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Lost and Found: (Non-)Translation and Transmission of Affect in Multilingual Poetry Performance

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While reading an untranslated poem in a language you do not understand may not elicit an emotional response or feeling of connection to the writer, poetry performances open up possibilities for creating social and affective bonds across linguistic differences. Exploring these dynamics, this article asks: what is lost and what is gained in poetry performances in which poets and audience members do not speak the same languages? To address this question, I draw on ethnographic research in Brussels, including participant observation at multilingual poetry performances and collective writing workshops, as well as interviews with poets from diverse linguistic backgrounds. While performers and event organizers employ a range of translation strategies, non-translation is also frequently articulated as an artistic and political choice that highlights the epistemic, affective, and relational value both of not understanding and of seeking understanding beyond words. With a conceptual focus on affect and its links to language, bodies, and understanding, the article explores three interrelated aspects of multilingual poetry performance – language and translation choices, performance strategies, and the role of the audience – to show how performers and audiences co-create meaning and establish relationships across linguistic differences.

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Introduction

Imagine that you are looking at a printed poem on a page in a language, or perhaps even an alphabet, that you do not understand. What can you decipher? The form. The punctuation. Perhaps you notice that some words are repeated, or that some lines are long and others short. Perhaps the script itself conjures some association for you. Yet your ability to access and engage with the poem's meanings and emotions is limited.

Now imagine that you are watching and listening as that poem is being read aloud live by its author, who does not just speak the words but enacts them, imbuing them with emotion and meaning. Maybe they whisper. Maybe they shout. Maybe their tone is sardonic, or their voice is comically exaggerated, or they pause for laughs from the audience. Maybe they use hand gestures, facial expressions, or full-body motions to convey the feeling behind the text. Maybe they speak sharply and crisply, enunciating every letter, their 'P's plosive and their 'F's fricative. Maybe they speak in a melodic voice, bringing musicality to their spoken verse, or perhaps they speak in a percussive rhythm, making you want to tap your foot or bob your head to the beat. Maybe they start slowly and softly, gradually going faster and faster, working up to a frenetic pace, before slowing again to deliver one. last. powerful. line.

While reading an untranslated poem in a language you do not understand may not elicit an emotional response or feeling of connection to the writer, poetry performances open up possibilities for creating social and affective bonds across linguistic differences. Using sound and body communication, performers transmit much more than the literal meaning of their words.

This article asks: what is lost and what is gained in poetry performances in which poets and audience members do not speak the same language? I explore these questions through ethnographic research in the multilingual spoken word poetry scene in Brussels, including participant observation at performances and workshops, as well as interviews with poets. While some events provide translations, non-translation is often articulated as an artistic choice that underscores the epistemic, affective, and relational value both of not understanding and of seeking understanding beyond words. In this vein, I argue for an expanded notion of understanding in and through poetry performance that brings together language, emotions, and bodies as interconnected tools for co-creating meaning and establishing relationships between speakers and listeners. Through my analysis, I engage with critical themes in poetry performance research – including affect transmission (McGowan, 2021), embodiment and sound (Novak, 2011), and translation (Saxena, 2022) – through an anthropological lens grounded in ethnographic methods and a focus on everyday practices and social relations.

The article begins with a discussion of the conceptual tools it mobilizes to explore the interplay between language, affect, and understanding. It then offers an introduction to Brussels' multilingual landscape and poetry scene before turning to three interrelated dynamics of multilingual spoken word poetry. First, I examine the language and translation practices employed by poets and event organizers and consider the effects these choices produce for listeners. Next, I analyze the diverse performance tools that poets employ to transmit meaning and create connections with listeners beyond words. Finally, I consider the role and experience of audiences at multilingual performances and examine the affective and relational dynamics of poetry, including its potential to cross linguistic and cultural barriers.

To elucidate these dynamics, I draw from ethnographic research conducted in Brussels from 2024 to 2026, including participant observation at close to thirty multilingual literary events, and semi-structured interviews with more than 20 writers and artists from diverse linguistic backgrounds. Complementing this research, I employ autoethnography to analyze my experiences as an audience member. As a North American researcher who speaks English, French, Spanish, and Luxembourgish, I can understand the majority of the poems I hear performed on a linguistic level; yet, owing to the multilingual context, I also frequently have the experience of not understanding or partially understanding. This positionality prompts me to pay close attention to the embodied and affective responses that performances elicit, as well as to my own active participation in the collective construction of a social and emotional atmosphere.

In my analysis of this ethnographic material, I focus on the performative, affective, and relational dynamics, rather than the content, of poems performed in particular and sometimes intimate contexts, in which poets decide what and how to share based, in part, on their feelings about the audience in the room. Similarly, as I get to know poets, I am aware of how my presence as an anthropologist could affect their feelings about performing. In this light, I find it important to share context about my research with the poets, explaining that I focus on multilingualism and modes of conveying meaning beyond language. Yet enacting my social role as an audience member also sometimes requires closing my notebook and setting aside my pen, particularly in cases where poets are communicating painful experiences or emotions. In other words, I engage with poets' performances not only as an anthropologist but also as a human being. Thus, in poetry performance settings, I embody the Spinozan definition of affect taken up by Brian Massumi as the 'ability to affect or be affected' (Massumi, 2009).

Language, Affect, and Understanding

Within the field of affect theory, there is a rich body of work exploring the relation between affect and language. Unlike emotion, which is an expression of personal

feeling and more closely associated with discourse, affect is frequently characterized as unmediated, preceding and exceeding linguistic expression (Massumi, 2021; Shouse, 2005). Descriptions of affect often emphasize its embodied nature and outline how it can circulate without verbal communication. Drawing on Brian Massumi's notion of 'microshock' (2009: 5) to describe the 'bodily sensations' associated with affect, Carsten Stage outlines how 'affect arrives at the level of the body before language has clearly conceptualized or interpreted it'. In this framing, 'the role of language becomes to integrate the experience of the microshock into the order of socially compressible communication' (2013: 218). Language, in turn, can either 'amplify' or 'dampen' affective intensity (Massumi, 2021: 28).

Multilingual contexts, in which poets and audiences frequently do not speak the same languages, provide a productive site for observing the transmission of affect. An affective charge can permeate a room before a poet begins speaking, while audience members' oft-cited sensation of 'feeling' a poem without understanding its words testifies to the ways in which affect can be transmitted beyond the bounds of linguistic expression. In this sense, Ben Anderson's understanding of 'affective atmospheres' helps conceptualize the ways in which diverse (human and non-human) bodies affect one another within a particular time and space (2009: 80). Emphasizing the fluid and 'unfinished' nature of atmospheres, Anderson describes how 'the "atmosphere" of [an] aesthetic object elicits a feeling or emotion in a spectator, viewer or listener', which in turn produces something beyond the object (2009: 79). In a similar vein, Sara Ahmed's reflections on the 'sociality of emotion' (2014: 9) are also useful. '*We need to remember the 'press' in an impression*', she contends, '[i]t allows us to associate the experience of having an emotion with the very affect of one surface upon another, an affect that leaves its mark or trace' (2014: 6). In both of these framings, affect is shown to be fundamentally relational, emerging not from inside one individual body but through encounters between bodies.

At the same time, it is clear when analyzing a verbal medium such as poetry that language cannot be removed from the equation. Literary scholars illustrate the myriad ways that emotion can be transmitted and elicited through words (Hogan, 2016), and contemporary affect scholars warn against the risks of replicating Cartesian dualism (Leys, 2011) in the 'distinction between embodied intensity and discursive content' (Lutz, 2017: 188). Here, I argue that incorporating scholarship on translation practices can help reframe debates about affect and language. Similar to questions about the capacity of language to transmit affect, translation theories have examined the potential of translations to capture the nuances of a source text. From Kwame Anthony Appiah's conceptualization of 'thick translation' (1993) to Emily Apter's notion of

'untranslatability' (2014), works in this field illustrate the incommensurability of languages. At the same time, however, translation can be conceptualized as a process of adding or creating new meanings (Emmerich, 2017). In this sense, we may also revisit the relationship between affect and language from a perspective of simultaneous loss and gain of meaning. Putting one's inner thoughts and feelings into words constitutes a first act of translation that cannot fully capture embodied and affective experience but generates new interpretation possibilities for the self and others. Each successive act of translation, whether through language or performance, offers the potential to co-create further meaning and to form affective and relational ties.

The fact that such interpretations are (inter)subjective, partial, and incommensurable does not prevent them from being meaningful. Scholars of multilingualism help us to complexify linguistic notions of 'understanding' from an epistemic point of view, thereby revealing the multidimensionality of verbal communication. Julia Tidigs and Markus Huss, for example, note that '[u]nderstanding can [...] also involve noticing a lack of understanding, noticing that another language is present, and reacting to what is foreign' (2017: 214). As audience members, we carry socially and culturally embedded associations with languages that we do not speak, and the sound of a language can elicit affective responses even when we do not understand the words.

Questions of understanding also entail ethical dimensions, and in some cases non-translation is employed as an artistic and political choice, indicating resistance to hegemonic monolingualism. Shahram Khosravi positions Gloria Anzaldúa's refusal to translate sections of *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987) and J. M. Coetzee's insistence on '*not* translating oneself in someone else's terms' (2013: xii) as forms of 'epistemic refusal' (2024: 1). Drawing on Édouard Glissant (1997), Khosravi conceptualizes such practices in ethical terms as a 'right to opacity' (2024: 7). Choosing not to translate can mean asserting the agency to speak on one's own terms rather than making oneself easily legible to others. The goal is not to elicit a total understanding of the author's words or emotions – which can never be achieved anyway – but rather to call attention to these gaps, thereby fostering a different kind of understanding that acknowledges the structural inequalities and incommensurability of lived experiences.

Bringing together these reflections on multilingualism, affect, and understanding, I construct a conceptual framework that takes seriously both the power and the limitations of language. Thinking of language, affect, and bodies as interconnected, I explore how language interacts with non-linguistic forms of 'emotional communication' (Lutz, 2017: 183–184) to produce emotional responses, affective atmospheres, and social bonds in a multilingual context.

Brussels and SpeakEasy as Multilingual Spaces

As the capital of a country with three official languages (French, Dutch, and German), the administrative center of the European Union, and a city with a large and diverse migrant population, Brussels constitutes a fertile site for this research. On a linguistic level, local language dynamics must be situated within a broader landscape of Belgian language politics, including historic and present tensions between French and Dutch. Rooted in political, economic, and social inequalities dating from before the country's independence in 1830 and divided along a 'linguistic frontier' since the 6th century (Javeau, 2016), Belgium's language divide was further entrenched in the 1960s with the formal legislation of regional monolingualism (Van der Linden and Roets, 2017). The city of Brussels is an exception to this policy, with both French and Dutch as official languages, but a much higher percentage of residents who speak French (81%) compared to those who speak Dutch (22.3%) (Saeys, 2024). At the same time, Brussels is becoming increasingly diverse, with nearly half of the population born outside Belgium (STATBEL, 2021). Within this context, English is gaining ground as a lingua franca (46.9%), while the presence of other languages is also rising, including Spanish (14.5%) and Arabic (11.5%). Overall, recent studies show a growing linguistic diversity in the city over the past two decades (Saeys, 2024).

In addition to producing distinct socio-cultural and political dynamics, this diversity creates a unique literary and artistic environment. Both top-down and bottom-up initiatives emphasize multilingualism as a key feature of Brussels' poetry scene. During my field research, I heard poetry performed in over a dozen spoken languages – including various Romance and Germanic languages, as well as Arabic, Turkish, Greek, and Irish – and encountered many more at writing workshops. An emphasis on multilingualism at the official level can also be glimpsed in the selection of Lisette Ma Neza – a Dutch poet of Rwandan heritage who speaks and writes in multiple languages, including Dutch, Kinyarwanda, and English – as the first Brussels 'City Poet' in 2024 (Lyons, 2024).

Poets frequently describe the Brussels poetry landscape broadly as a welcoming space. This ethos is particularly visible at the monthly open mic events hosted by SpeakEasy Spoken Word BXL. Dutch poet and founder Miksi first started hosting open mic events in her Brussels living room ten years ago. As the community grew, the events moved to larger spaces, and the group now meets regularly on the second Thursday of every month for an open mic in the basement of the Pianofabriek, a cultural center in a former piano factory in the multicultural Saint-Gilles neighborhood. Surrounded by whitewashed brick walls and colored lights, with a small bar in the back where performers can redeem tokens for free drinks, poets perform in multiple languages,

often within a single poem. Many performers hail from Belgium or other European countries, yet poets from outside Europe, including the Americas, Africa, and the Middle East, also frequently take the stage, performing in English, French, Dutch, and many other languages, which vary from month to month and seldom appear in the same combination twice.

In addition to fostering this linguistic diversity, SpeakEasy brings together a range of writing and performance styles, including seasoned performers and first-timers. Sometimes they host open mics around specific issues (such as mental health and Palestine) but typically they are open to all themes, as long as poets adhere to the time limit and the prohibition against 'bad isms and phobias' (i.e., racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia) announced at the beginning of each event. Endeavoring to 'work together with as many voices as possible', Miksi is aware that making room for others, particularly nonwhite poets and poets from the Global Majority, requires taking a step back (Miksi, 2024). Concretely, this means that she and her co-hosts often do not perform unless there is space on the roster, or they bump themselves from the list to make space for others (although they always seem to have poetry in their back pocket, sometimes literally, when there is a hole to fill).

This work to create an inclusive atmosphere – through organizers' remarks before, during, and after performances, as well as behind-the-scenes coordination and curation – is not lost on performers and audience members. Many poets say they feel comfortable sharing in this space because of the supportive atmosphere, and I frequently hear that the SpeakEasy community is 'like a family'. Rachele, an Italian poet who writes and performs in several languages and is finishing a PhD on street poetry, tells me that 'everyone is welcome and you feel it' (Gusella, 2025). With this mix of languages, genres, and themes, featuring poets with different migration backgrounds and jobs, SpeakEasy is, Miksi tells me, 'quintessentially what Brussels is about' – or, in a utopian sense, 'what Brussels was meant to be'. However, she also notes that 'there is racism and sexism' in the broader society and that poets are not immune from such prejudices, which SpeakEasy seeks to counter (Miksi, 2024). When performances do not align with the collective's values, organizers explain this dissonance to the poet offstage afterward or, in more extreme cases, intervene publicly to insist that bigotry is not welcome in this space.

Here, as is common at literary events emphasizing multilingualism in Brussels, English serves as both the lingua franca and the performance language among native and non-native speakers alike, illustrating the dominant position that English continues to hold in many multilingual literary contexts globally (Crystal, 2009). In my research in Brussels, I find that unless an event specifically foregrounds a different

language or linguistic configuration, there is often an expectation among audiences that multilingual events in the city will be intelligible to English speakers. In one case, I witnessed this expectation become a point of tension when an audience member raised their hand during a long talk in Dutch to say that the online description of the event had been misleading (as it was in English) and that many audience members were struggling to understand. While the event facilitator's ad hoc solution of translating informally via linguistic break-out groups made it possible for a larger portion of the audience to understand the content, it also created a demarcation between language groups, illustrating the limitations of multilingualism as an unequivocally inclusive or socially unifying force in groups with diverse or uneven linguistic capacities.

Language and (Non-)Translation Choices

In this landscape, language and translation choices at poetry performances are linked to power dynamics. As in all societies, languages, accents, and dialects can serve as both markers of (un)belonging and instruments of power, with linguistic perceptions (inter) subjectively constructed through speakers' and listeners' individual backgrounds and experiences, as well as broader social and cultural associations. Multilingualism can be a form of resistance to a 'monolingual paradigm' linked to the nation-state (Yildiz, 2012: 3) but can also constitute a mode of 'linguistic exhibitionism' – an aesthetic device to increase a literary work's perceived value in a globalized literary market (Pandey, 2016: 1). At the same time, the act of translating poetry can be a way of 'mak[ing] different aural lives audible' and a powerful tool for voicing dissent and creating political solidarities (Saxena, 2022: 84).

These political and aesthetic dynamics are evident at multilingual events in Brussels. Although English is gaining prominence, some poets problematize this phenomenon, with one writer and workshop facilitator emphasizing that we cannot forget the colonial context in which the English language's hegemony was established. Similarly, uses of French or Dutch can serve either to reify or to transcend cultural and political boundaries. As one SpeakEasy poet asserted – performing shortly after the newest Belgian government was formed, with the right-wing Flemish nationalist party in power – mixing these languages in a poetic context can be a political act in and of itself. For speakers of non-European or minoritized languages, such as Arabic or Irish, poetry performance can be a 'way of expressing [oneself] outside the dominant language', according to Miksi (2024), constituting a form of resistance to linguistic assimilation.

Multilingualism plays out in many ways within the Brussels poetry landscape, from alternating between poems written entirely in one language to performing single poems written in two or more languages. Sometimes poets sprinkle discrete words or

phrases in a language other than the primary language of the poem, whereas other poems include larger segments in different languages or consistently intermingle languages. Verónica, a multilingual poet who also goes by the artistic name La jaune Schreibmaschine, in reference to the yellow typewriter she uses for her public 'Poetry for Strangers' project, favors 'interlineal code-switching' – alternating languages within or between lines (Schmalz, 2025). For example, in a poem entitled 'HOPE' that she performed at a SpeakEasy event at the Brussels Planetarium in 2025, Verónica mixes Spanish, French, Dutch, English, German, and Italian, exploring feelings of both non-belonging and multiple belongings. While she evokes a child's feeling of being different due to their accent, language, skin color, and family, and sometimes wishing they could be like others ('*être comme ils le sont*'), she also describes finding strength in community:

> Gelukkig had ik jullie
> We neuf, together,
> Found the Schlüssel, the key,
> Para sobrevivir y estar aquí.
> Qui aurait imaginé que
> Vuestra resiliencia y resistencia,
> La paciencia y la potencia
> Eran y son la fuerza
> Clavada en mi cabeza
> - Ne t'arrête pas
> Avance, comme ça! (La Jaune Schreibmaschine 2025).

Alternating rapidly between languages signals a move toward embracing a multiplicity within oneself. Within this context, the poem's thematic focus on the 'key' to survival frames this multiplicity as a source of power rather than alienation. At the same time, on an aural level, the rhymes between distinct languages – '*jullie*'/'key'/'*aquí*' and '*fuerza*'/'*cabeza*'/'*pas*'/'*ça*' – mirror this sentiment, evoking a sense of finding connection across and through linguistic difference.

Speaking with poets who mix languages in their writing, I ask how they choose which language(s) to use. For most, it is not a conscious choice to use certain languages to address certain themes, but rather a reflex that they sense instinctively. Rachele compares the process to the way 'the wand chooses the wizard' in *Harry Potter* (Gusella, 2025). Willem, a poet from Brussels who has written in eight languages and performs weekly (and sometimes multiple times a week), expresses a similar sentiment: 'I feel that it needs to come in a specific language' (Willem, 2025). By evoking these affective

terms to describe their relationship to multiple languages, poets challenge monolingual notions of 'one predetermined and socially sanctioned language as the single locus of affect and attachment' (Yildiz, 2012: 13).

Merlijn, a spoken-word poet originally from the Netherlands, takes a somewhat different approach, integrating languages through the voices of other speakers in his poems. He mostly writes in Dutch, but when writing about Brussels, he uses French and other languages he encounters in the city, illustrating the ways in which language use is embedded in relationships and experiences of everyday life. In this vein, multilingual poems can be a reflection of the urban landscape but also a means of engaging with an audience characterized by linguistic diversity. Merlijn tells me that 'when I know the audience will be a bit multilingual [...], I'll try to include [multiple languages] so they'll be part of it' (Gabel, 2025). In these instances, multilingualism is simultaneously an aesthetic and a relational gesture that offers poets a means of creating connections with diverse listeners.

At the same time, not all poets who perform at SpeakEasy share the same enthusiasm for multilingual performances. Poet and anthropologist Alexandra Oancă recounts that she has heard poets at SpeakEasy express skepticism about performances that mix languages, with one artist referring to this practice as 'gimmicky' (Oancă, 2026) – echoing Pandey's critique of 'linguistic exhibitionism' (2016: 1) – and framing it as an aesthetic device that can 'obscure' the quality of the text (Oancă, 2026). Moreover, some poets' 'refusal to be multilingual', as Alexandra puts it, can be linked to migrant positionalities. For people who are 'minorities in their native country' or 'minoritized' in Belgium, performing in a language that audiences do not understand can provoke feelings of alienation within the poetic community, whereas performing in a more widely understood language may be connected to feelings of belonging (Oancă, 2026).

Beyond these language dynamics, translation choices – including the choice not to translate – also play an important role in shaping Brussels' multilingual poetry scene. The most common formal method that I encounter at multilingual poetry events in Brussels is the use of written translations, often projected onto a screen behind the performer. Such translations can be invaluable, allowing audiences to understand the content of poems in languages they do not speak. However, this method also has limitations. At one event, I found myself craning my neck to read the English translations accompanying a Dutch performance whereas the person next to me, a native Dutch speaker, was focusing more intently on listening to the poets' spoken words. Based on his reactions, and our conversations during the breaks, I came to realize that certain stylistic elements of the poems are lost in translation. He found that one poet, for example, used very 'old-style' language, a nuance that was lost on

me, along with the emotional effects that it may produce for listeners familiar with the linguistic and cultural context.

The other drawback of this approach is the way in which it can condition the audience to read rather than listen. At the same event, one poet noted in her introduction that in previous performances she had found herself reading the translations of poems even when she understood the original, something that I often catch myself doing as well. Paradoxically, this practice can lead to paying less attention to the aural and visual dynamics of the performance. Merlijn reflects that this behavior pattern also changes the experience for performers: 'People are just looking at the screen and you can't really interact', he explains (Gabel, 2025). In these instances, I observe a tension between different modes of understanding, with linguistic and affective or relational modes of comprehension positioned in opposition to each other in a way that would be less likely in situations in which performers and audiences share a common language.

Transcending this embodied tension between listening and reading, translations are also sometimes provided orally, with texts prepared in advance by the poet or a professional translator. Willem finds it interesting to hear 'the same text in two different languages, one after the other', which can help the audience to understand the poem differently (Willem, 2025). At the same time, translations can also take on different resonances for both poets and audiences. Rachele, who sometimes translates her own poetry, discusses the diverse meanings and feelings that translations can convey. She gives the example of one poem that she originally wrote in French and translated into Italian, but she refuses to perform the Italian version because she does not like the way it sounds: 'For me the French version is the one I would read out loud. The Italian version is also the poem but the one I would read by myself'. By the same token, there are other poems that she prefers to perform in Italian, 'because it sounds better or it's more felt' (Gusella, 2025). These reflections on the aesthetic and emotional logics behind language choices again break with monolingual imaginaries, showing personal connections to language to be heterogeneous and complex, accumulating and shifting over a lifetime through lived experience.

In addition to these varied forms of translation, poets use other tools to transmit meaning. Often, contextualization takes place in poets' introductions, which form part of what Julia Novak refers to as 'paratext' in the context of live poetry performance (2011: 138). At SpeakEasy, poets frequently offer short remarks in English or French, giving information about their poem(s), including trigger warnings, where applicable. By giving the audience some details about the poem's content or the feelings behind it, Miksi says, you can 'guide them by the hand' (2024). As an audience member, I find that this gesture makes a big difference when listening to performances in languages

that I do not understand. As Willem explains, '[i]f the performer introduces their own text [...] with the intention, then I can feel it better' (2025). Similarly, poets sometimes offer ad hoc translations of their poetry afterwards when asked by friends or audience members. Willem tells me that these translations are typically quite literal or 'word-for-word' (2025), capturing the broad meaning rather than the poetic nuances. Through these practices, we see how language shapes audiences' experiences of a performance and the relationships between speakers and listeners. Here, language is not simply a 'dampener of affect' (Stage, 2013: 2020), but a crucial means of conveying or accessing it. The fact that the understanding generated through language is always incomplete, in both multilingual and monolingual settings, does not negate the power of words to communicate subjective experiences and emotions from one person to another.

Finally, some poets choose non-translation for artistic, epistemic, or political reasons. One example of an explicit 'no translation' policy can be found at the multilingual poetry workshops led by topo.grafiaaa, a small collective which takes some of its inspiration for writing multilingually from its experiences with SpeakEasy. The co-founding writers, who grew up in Belgium with migrant parents, share the ambiguous experience of growing up between languages and cultures (topo.grafiaaa, 2024), countering connotations of singularity and innateness associated with the notion of a 'mother tongue' (Arsanios, 2020; Yildiz, 2012). While both founders describe challenges communicating across languages, they also emphasize the emotional resonance that can come with performing in the language(s) of one's choice without the pressure to make oneself understood to others. The audience, in turn, can 'still get transported somehow, even if you don't speak the language' (topo.grafiaaa, 2024).

This notion of 'feeling' rather than 'understanding' a poem is frequently evoked at multilingual events. One evening, in line for the bar during the break at a SpeakEasy open mic, I overheard an audience member telling a poet who had just performed that they do not speak Dutch but they 'felt it', with this encounter sparking a conversation between two strangers. Another evening, after a particularly emotive performance in Dutch, Miksi asked the audience: 'Who doesn't speak Dutch but felt it?'. Many audience members raised their hands, including me, to which Miksi responded: 'Poetry speaks to the soul'. In these scenarios, emotional resonance is placed above linguistic comprehension – or perhaps, more accurately, framed as a different way of understanding and connecting with others which goes beyond what can be conveyed with language (Massumi, 2009; Stage, 2013). As Miksi puts it, '[w]hen we speak in poetry, we all speak the same language. We can feel each other in the topics, in the themes, in the intonation, in the body language' (2024).

Similarly, Verónica emphasizes the aesthetic, social, and political value of partial understanding and not understanding on a linguistic level. Her poetry, she explains,

inhabits a linguistic 'in-between space', which she poetically likens to 'the river coming to the sea'. Listeners will each have their own 'unique interpretation' based on their personal and linguistic backgrounds, and it is not necessary for audiences to understand every word; for her, it is 'enough to connect with one word' (Schmalz, 2025). In this way, Verónica characterizes meaning-making as a simultaneously personal and social process, which both encompasses and transcends linguistic understanding. However, she also describes moments where this approach became a point of tension. She recounts, for example, a negative experience at a slam competition in Belgium at which judges said that her multilingual poetry was 'difficult to understand' (Schmalz, 2025). On another occasion, she had a 'heated conversation' with an audience member who did not like the sensation of not fully understanding her performance (Schmalz, 2025). Drawing from her experience of migrating to Europe from Argentina at a young age, she countered, '[h]ow long did your discomfort last? Three minutes? Do you know how many migrant people endure this discomfort for months or years of their life?' (Schmalz, 2025). In this sense, the inability to understand a poem's words may foster a different kind of understanding on an affective level, inviting audiences to experience non-comprehension, to understand how it feels not to understand. At the same time, by evoking the structural inequalities tied to language and migration, Verónica emphasizes the political potential of non-translation, countering a colonizing 'demand for knowability' (Khosravi, 2024: 7). In this vein, Verónica argues, multilingual poetry makes a 'strong statement about rebelling [...] socially and politically' against 'homogenization' (Schmalz, 2025), thereby challenging monolingual and monolithic ideas of both art and belonging.

Performing Multilingual Poetry

This emphasis on poetic affect foregrounds different approaches to conveying meaning beyond textual interpretation. While poets' uses of bodies and voices are closely entangled with affect transmission in live performances (Novak, 2011), such tools take on a particular importance and distinctive dynamics in multilingual contexts. At events in Brussels that are largely conducted in one language or when poems are performed in languages that all or most of the audience understands (English, French, or Dutch, depending on the context), semantic content remains a key factor, whereas performances in other languages, or in multiple languages, often place greater emphasis on the performance's embodied dynamics, including aural and visual effects.

On an aural level, poets employ a range of sound techniques to communicate beyond the literal meaning of words. In addition to the sounds of a poem's text – such as rhyme, rhythm, or repetition – performers incorporate a variety of vocal and breathing techniques, as well as sounds made by other parts of their bodies. Such effects can

mimic the content of the poem; for example, a speeding tempo can mirror physical movement or an intensity of emotion. While some of these performance techniques are carefully crafted, others are more spontaneous or unintentional, such as voices breaking, pausing to hold back tears, or audible crying. For some poets, performing in multilingual contexts heightens their attention to these elements, which can shape how they write. Merlijn recounts that since moving to Brussels, he has noticed that his poetry has become 'really rhythmic' and his performances more focused on sounds and movement, particularly in multilingual contexts. 'I still have to entertain [the audience] for two minutes, at least'. In comparison with monolingual events where 'it's about what I say', in multilingual settings he feels like 'I can say whatever', but *how* he says it counts more. When performing for an audience that mostly does not understand Dutch, he says that it is a 'cool' feeling to still be able to transmit meaning beyond words. 'Often when you perform a poem that's really good, you feel like something is vibrating', he tells me, giving words to the embodied feeling that this experience elicits in him (Gabel, 2025). Similarly, for topo.grafiaaa, 'play[ing] with phonetics and sounds and rhythms' was an important inspiration for hosting multilingual workshops. In addition to highlighting the 'musical aspect' of language, they argue that this approach makes poetry more 'accessible' to people who may not speak the language(s) in which it is written. They bring this method into their workshops, proposing exercises and activities that focus on the sounds rather than the meanings of words. According to one founder, 'my way of writing poetry changed' since they started the project, and they now find it 'more fun' to play with sounds and mix languages, showing that there are 'so many textures that multilingualism offers' (topo.grafiaaa, 2024).

In addition to these aural qualities, affect transmission in poetry performance is a highly corporeal experience (McGowan, 2021). Poets mobilize a range of visual forms of body communication, which are frequently 'culturally conditioned' and interpreted based on audience members' 'knowledge of body communication off stage' (Novak, 2011: 145). From facial expressions and hand gestures to full body movements, performers add a visual layer to the performance that may complement or complicate their spoken words. Performers may grasp the mic stand closely, creating an intimate or confessional tone, or take the mic off the stand entirely to move around the stage, projecting confidence or familiarity. They may position their body toward the audience or away from it. They may close their eyes softly or squeeze them shut. They may act out vignettes from the poems or touch parts of their bodies to indicate visceral feelings – in their stomach, their heads, their hearts. Poems that manage to convey a strong emotion are often the best received by audiences and tend to elicit parallel affective responses. Such embodied performance tactics can be choreographed or improvised. Rachele, who

has a very engaging stage presence, tells me that she tends to experiment onstage: 'I really like to move when I perform. It's not something I control, I think it's that fever taking over' (Gusella, 2025). Yet while she characterizes her movements as instinctual, these dynamics of her performance add to the affective resonance of her more carefully crafted spoken words, illustrating the links between language, emotions, and the body. These performance techniques take on particular importance in multilingual performances as a mode of conveying the emotional and embodied feelings elicited by a text to audiences who may or may not understand the spoken words.

Using their bodies and voices in concert, poets can create different kinds of relationships with the audience. Verónica describes herself as a very 'theatrical poet', explaining the diverse vocal and bodily techniques she uses to convey meaning beyond words. While many of these are intended to engage the audience broadly, she also likes the experience of creating a connection with one person. Particularly when she sees someone looking 'skeptical', she sometimes chooses to look directly at them, using eye contact and gestures as if she were speaking to them alone. She sees this tactic as a way of 'giving someone a place in the performance', a move which also typically prompts a 'shift' toward greater engagement on the part of the audience member (Schmalz, 2025).

At other times, however, non-linguistic forms of communication may spark interpretations or affective responses that differ from what is felt or intended by the poet. Undoubtedly, there are limitations to what can be conveyed through voice and the body. Besides the obvious loss of content and wordplay that occurs in non-translation, there are innumerable stylistic and emotional layers that are difficult to express without words. Humor, for example, can be particularly challenging to convey, Merlijn explains (Gabel, 2025). In a similar vein, without understanding the language of performance, it is difficult to grasp the effects of an intentional dissonance between tone and content, such as using a light tone to talk about a serious or emotional subject.

Active and Affective Listening

Thinking about how performances are received invites us, in turn, to explore the relational and affective dynamics of multilingual poetry performance as a form of oral literature. Unlike written literature, the audience in such contexts is not hypothetical but clearly visible, playing an active role in the performance (Dubuisson, 2022). In such contexts, the audience performs a key social role in the sense outlined by Erving Goffman, as 'the enactment of rights and duties attached to a given status' (1959: 16). As Richard Butsch explains, 'audience is a situated role that people temporarily perform, and in their performance people produce representations of audiences' (2008: 3), which

in turn create contexts for the transmission of affect (McGowan, 2021: 114). At the same time, the dynamic changing of social roles 'make[s] *intersubjectivity* possible', and switching between positions (i.e. onstage performer and offstage audience member) can 'open and close spaces of difference and possibility [...] both of these with intense emotional resonances' (Glaveanu and Womersley, 2021: 632).

In light of these shifting but inextricably intertwined roles, I ask poets about their experiences as audience members. One common theme that emerges in these conversations is that listening to a poetry performance in a language you do not understand can provoke a feeling of 'letting go' that can be cathartic. Rachele, for example, tells me that she often finds it 'calming' to listen to poetry in languages that she does not understand and that, when she's onstage, she likes to 'give people that feeling', that ability to '*lâcher prise*', or 'let go' (Gusella, 2025). Similarly, one audience member with whom I chatted at a SpeakEasy event told me that they 'almost prefer it' when they do not understand the language of the performance, as it allows them to listen differently.

This idea of listening differently, in turn, echoes Jean-Luc Nancy's reflections on listening as a sensorial act. 'What secret is at stake' he writes, 'when one truly *listens*, that is, when one tries to capture or surprise the sonority rather than the message?' (2007: 5). In the case of multilingual poetry performances, letting go of the impetus to understand language makes way for other ways of knowing, more rooted in the body and emotions. When I ask what one can understand in a poetry performance in which one does not speak the language, poets tend to emphasize emotional and relational dynamics. Merlijn tells me:

> They're humans and I'm a human. And especially when [...] people talk in a certain emotion and I don't understand the words but I understand the emotion and it's so powerful [...] I don't need to know – it's just a feeling [...]. Even if you don't understand the language, you see 'this is a human being on earth' [...]. You see people being vulnerable (Gabel, 2025).

Or, as Rachele succinctly puts it: 'We don't have to understand why someone is sad if we see that they are sad' (Gusella, 2025). This notion, in both accounts, of not needing to 'know' the specific context or details to 'feel' the conveyed affect on a more instinctual level attests to the power of poetry performance beyond words.

This focus on the human-to-human dynamics of poetry performance illuminates the relationality of this encounter, in which audiences play an embodied role in the transmission of emotion (Ahmed, 2014). Whether snapping, clapping, stomping,

cheering, laughing, tapping their feet, or bobbing their heads, audience members perform their listening, which poets describe as crucial to creating a supportive ambiance. 'What I've really learned from the spoken-word scene', Merlijn recounts, 'is to be supportive and to show that'. He admits that engaging with a performance can be 'more difficult when it's a language I don't know or a story told in a specific way' so 'sometimes you fake it a bit'. I semi-jokingly recount to him that I have never been able to snap my fingers well, and that now that I am doing research at spoken word poetry events, this has become an issue, so I sometimes fake it. He responds graciously that 'these are the microscopic things that you can feel' when you are onstage – for example, seeing the movement in the audience – and 'it's enough'. Such gestures can also elicit a 'chain reaction' whereby one person's snaps or laughter creates a mimetic effect in the audience (Gabel, 2025). By the same token, however, audiences' actions can also have distracting or unsettling effects; for example, Willem says that 'it throws [him] off' to have audience members talking during his performance (2025).

Audiences' reactions can also be another entry point to understanding the meanings and feelings behind a poem performed in a language that you do not speak but that others in the audience do. As I write in my field notebook at one SpeakEasy event: 'As a listener, you can surmise about the poem not just by the poet's voice, body language, etc. but also the response of the audience. Now, it's a silent, heavy atmosphere. It feels like the audience is all hanging on the poet's words, whether we speak Dutch or not'. However, these responses can also underscore what you *do not* understand, possibly provoking feelings of alienation, such as when everyone is laughing at a joke you do not get or is visibly emotionally affected by words that you cannot comprehend. In this sense, the affective atmosphere of a space (Anderson, 2009) can not only give cues to understanding a text but also shape one's sense of connection to both the poem and the other people in the room.

While these interactions between performers and audiences can be fleeting, emerging in a particular time and space, they can also lead to the formation of relationships outside the performance context and contribute to building community. Performing poetry can be an intimate act in any language and can take on further emotional resonances in multilingual settings. As Miksi puts it, 'when somebody performs something written in another language, they're giving you a piece of their heart' (2024). While attending events and speaking with poets, I witness how relationships formed through performances often go beyond the stage. At poetry events, I constantly hear and see people approach poets to say they enjoyed their performance, and I frequently do the same. As Willem suggests, this positive feedback can be an ice-breaker, a mode of making contact and building social connections, even though these may be fleeting.

He recounts that after almost every performance he has conversations with audience members, reflecting that 'I think it's what I like the most, going to tell them thank you for your words and having them do the same' (Willem, 2025).

Language itself can also play a role in shaping encounters and relationships. For speakers of minoritized languages, performing and listening to poetry in a live context can create a special bond. Sometimes, poets ask in their introductions who in the audience speaks a specific language to gauge who will understand the content. In one instance, I noticed that just one member of the audience snapped in response to the poet's question, to which the poet replied, '[o]k, I'm going to read for my girl'. Another poet describes an experience of reading a 'very personal' poem in a language that they did not expect most of the audience to understand, so when someone approached them afterwards to say that they found it moving, their shared language created a special point of connection. In such situations, performers' language use, dialect, and accent can play an important role in defining belonging, indicating 'membership in a larger speech community' or even 'sub-community' (Field, 2013: 93).

At the same time, not understanding a language can also create links, as Willem explains. As an audience member, he likes being able to ask people after a performance what their words meant or what languages they used, which can also '[help] to start contact with someone you don't know' (Willem, 2025). All the poets I interview talk about the relationships they have formed through performing, and many describe a sense of community they feel in these settings, where poets and audiences can forge emotional and social connections not in spite of, but because of their diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Conclusions

This article puts forth different ways of answering the question of what is lost and what is gained when poets and audience members do not speak the same languages. In concise, though perhaps overly simplistic terms, we see that one can lose a poem's linguistic meaning and the literary effects of its style, word choice, or cultural references while still gaining an emotional, relational, and aesthetic experience. Another way to put it is that we both gain and lose understanding. In multilingual poetry performance, as we have seen, the notion of understanding can take on a variety of forms and shades, both within and beyond language. One can fully understand a performance on a linguistic level without understanding or feeling a connection to the emotions behind it but, equally, one can be emotionally affected by a performance and feel a bond with a poet without understanding their words. Paying attention to embodied forms of communication, such as sounds and visual cues, sheds light on these affective and relational dynamics.

Understanding is revealed to be both intersubjective and cumulative, emerging through encounters between speakers and listeners and through the layering of diverse forms of verbal and nonverbal communication. While this understanding is plural and multifaceted – encompassing linguistic comprehension, emotional resonance, and even, in some cases, the ambivalent experience of not understanding – it is also always partial, reflecting the impossibility of fully comprehending others.

At the same time, the insights generated through this line of questioning bear relevance beyond the scope of multilingual performances. While the effects produced by poets' transmission of affect through sound and bodily communication take on unique significance, or become particularly visible in contexts where linguistic understanding cannot be taken for granted, exploring multilingual poetry performance also sheds new light on the social and affective dynamics of poetry performance more broadly. Looking at these settings illuminates how performers and audiences collaborate to transmit affect on and off the stage, through language and beyond it. Although this ethnographic analysis reveals critical gaps, tensions, and incommensurabilities across languages, social positions, and lived experiences that emerge in poetry performances in multilingual settings, it also, crucially, underscores the entanglements of linguistic and non-linguistic communication, of emotions and bodies, and of individuals and the social worlds they inhabit.

Ethics and Consent

This research was approved by the Ethics Commission of the researcher's university which conducted a GDPR assessment and ethical review (reference number G-2024-7572-R2(MAR)). All interviewees gave verbal consent to participate in the research and selected how they wanted to be cited (full name, stage name or collective name).

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