (Chicago: Paul Theobald, 1946), p. 349.

also, that actually there is such an assumption. This also entails the undermining or subverting of the essentialist or reificatory notion that the language identity of a text is something “objectively” given, that language is the property of the text since the reader is made aware that the language identity of the text is ultimately the product of his own agency operating through his choice, will and act.

Furthermore, this thematisation itself is thematised: by the thematisation of the language identity assumption the underlying notion of language identity is metathematised. This takes the form of problematisation. In working with the *szumbath/wassarnap* passage we found it useful to assume, whether successively or simultaneously, several language identities for the text in question. This kind of procedure implicitly destabilises the notion that texts possess, of necessity and by nature, singular language identities. Consequently, the language of *Finnegans Wake* offers itself as a language which can be only tentatively and conditionally assumed to be English. As a further, “subversive” consequence of this, the language of the book undermines the authority of Standard English as it de-authorises or disenfranchises Standard English as the normative authority over itself. This de-authorisation, in turn, authorises or empowers the reader to consider “likely” items, qualities or aspects of the text as being in languages other than English and assign alternative language identities to these items. In theory, the range of assignable language identities is theoretically unlimited; indeed, the language of a word or passage in *Finnegans Wake* can be “*anythongue athall*” (117.16).

By implication, this destabilises, or subverts the very notion of language identity, too. If you can standardise or “normalise” *wassarnap* in at least three different languages at the same time, if it is possible to have a language whose components can function by virtue of simultaneously belonging to a number of different languages, then the very idea of language identity, elusive enough for the linguist or socio-linguist, evaporates.<sup>5</sup> By its deviancy and aberration *Finnegans Wake*, which, in symbolic terms, is both all-language and no-language, demonstrates that what the “naïve” view of the matter, the Husserlian “natural disposition” or *natürliche Einstellung*, supported by “normal” texts and their “normal” reading, regards as an “objective” entity and self-evident notion, is in fact a fully dissoluble ideological construct, possessing only relative and strictly conditional usefulness, if at all.

As a corollary, *Finnegans Wake* delivers a more general challenge to the “naïve” view of meaning and understanding. On this view, meaning is conventionally as-

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5. Cf. László Kálmán and Ádám Nádasdy, *Hárompercesek a nyelvről* (Budapest: Osiris, 1999), p. 142.



sumed to pre-exist the act of reading and, also, to exist independently of any act of reading. It is regarded as an entity of sorts, essentially linked with, or even “objectively” residing in, the sound or script it is the meaning of. Consequently, reading or interpretation equals the interpreter’s “finding” a meaning which is somehow already “there.” Now, in foregrounding or thematising the language-identity assumption as something the making of which is both a prerequisite for and a source of possible meaning, *Finnegans Wake* also highlights, in a general way, the fact that the meaning of a particular language unit is always something *produced* by its interpreter. It is his choice of a language identity that he assigns to the language unit in question that determines the kind of meaning it will have, just as, more generally, it is his choice of making or not making the language assumption that determines whether there will be a meaning (or, generally, meaning) at all.

All this has profound metaphysical implications. Inasmuch as meaning is shown to be dependent on the choice of the interpreter to produce it (and, logically, on the free will of the agent involved in this choice), *Finnegans Wake* presents meaning (and, in symbolic terms, the entirety of Being) as the productive activity of the free human agent. In this, it is significantly analogous to radically “non-reifying” or “anti-reifying” descriptions, whether in mysticism, philosophy, sociology or aesthetics, which present Being as the ongoing creative process of the metaphysical subject. These include visions of *unio mystica*, philosophies prioritising *Werden* over *Sein* (or Becoming over Being) and various “*energeia*” or “process” descriptions of the world ranging from Heraclitean “flux” to the Marx of *Ökonomisch-Philosophische Manuskripten*, the Lukács of *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein* and Bakhtin’s “carnival.”

*Finnegans Wake* does all this by being *about* the kind of reading, or interpretation, it elicits from its enterprising reader. In this sense, the very point of *Finnegans Wake* is that it makes its reader aware of those interpretative procedures (and the assumptions underlying these procedures *and* the arbitrary nature of these assumptions), which he would “normally” use automatically, in an unreflected way. Or to put this in the form of apparent tautology: the reading of *Finnegans Wake* is its reading.