



**Writing in the ‘Grey Zone’: Exophonic Literature in
Contemporary Germany**

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This article argues for the adoption of the term 'exophony' (and its derivative adjective 'exophonic') as a useful and appropriate description of the phenomenon of writing by non-native speakers of a language, in this case of German. 'Exophony' avoids the thematic prescriptiveness of older terms used in the German context such as 'Ausländer-' and 'Migrantenliteratur', and of more recent thematically motivated terminology such as 'axial' and 'postnational'. It allows an important distinction to be drawn between the differing contexts of production of writing by non-native-speakers and native-speakers of hybrid identity, calling attention to the politics of style in non-native-speaker writing. The innovative stylistic features observed in the work of writers such as Franco Biondi, Emine Sevgi Özdamar and Yoko Tawada are analogous to the strategies of appropriation identified in certain postcolonial literatures. They defamiliarise the German language in a manner which is often alienating for German readers.

1. Introduction

An increasing number of writers across Europe are producing literature in languages other than their mother tongues, and it is to be expected that the current wave of labour migration brought on by the opening of the EU's internal borders will swell their numbers in the coming decades. Germany's non-native-speaker writers are, comparatively speaking, a well-established phenomenon. Many of them migrated to the Federal Republic as so-called *Gastarbeiter* during the country's post-war wave of labour recruitment. Franco Biondi (born in Italy in 1947, emigrated to Germany in 1965), Emine Sevgi Özdamar (born in Turkey in 1946, initially moved to Germany in 1965) and Rafik Schami (born in Syria in 1946, emigrated to Germany in 1971) number among this group. Others came to Germany independently of such mass labour migration; included among this group are Wladimir Kaminer, Yoko Tawada, Galsan Tschinag (to the Democratic Republic) and Tzveta Sofronieva. Non-native-speaker writers write for both children and adults, and their work covers a spectrum ranging from the popular to the literary and the intellectual. What they all have in common is that German is not their mother tongue, and the vast majority of them had little or no knowledge of the language before moving to or first spending time in either the Federal or the former Democratic Republic.

Terminological discussions have accompanied contemporary German writing by non-native speakers of German from its *Gastarbeiterliteratur* beginnings in the early 1980s. The critical preoccupation with sociological labels has persisted almost as long as writers' demands that they be appreciated for the literary nature of their contribution to German letters. The sociological survey approach adopted to writing by non-native speakers, and indeed to writing by the native speaker 'second generation', has declined in recent years, and questions of form and style are increasingly attracting attention in the critical literature. There remains, however, a lack of differentiation between different generations of 'hyphenated writers' in Germany, to borrow a term from Cheesman (2006), as well as between those native and non-native speakers of German who have hybrid identities. After careful consideration of other terms including 'postcolonial', this article will argue for the adoption of the noun 'exophony' and the derivative adjective 'exophonic' to describe the phenomenon of a writer working in a language other than his or her mother tongue. This term avoids the imposition of a thematic straitjacket and emphasises the innovative stylistic features that can be observed in this body of texts.

2. Writing in the 'grey zone': an investigation of descriptive terminology

At a symposium entitled 'Orte des literarischen Exils' which took place at the Literarisches Colloquium in Berlin in 2006,¹ Dubravka Ugrešić, a writer from Croatia who lives in voluntary exile in The Netherlands but continues to write in Croatian, expressed the opinion that contemporary works of literature created in the 'grey zone' between a national literature and the literature of a host country surpass and subvert the conceptual apparatus of literary critics, university departments, teachers and readers. Her remarks occurred in the context of a discussion with two other voluntarily exiled writers from former Yugoslavia on the definition of 'exile', a word/state which Ugrešić felt was characterised by inadequate

¹ The symposium took place on 17 May 2006 in honour of the Serbian writer David Albahari, who lives in 'voluntary exile' in Canada. Albahari, along with his German translators Mirjana and Klaus Wittmann, was being awarded the Brücke Berlin Preis by the BHF-BANK-Stiftung. The symposium was conducted largely in English and the account of the discussion given here is based on my own notes.

descriptive terminology as well as by a failure to differentiate between different types of exile, that is, to position the circumstances of a given writer's exile on a spectrum ranging from the forced to the voluntary. Ugrešić continued by saying that reviews of books such as her own *The Ministry of Pain*, the English translation of which (Heim 2006) was nominated for the 2006 Independent Foreign Fiction Prize, rarely discuss the work at hand, and concentrate instead on extra-textual topics such as the author's biography and the 'unhappy' condition of exile. Although the vast majority of Germany's non-native-speaker writers are not in exile,² they certainly produce their work in what Ugrešić terms the 'grey zone', and the question therefore arises as to which terminological frameworks are available to describe and discuss their writing. Several terms used in recent years by scholars working in various fields – contemporary German literature, translation studies, and postcolonial studies – suggest themselves, and it is to a consideration of these terms that I will now turn.

2.1. Axial writing

A research group at the University of Wales, Swansea³ suggested the adjective 'axial' as a way of referring to 'travelling writers whose lives are lived on, and whose work chronicles the traffic on, the geographical (but also remembered and imagined) pathways of mass migration' (Cheesman 2006: 477). The phenomenon of axialism is not confined to any particular culture or language. Cheesman, who coordinated the Swansea research group, lists axialism as one of four strategies adopted by German-Turkish novelists as a means of dealing with 'the burdens of representation' which their situation as prominent members of the Turkish community in Germany brings with it (ibid). The other strategies are refusal (to thematise cultural identity or any of the other issues dealt with by axial texts), parodic ethnicisation (parodying the German majority view of the Turkish minority by representing that minority as 'exactly what the majority dreads them to be' (ibid: 482) and glocalism

² Rafik Schami's and Wladimir Kaminer's respective situations number among the more politically complex.

³ The Swansea-based research group on 'Axial writing: transnational literatures, cultural politics and state policies' was part of the 1997-2003 ESRC-funded Transnational Communities Programme, hosted by the University of Oxford. See www.transcomm.ox.ac.uk for full details of this programme.

(texts which have a more international or globalised focus). The vast majority of German-Turkish writers can be described as axial, Cheesman argues, and in fact all hybrid writers, and many non-hybrid writers, can be categorised thus ‘because a sufficiently suspicious reading can find metaphors of border-crossing, difference, displacement and cultural dissonance in any text’ (ibid: 478-9).

‘Axial’ is certainly an apt description of the circumstances of Franco Biondi’s life, and of the thematic preoccupations of his writing. Biondi’s novel *Die Unversöhnlichen oder Im Labyrinth der Herkunft* (1991) considers the family history of an Italian *Gastarbeiter* turned social worker, Dario Binachi, against the historical background of twentieth-century Italy, a period when many Italians were forced, out of economic necessity, to seek employment abroad. In the novel, Dario Binachi returns to his home town in Italy for a visit and begins to contemplate the relationship between his Italian past and his German present. Dario Binachi’s fictional life mimics Biondi’s own, and indeed the author fictionalises himself as a character in three of his novels. Biondi first went to Germany as a *Gastarbeiter* in 1965 at the age of eighteen, accompanied by the rest of his family who eventually returned to Italy. He spent ten years doing various types of factory work, put himself through night school and university and today combines his job as a family therapist with writing. ‘Axial’ is less fitting as a description of Yoko Tawada’s work, however. Tawada, who publishes in both German and Japanese, was not part of a wave of mass migration to Germany, and as such does not share the same burden of representation carried by German-Italian and German-Turkish writers. Her work does confront stereotypes of the ‘Oriental’, but it makes use of a strategy of parodic ethnicisation rather than axialism. The problem with using axialism as a descriptive term for the work of non-native-speaker writers is not, however, that it does not provide a neat thematic fit. Rather it is problematic precisely because it is a thematic rather than a stylistic categorisation.⁴ This type of categorisation does not consider, for example, that a text which appears to refuse to deal with axial issues on a thematic level may be dealing with them stylistically instead. It does not differentiate between native and non-native speakers of German and therefore ignores key differences in

⁴ The same criticism holds for older terms such as *Ausländer-* and *Migrantenliteratur* which are still used in Germany.

the production and reception of texts written by different ‘types’ of author. It also categorises by writer rather than by text and therefore does not allow for thematic (or stylistic) variations within an author’s oeuvre. A further problem with thematic categorisations is that they run the risk of being as prescriptive as the term *Gastarbeiterliteratur*, which was used in the emergent days of non-native-speaker writing in German, thus extending the burden of representation – whether this is refused, embraced, or something in-between the two – to all hyphenated writers.

Cheesman admits that his ‘quartet of strategies [may not] hold analytical water’ (ibid: 486) and welcomes critical debate on it. One might argue that an emphasis on theme or style respectively is merely a matter of the individual critic’s focus. The cognitive turn in stylistics, however, which has gathered momentum over the past few years with key contributions from translation studies scholars (cf. Boase-Beier 2006), understands the stylistic features of a text to contain clues as to ‘mind style’ (Fowler 1977: 103) or ‘a speaker’s (subjective) choice of a given conceptualisation’ (Tabakowska 1993: 7). Style implies choice on the part of the author, whether conscious or unconscious, and these stylistic choices provide the reader with clues which help him or her construct the attitude of an inferred author, of a character, narrator or text. From a cognitive stylistics point of view therefore, to disregard style is to severely limit one’s reading of a text.

2.2. Postnational writing

Another term which could be used to describe certain types of writing within the grey zone is ‘postnational’, suggested by Thomson as a way of describing ‘a shift from a strategy of writing (and translating) as nation-building to one of writing (and translating) as a response to living in a time when the boundaries between and within national cultures seem to be ever more fluid and porous’ (2004: 57). Thomson adopts postnational in preference to postcolonial, arguing that postcolonial theories of translation can seem inappropriate in the context of wealthy European cultures. The term postnational, however, appears overly optimistic in its assumption of the steady decline in the primacy of the nation state as a core unit of identity and power. It also suggests a cultural fluidity within the borders of the nation state which does not (yet) hold true for the German cultural context. Feridun Zaimoğlu, the child of Turkish immigrants to Germany, argued firmly against optimistic

talk of postnationalism in Germany in his introduction to *Kanak Sprak* (2004 [1995]), a collection of ‘interviews’ with disenfranchised and disillusioned German-Turkish youths. His (and his interviewees’) appropriation of the racist terms ‘Kanake’ and ‘Kümmel’ challenged the myth of a tolerant, multicultural German society and lashed out at middle class Turks who claimed to have successfully integrated. Zaimoğlu’s interviewees were united by ‘das Gefühl (*sic*), “in der liga der verdammten zu spielen”, gegen kulturhegemoniale Ansprüche bestehen zu müssen’ (2004 [1995]: 17). Admittedly, since Zaimoğlu wrote *Kanak Sprak* in 1995, the legal situation with regard to attaining German citizenship has changed considerably, with German-ness no longer being defined exclusively in terms of ethnicity, bringing with it a change in the socio-cultural climate. Zaimoğlu’s own reputation as a literary and cultural *enfant terrible* has also softened. The correlation between class and successful integration to which he drew attention, however, is still valid today, and highlights the fact that the term postnational is a more fitting description of a cultural elite than of a mainstream tendency in contemporary Europe. Furthermore, I would dispute Thomson’s argument that the postcolonial is not an appropriate paradigm within which to describe the movement of texts between European states. Whether this is in fact true depends very much on the nature of the source text and the culture into which it is being translated. Labour migration within Europe in the post-war period has created social and political inequalities and systems of dominant and marginalised cultures which are reflected in contemporary literature and which benefit from discussion within a postcolonial paradigm. Moreover, although writing (and translating) may no longer be geared towards homogeneous nation-building in the classic nineteenth-century sense, heterogeneous, alternative histories of the nation continue to feature in contemporary writing by hyphenated writers: Özdamar’s *Das Leben ist eine Karawanserei* (1992), for example, is in many ways a magical realist treatment of the post-Ottoman Turkish republic. The term postnational, then, is problematic on a variety of levels, and, like axial, does not pay enough attention to the linguistic and stylistic aspects of writing in the grey zone.

2.3. Postcolonial writing

There can be little doubt that a ‘discourse of colonialism’ (Bhabha 2004 [1994]: 94) affecting Germany’s immigrant population can be observed today in the German media and

in political and daily life. Observation of current events and analysis of articles in the press reveals the extent to which German society claims to know its migrant 'others' and engages in constant reinforcement of its Orientalist stereotypes. The current colonial discursive turn appears to have been triggered by two sets of circumstances: the first, ironically, is the process of normalisation taking place in German life with respect to the country's treatment of migrants. At a recent conference held at the Goethe Institut in London (27-28 April 2007), Kolb (unp.) argued that Germany has now begun a 'normalisation process' in relation to its immigrant population. This process manifests itself in four areas: politically speaking, the country has admitted its status as an *Einwanderungsland*; legally speaking, it has taken steps to bestow citizenship more easily on its long-term foreign residents; intercultural education has been embraced in schools; and research into all aspects of migration is well under way in the academic sphere (Kolb, unp.). The second set of circumstances is Turkey's EU accession bid, which has led to unease in Germany about the status and loyalties of its Turkish population – Germany's largest ethnic minority group after Germans themselves. In a lead article in *Die Zeit*, published to coincide with the EU's Copenhagen summit in December 2002 where Turkey's bid to be named an accession candidate was under consideration, the former SPD Chancellor Helmut Schmidt argued that Turkish accession to the EU 'würde Freizügigkeit für alle türkischen Staatsbürger bedeuten und damit die dringend gebotene Integration der bei uns lebenden Turken und Kurden aussichtslos werden lassen' (Schmidt 2002).

Schmidt's article 'Einbinden, nicht aufnehmen', printed under the larger, provocatively worded headline 'Sind die Türken Europäer?', implied that if Turkey were to join the EU, in addition to Germany being flooded by Turkish nationals, those Turks already resident in Germany would no longer feel obliged to integrate; integration into German society, the reader is led to understand, involves embracing German-ness and renouncing any other national claims on one's identity. If Turkish-ness were to become a valid permutation of a European identity, the supremacy and attractiveness of German-ness would be severely undermined. The official governmental discourse of integration as a desirable goal is upheld in Schmidt's article, but it is counteracted by his simultaneous argument that Turks are ultimately incapable of integration into German society because of their essential non-European 'otherness'.

The discourse of colonialism makes itself felt in literary spheres as well. A 2004 column written by Ulrich Greiner, *Die Zeit*'s literary editor, criticised the decision taken by the organisers of that year's national poster campaign 'Bringt Poesie in unsere Städte!' to focus on Chamisso prize winners – the Adelbert-von-Chamisso prize is awarded annually to 'deutsch schreibende Autoren [...] deren Muttersprache oder kulturelle Herkunft nicht die deutsche ist' (Robert-Bosch-Stiftung 2005: 5) – whose poetry, Greiner argues, is simply not among the best that Germany has to offer (Greiner 2004).⁵ The most striking element of Greiner's criticism is, however, his dismissal of the verb construction in line three of an extract from Yoko Tawada's poem 'Kaeshiuta' (2004), featured in the campaign, as an incorrect subjunctive: 'Verließe ich sie, würde ich eingehen'. Greiner is presumably maintaining that this line, which contains a suppressed *wenn-dann* structure, should in fact read 'verließe ich sie, ginge ich ein'. In fact both 'würde ich eingehen' and 'ginge ich ein' are valid forms of *Konjunktiv II*. In Durrell's terminology they are referred to as the 'conditional' and the 'past subjunctive' respectively, and occur as alternative forms of *Konjunktiv II* with roughly equal frequency when used with the verb 'gehen' (Durrell 2002: 329). 'Würde ich eingehen', which makes use of the *würde-Umschreibung*, is more colloquial than 'ginge ich ein', but it is still correct. There seems, however, to be a logical, linguistic reason for Tawada's use of the circumlocution. If the third line of the poem did indeed read 'verließe ich sie, ginge ich ein', the reader might understand both clauses in the line as conditions, and hence perhaps as the beginning of a list, rather than understanding the second clause as a suppressed *dann*-clause. Greiner quotes only lines one to three out of the eleven lines featured on the billboard, and so the reader does not learn that line four contains a further example of a suppressed *wenn-dann* clause: 'Bliebe ich dort, gäbe es keinen Sex'. This line contains Greiner's preferred form of *Konjunktiv II* rather than the colloquial alternative 'Bliebe ich dort, würde es keinen Sex geben'. Line four places line three in its proper context, proving that Tawada is fully aware that there is more than one form of *Konjunktiv II*. It also supports the argument that her use of 'würde' was deliberate, aimed at avoiding the potential for misunderstanding described above. One might speculate that Greiner perceived Tawada's mastery of the 'colonial' language as a challenge, and

⁵ See Wright 2008 for a more detailed discussion of Greiner's article.

resorted to what Biondi has referred to as ‘Obrigkeitsdeutsch’ (cf. Biondi 1995; von Saalfeld 1998: 151-4), a phenomenon whereby German publishers and literary critics insist upon the authority of German grammar and conventional linguistic usage, as well as upon their own authority as native speakers to enforce these rules.

The discourse of colonialism briefly illustrated in the above examples inevitably leads one to consider the appropriateness of postcolonialism as a framework for examining contemporary German writing by non-native speakers. Postcolonialism, or postcolonial studies, is a complex and wide-ranging field whose ‘referent in the real world is a form of political, economic, and discursive oppression whose name, first and last, is *colonialism*’ (Slemon 1994: 31). Although individual German states pursued colonial ambitions pre-1871 and a unified Germany acquired colonies in both Africa and the Pacific post-1871, Germany’s colonial history was short-lived in comparison to that of Great Britain and France; by the end of the Great War, its colonies had been redistributed among the Allied powers. The immigrant non-native-speaker writers who populate today’s literary landscape in Germany do not come from former colonies of the German empire and their literature has therefore not emerged from the experience of colonisation in the strict sense of the word, nor, strictly speaking, is Germany’s relationship to them that of a coloniser. However, in their seminal essay ‘Literatur der Betroffenheit’, Franco Biondi and Rafik Schami, who were leading figures in the political organisation of writing by non-native speakers in the 1980s, compared the situation of *Gastarbeiter* in the Federal Republic with that of colonised peoples:

Die Gastarbeiter kommen meist aus südlichen Ländern, sie kommen aus ländlichen Gebieten und sind von der dortigen kulturellen Entwicklung geprägt. Sie kommen hierher und erleben einen Bruch, denn sie werden in eine fest gefügte, auf einem anderen Stand der Entwicklung sich befindende Kultur hineingeworfen. Dieser Bruch in der kulturellen Entwicklung ähnelt sehr der kulturellen Katastrophe, die die Kolonialvölker erlitten. (Biondi; Schami 1981: 124)

Biondi and Schami state that the immediate response of the *Gastarbeiter* to his or her new ‘colonial’ situation was ‘literarische[s] Verstummen’, gradually followed by the realisation, even by those guest workers who had little formal education, of the importance of communicating their experiences to a wider audience (ibid).

The debates which surrounded the emergence of German literature by non-native speakers in the 1970s and 1980s bear key similarities to the debates surrounding the emergence of

postcolonial literatures, in particular the literatures of former colonies of occupation. The structural organisation of *Gastarbeiterliteratur* in the 1980s went hand-in-hand with a debate over whether to adopt German as a literary *lingua franca*, mirroring the debate over the use of English versus the use of a local language in postcolonial contexts (cf. Achebe 1989 and Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’O 1986). Two key organisations, *PoLiKunst* and *Südwind*, promoted the use of German among their members and published their anthologies either in German or as bilingual editions. Biondi and Schami explain the decision to encourage non-native-speaker writers to work in German in the following terms: ‘Damit wollte man und will man auch das Gemeinsame betonen, um Brücken zu schlagen zu den deutschen Mitbürgern und zu den verschiedenen Minderheiten anderer Sprachherkunft in der Bundesrepublik’ (Biondi; Schami 1981: 134).

Biondi and Schami acknowledge that writing in German rather than in one’s mother tongue comes at a price, but deny that this price is that of learning German to a sufficient standard: ‘vielmehr begibt sich der Autor schon hier auf eine Konfliktebene mit seiner Identität’ (ibid). They go on to argue that non-native-speaker writers are willing to sacrifice writing in their mother tongues ‘weil sie sich bewußt sind, daß nur das gemeinsame Handeln mit allen Betroffenen die Gründe ihrer Betroffenheit aufheben kann’ (ibid). The collective decision to write in German was therefore primarily pragmatic in nature. It gave disenfranchised *Gastarbeiter* a political voice with which to fight the injustices of their situation and it brought different minority groups together. This bears similarities to the situation described by the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe, who argued that English, the language of the coloniser, could act as a *lingua franca* in his postcolonial society, enabling him to communicate with his fellow Nigerians in a country where over two hundred languages are spoken (2006 [1989]: 269). In Germany, some migrant writers nonetheless felt excluded and betrayed by *PoLiKunst* and *Südwind*’s decision to promote the use of German among their members, many of them feeling that their linguistic skills were simply inadequate to the task of writing in German. On the other hand, many non-native-speaker writers increasingly felt a gulf between the expressive possibilities of their mother tongue and the reality of their everyday life in Germany.

Writing by German non-native-speaker writers displays analogous strategies to the strategies of appropriation identified in certain postcolonial literatures and documented in

some detail by Ashcroft et al. (2002: 58-76). These strategies include literal translation, glossing, neologism and syntactic fusion, all of which create a ‘metonymic gap’ (ibid: 53) – a deliberate gulf of understanding between post-colonial text and metropolitan reader. Appropriation of the colonial language is necessary to enable the expression of post-colonial identities in the language(s) of the former colonisers. In similar fashion, non-native-speaker writers have sought and continue to seek to create a space in the German language for the expression of ‘other’ German identities. As Biondi states: ‘Es geht mir darum auszuloten, wo ist die Anwesenheit einer fremden Erfahrung in der deutschen Sprache möglich’ (von Saalfeld 1998: 152). Non-native-speaker writers also defamiliarise German for the German reader, creating their own ‘metonymic gap’, reminding themselves and their readers that language belongs to nobody and that one should never feel too comfortable there.

There are further similarities between the contexts in which *Gastarbeiterliteratur* and postcolonial literatures emerged. It is possible to argue that the institutional support for *Gastarbeiterliteratur* which eventually resulted in the establishment of the Adelbert-von-Chamisso-Preis resembles the second stage in the development of postcolonial literature identified by Ashcroft et al.: ‘literature produced “under imperial licence” by “natives” or “outcasts”’ (2002: 5). (The first stage, writing produced by ‘a literate elite’ (ibid), does not apply to the German context.) It has certainly been criticised as such by Zaimoğlu, who in his introduction to *Kanak Sprak* (2004 [1995]), as well as in a fiery essay entitled ‘Gastarbeiterliteratur: Ali macht Männchen’ (1998) accuses ‘Alipoeten’ (ibid: 91) of self-pity, of relegating immigrants to the role of helpless rather than angry victims in German society – in this respect his critique echoes the critiques of Günter Wallraff’s *Ganz unten* (cf. Özakin 1986; Teraoka 1989) – and of being poor stylists. The attempts made by guest worker writers to build bridges between two cultures and languages denied the fundamental inequalities and injustices in German society in favour of the pursuit of personal ambition and a place in the state-sanctioned canon.

also spricht das plumpe ei: ich sehe orient und okzident, ich sehe zwei ufer, und die will ich verbinden [...] es verbindet genau zwei punkte, nämlich einen abgehauenen rassellevantiner mit dem goethe-institut. Es träumt der gnompotatoe von seiner relevanz im dtschen (*sic*) schulbuch gleich im anschluß an die katholikentrübsal böll (Zaimoğlu 1998: 91-92)

Cheesman suggests that the publicity-loving Zaimoğlu is merely making an Oedipal gesture (2002: 190) by launching such a fierce attack on the first generation of hyphenated writers in Germany. The motives behind Zaimoğlu's criticism are certainly questionable, and his own work has faced the same charges of lack of authenticity and exoticism that he himself levels at *Gastarbeiterliteratur*.⁶ Certainly if one looks closely at Biondi and Schami's seminal essay 'Literatur der Betroffenheit' (1981), the tone is more one of provocation than self-pity. Regardless of whether one views *Gastarbeiterliteratur* as an anti-colonial movement based on a somewhat contrived but strategically necessary cultural category, or as a colonial attempt to channel and defuse guest worker frustration, the persistent use of labels such as *Ausländer-* and *Migrantenliteratur* on the part of critics have to be seen as 'domestication of the exotic' (Said 2003: 60), an Orientalist practice present in all cultures. This domestication is an attempt to name and contain the 'other' and make it 'less fearsome' (ibid) to the coloniser. In the German context then, this labelling can be interpreted as a response to the act of provocation represented by the 'zu Wort kommen' of the *Gastarbeiter* (Biondi; Schami 1981: 134).

In comparing the contexts of postcolonial literatures and post-war German writing by non-native speakers, it is not my intention to make light of the effects of colonisation proper, nor to make a blanket comparison between a single 'ideal type' postcolonial situation and the German context. There have been repeated calls within postcolonial studies for scholars to always 'address the local' (Slemon 1994: 31) and for 'a proliferation of historically nuanced theories and strategies' (McClintock 1994: 303) to avoid generalisations. Contemporary Germany is not a postcolonial society, nor a former imperial power of any significance, but rather a European nation state where until very recently citizenship was defined exclusively in terms of ethnicity, giving rise to a situation of political, social and cultural inequality. At most the situation resembles 'internal' rather than 'imperial' colonisation (ibid: 295), 'where the dominant part of a country treats a group or region as it might a foreign colony' (ibid). The colonial discursive turn in contemporary Germany is imperialist or neo-colonial rather than colonial in the strict sense, but it does highlight the fact that colonial discursive practices are far from 'post-'. The fact that Germany is not a

⁶ See, for example, Droste's famous 1998 attack on Zaimoğlu.

postcolonial society does have important implications for non-native-speaker writers' choice of language. The dilemma faced by the postcolonial writer over whether to write in the local language or in the former colonial language was not, I would argue, as fraught for the *Gastarbeiter* generation. The sense of a debt to one's mother tongue and of accountability to the society of origin was never as acute as it was in postcolonial societies. The need to appropriate the German language, however, was as great as, if not greater than, the need to appropriate the colonial language in postcolonial societies – there was no 'german' to match the already existent 'englishes' of postcolonial societies (Ashcroft et al. 2002: 8) – and it is in this respect that the comparison with postcolonial literatures proves most useful.

2.4. Exophonic writing

Various adjectives – axial, postnational, postcolonial – have shown themselves to be unsuitable as descriptions of writing by non-native speakers on the grounds of being thematically prescriptive, utopian or, in the case of postcolonial, inappropriate from a historical point of view. Throughout my discussion thus far, I have relied on the terms 'hyphenated writers' (borrowing from Cheesman 2006) and 'non-native-speaker writers'. The former term is very unspecific, merely suggesting an identity which is something more than simply German. It does not distinguish between different generations of writers with hybrid identities or between native and non-native speakers of German. The latter term, used to differentiate Biondi, Özdamar and Tawada from 'second-generation' hyphenated writers like Zaimoğlu, should not suggest that the linguistic abilities of 'first-generation' immigrant writers are deficient or somehow less than those of native speakers, nor should it express a patronising sense of wonder at their linguistic achievements. In this respect the term 'non-native speaker', while being technically correct, is unsuitable. Biondi, Özdamar and Tawada are, in terms of fluency and facility with the language, on a par with native speakers of German, but their childhoods were spent in other languages, and this experience of other languages and cultures makes itself felt in their writing. I am aware that the search for a label for this type of writing continues the tradition of terminological squabbling which has often prevented true engagement with these texts. My intention, however, is to clearly demarcate this body of writers and to draw attention to the innovative stylistic features of their work. Ashcroft et al.'s distinction between 'English' and 'english'

(2002: 8) initially suggested ‘german’ as a potentially suitable description. This term, however, also fails to distinguish between different generations of writers, and between native and non-native speakers.

At this juncture I would like to argue for the use of the adjective ‘exophonic’ (derived from the noun ‘exophony’). This term can be qualified with the adjective ‘German’ to differentiate between exophonic writers working in German and the specificities of their situation, and exophonic writers working in other languages and countries. Exophony is an emerging term which has largely, although not exclusively, been used to describe the phenomenon of African literatures written in European languages, particularly in French (cf. Heinrichs 1992: 19).⁷ There is, therefore, some overlap between exophony as a phenomenon and literature produced in postcolonial contexts. *Exophonie* is also the title of a collection of Japanese language essays by Yoko Tawada (2003)⁸ which deals with the topic of leaving one’s mother tongue. Tawada first heard the term ‘exophony’ at a conference held in Senegal in 2002 entitled ‘Afrika-Europa. Transporte des Literarischen’ (personal correspondence).⁹ Tawada reports that the non-native-speaker French writers at the conference were given the well-known label ‘francophone’, the German writers ‘germanophone’, and that the collective label used for the various non-native-speaker writers from different countries was ‘exophonic’.¹⁰ Tawada’s collection of essays bearing the title *Exophonie* was published the year after the conference and in 2007 the co-organisers of the Senegal conference brought out an edited volume, also entitled *Exophonie* (Arndt et al. 2007), the proceedings of a 2005 colloquium of the same name.¹¹

The term ‘exophonic’ has the advantage of describing a linguistic state of being rather than prescribing any theme(s). It does not imply anything about a writer’s background, even if,

⁷ Exophony has also been formulated in English as ‘literatures in assumed languages’ (cf. Grassin 1996: 55).

⁸ This Roman alphabet spelling is as it appears on Tawada’s website (Yoko Tawada 2007).

⁹ This conference, held in Dakar on 4-5 November 2002, was co-organised by the Zentrum für Literatur- und Kulturforschung (ZfL) in Berlin and the Goethe Institut InterNationales. See ZfL 2007 for full details.

¹⁰ An alternative version of this adjective in English would be ‘exophone’.

¹¹ This colloquium was held at the ZfL in Berlin on 13-15 January 2005. See ZfL 2007 for full details.

in the German context, exophonic writers are typically also first-generation migrants. It also allows for comparative study of the phenomenon of exophony across linguistic boundaries, while always bearing in mind ‘the local’ (Slemon 1994: 31), and encourages acceptance of exophony as a natural and growing phenomenon worldwide. The degree to which exophonic texts are of interest to stylistically-minded scholars working in literary and translation studies does, of course, depend on the extent to which they highlight their exophonic status with a display of innovative stylistic features. A populist, best-selling writer like Wladimir Kaminer is less innovative in his style than the Kleist-Preis-winning Emine Sevgi Özdamar, whose prose makes use of code-switching, literal translation and lexical repetition to create a new literary register. Franco Biondi’s first novel, *Die Unversöhnlichen*, displays an excess of metaphor which opens up a creative space in the language, ‘um die deutsche Sprache auch für die Fremden bewohnbar zu machen’ (Chiellino 1995: 388). Yoko Tawada’s short prose plays with those aspects of language that lie beyond the semantic, questioning the meanings generated by the Roman alphabet’s random combinations of letters. In focussing on style and how meaning is generated by it, the term ‘exophonic’ represents an important shift in how we approach writing by non-native speakers, and a return to the of late somewhat neglected relationship between form and meaning in literature.

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Biodata

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