

MIF Originals

Episode 1: Polyglot Radio

Adam Thirlwell / Natalia Greig [00:00:09]

For me, originality is when something is there which wasn't there before; basically, a mystery. On the other hand, I also think that there's no such thing as originality because nothing comes from nothing.

Isaiah Hull [00:00:26] Welcome to MIF Originals. A brand new podcast series from Manchester International Festival. It's a podcast about originality and the nature of creativity.

[00:00:42] I'm your host Isaiah Hull, and as a writer I care about originality because originality or the idea of originality means people go ooh, where do I find this thing, this new thing. It gives a hope for the future. Not everything has been done already and that unknown space is exciting.

[00:01:15] During this podcast season, five amazing artists developing new work for this year's festival will have a blank audio canvas to fill. A chance to try something new with the podcast form.

[00:01:29] Episode One is from the award winning novelist Adam Thirlwell. The project he's bringing to this year's festival is Studio Creole, which Adam describes as an attempt to put the audience into the mind of God, where they can understand many languages at once; turning literature and translation into live art. Here's Adam to explain more. And I recommend you listen to this episode in headphones.

Adam Thirlwell [00:02:01] I'm a novelist. And me, I've always had this anxiety or confusion about the business I do. Because a novel is an international object it's part of an international history, and it's designed to be read internationally, not just in London or New York but also Tokyo, Reykjavik. In that way obviously it's just like other art forms like a film or a piece of music or some conceptual art. Except a novel only exists in words. It's medium is language and language is, or at least certainly that's how we currently understand it, inherently and irrevocably national. So it kind of looks impossible to be a novelist. Sure sure sure, you're going to say, as if the solution is obvious, there's translation.

Adam Thirlwell / Natalia Greig [00:02:52] One thing that's possible is that without anticipating the state at all, you wake up and suddenly unable to imagine how you will complete the slightest action. Even reaching the door from the bed can seem a distant prospect.

Adam Thirlwell [00:03:08] The more you think about translation the crazier it gets. And as the writers and readers of novels, let's just pause on a single thing; none of the words you're reading when you read a translation are words chosen by the novelist. And yet of course, the main thing a novelist cares about are the precise words she's chosen. The more carefully written a novel is, the more valuable it is for a reader. But at the same time, a novel that only exists for readers in one language isn't really a novel at all. It isn't part of the novel's international history. The more you think about this the more you have to change your basic definitions of a novel, or a style, or a language. Or, translation. Everything has to become woozy and elastic [Adam's voice is multiplied and stretched].

[00:03:59] However I don't want to talk about translation, not right now. What I want to talk about is interpreting, and the difference is kind of simple. Literary translation is what happens when someone sits down with a text in another language and spends as much time as they can trying to work out equivalence for this text in a new language. Whereas interpreting is what happens when someone speaking live, and at the same time someone else tries to say what they're saying in a new language.

[00:04:36] Obviously these two techniques are kind of radically different. However it's also true that however much literary translation tries to remove as many slippages, mistakes and rewritings as possible, the deep anxiety (that is a true and justified anxiety) is that every act of translation is an act of risk and trust. Like any communication between two people and any form of being read. And therefore although live interpreting might seem different to literary translation, I think they're more on a continuum, a kind of water slide of simultaneous loss, confusion and mayhem and also beauty and invention. As long as I've been a novelist, I've also been thinking about translation. I've written essays, I've set up wacky experiments. But now I'm also interested in thinking about interpretation. I'm sure there's an autobiographical reason for this.

[00:05:35] The more you do readings internationally, the more you're dependent on interpreters and the more vulnerable you feel. Also, the more interested you become in the different possibilities for interpreting. The varieties are startling. I once did an entire interview in Latin America where the interpreter was in another room and she would speak to me, this voice nestled in my earpiece being rude about the other speakers, expressing boredom, exasperation until I felt I knew her. I never even saw what she looked like. Or, there is the other extreme where a stranger is suddenly sat beside you, or behind you, whispering constantly into your ear, so close that you can smell them. So the interpreting becomes this deeply physical and invading process. The more this happens, the more you realise that you are always a guest dependent on your host, every time you're being read in translation, and you are a host with a guest every time you are reading a translation. And yet it feels like we're very cautious when it comes to interpreting. We're nervous about how to do it, or stage it.

[00:06:44] How does it happen on the radio? Normally, someone speaks for a second in their language, and then they're faded out and the interpreter takes over. But at this point, I want to digress and state something. All of this has obviously the kind of background noise of my concern for something you could call world literature. As I think I was saying, the more you think from this perspective, the more your normal ideas tend to get upended and I think the most radical is in a way the most obvious. Those who want to hasten the era of world literature will have to accept one, fast novelty: the deconstruction of the idea of the single language. The world cannot be said in a single language, just as a person isn't bound to a single language either.

[00:07:32] I don't mean that this isn't a strange way to think, we're so rooted in the idea of a single language, a mother tongue, and of a person's identity as in some way correspondingly single and transparent that any attempt to think in terms of a world or a planet is very difficult. It can feel artificial, or even unnatural, but what a future world literature will require is the knowledge that a language isn't something that belongs to a landscape, or a nation, or a person. If you want to invent a future form called World Literature, all small scale and miniscule, I have this idea that you therefore can't just refuse the absence of translation. In fact, two absences need to be reversed for world literature to

happen. The absence of translation, but also the absence of the original, which happens when you read a translation.

[00:08:25] Translation is wonderful and necessary, but the danger of translation is the absence of the original language. Which I think is why I have this vision of literature as something that could be instead a little gathering, like a party, or a deconstructed conference, a soft machine. And of course, this is something the world does know about already, but outside literature, it's something you see in international criminal courts or the United Nations. It's model is the highest politics.

[00:08:56] After World War II, when the Nuremberg trials were prosecuting the alleged perpetrators of mass crimes and genocide, they decided that they would hold the proceedings in four languages at once. From then on therefore, they not only had invented international justice, but they were forced to invent a whole new mode of simultaneous translation, which has become the mode we associate with all international criminal proceedings. And that's why I've invited my friend Philippe Sands, bestselling author and international lawyer to talk for a little bit about exactly what happened at Nuremberg.

Phillipe Sands [00:09:32] When the trial was being conceived the need for interpretation was immediately recognised. But the difficulty was that if you had consecutive interpretation, that's to say if a prosecutor might speak first in English, or French, or Russian, and then wait for a translation to German, that would double the length of the proceedings. Since the idea was that the trial should be done and dusted in six months, the other idea emerged of simultaneous interpretation. It was a technique essentially to speed up the process of the trial to bring it to a quick and early end, and interpreters were brought in from many countries. I think there were more than 20 of them. I happen to have met the last living interpreter, a wonderful man called Siegfried Ramler.

[00:10:16] He was born in Austria, he left that country when the Nazis took over because he was Jewish. He made his way to the United States, joined the US Army, fought in Europe, and because of his language skills found himself entirely accidentally, and without any real training, as an interpreter in the Nuremberg trial. He told me how he found himself face to face with Hans Frank, former governor general of Nazi occupied Poland, who was responsible for the killings of many of his family and friends. This was a tough, tough exercise. It was, for him I think, extremely sensitive, even when I spoke to him about it 70 years later. That sensitivity accords with my own experience.

[00:10:58] I often argue before international courts and tribunals. The Peace Palace in The Hague for example, has essentially been the same cast of characters for years so I've come to know them very well. I've come to trust them, and understand how exceptionally good they are at what they do and how delicate is their work. And of course there's something else. Day in and day out, they're listening to these subjects in court, interpreting, so they have a deep substantive understanding of what's going on. In fact, sometimes they know best the sense of the room and I'll have a conversation informally with an interpreter that I've come to know well, to get a sense from her or from him of the impressions that have been obtained during a day's hearing in court. The interpreter can really tell how a case is going, how attentive the judges are, how effective the advocates have been.

[00:11:48] For simultaneous interpretation, because of the intensity of the exercise, the maximum you can reasonably do is about 30 minutes at any one go. It's an extraordinarily tough job, and some of the interpreters have had post-traumatic stress treatment because

some of the subjects they're interpreting are so very terrible. The Nuremberg model worked. No one complained about the quality of interpretation, and it has become the standard model for international institutions for cases before international courts and tribunals. Of course it's been refined, the technology has improved. At the UN, you have simultaneous interpretation not just in three or four languages but in six, and the European Union it's two or three times that number. So the complexities have increased, but the essential skills are the same.

[00:12:35] I just end by saying the community of simultaneous interpreters is truly a remarkable group. They're intelligent, they're hugely hardworking and incredibly adept at picking up on the nuances of meanings and words; what is said, the silences, and often their work is imbued with a terrific sense of humour. At the International Court of Justice, one of the things we as counsels sometimes like to do, is throw in a word or a phrase that might confuse our interpreters who have become our friends. A classic one I've used is to talk about an argument that my opponent is making as a 'red herring'. Sometimes that does get interpreted as an 'hareng rouge', a red herring, literally in French; meaningless. And so we rely on our fabulous interpreters to break the atmosphere, to lighten the load. In The Hague, in Washington, Paris, Lausanne, other places, I've come to really appreciate the singular quality of our interpreters.

Adam Thirlwell [00:13:35] What I'm trying to say with all this, what I'm trying to say in this entire podcast is that you can't deny the multiple voices in this world. It's true of justice, and I think it's also true of art and specifically true of literature. We need to see all language uses as a continuum, a slide. But how do you do this with sound? How do you make a machine for staging stories where you could hear both the original and the translation at the same time? That's the kind of ideal I'm trying to pursue here. How can you set up a recording studio for world literature where the original exists at the same time as it's translation? A form of preservation for the multiple languages in the world.

[00:14:18] On the radio, as I said, the model is always the fade out [here the audio fades out.] But I want to do the opposite of a fade out, and what else can we do? Well you could:.

[00:14:28] 1. Put each language into different ears [here Adam is hard panned left, the interpreter is hard panned right]. Put each language into different ears [here Adam is hard panned right, the interpreter is hard panned left].

[00:14:32] 2. Have two languages overlapping [here Adam and the interpreter's speech are overlapping].

[00:14:32] 3. Have one whispered while the other is spoken [here Adam is speaking and the interpreter is whispering].

[00:14:45] 4. Have two spoken at once, one of them super dramatic, the other one super monotonous like a political Congress [here the interpreter is dramatic, and Adam is monotonous].

[00:14:57] 5. Leave a language untranslated [here the interpreter speaks and it is not translated into English]. And if you do have an interpreter what kind should you use; a person, and if so who? A friend, a trained interpreter or a machine?

[00:15:21] 6. Let Google Translate takeover [Google Translate reads aloud in different voices and languages].

[00:15:40] So we decided to do some experiments on a story I wrote, which the Chilean novelist Alejandro Zambra once translated into Spanish. It's a story I wrote a while ago for the Serpentine galleries, a story I called five prophecies. It's very short and it's about what happens when you move from one state to another which can be as simple as walking from one side of a bridge to the other.

[00:16:04] Five Prophecies.

One thing that's possible is that without anticipating this state at all, you wake up and are suddenly unable to imagine how you will complete the slightest action – even reaching the door from the bed can seem a distant prospect. And then once you've made it to the door how many steps must you go down to the kitchen, and then how many operations just to make a cup of coffee! It's a wonder anyone survives even the beginning of a day, let alone an entire week. For once you discover the infinite inside things it's very wearing and dispiriting. And that is what once happened to Jaleesa – not, to be precise, when she was waking up but when she stood there on a bridge, or to be even more precise just before a bridge, and realised that even inside this small walk ahead of her from one side of the bridge to the other there were an infinite amount of moments to negotiate.

Jaleesa was a bodybuilder. And probably it's true that if there has ever been a golden age of female bodybuilding, then we are in it. But still, however content she should have been, at this moment Jaleesa was experiencing something that she could only call *fear*. But really what she was feeling was possibly much stranger and more terrible.

Because it really is terrible when you consider how far away things are from each other. Just think about the space there is between you and the nearest tree, then between the leaves themselves and from the leaves to the twigs and the smallest branches. It's basically impossible to reach anything at all, or sometimes it can seem so. To think of the infinity inside the smallest motion! And it was making Jaleesa realise how many prophecies she could make even concerning a single walk.

For instance, according to Jaleesa five things were going to happen before she reached the other side of the bridge.

1. She knew that when she saw the water she would want to look down at it. And this happened.
2. She knew that if a car went past it would make her think of her dead father. And this happened.
3. She knew that a wind would suddenly make the sound in her headphones go crazy. And this happened.
4. Also she knew that she would think about a boy who was right now far away in another country because if you chose any five-minute period in her life right now she would be thinking about him at least once. And this happened. It happened more than once.

5 But also she knew that as soon as she reached the other side she would pause and hail a taxi to take her to the gym for her day's training. And while this almost happened, it did not – and the story of how this prophecy did not come true is of some interest and perhaps also instructive.

She was walking along the bridge, and had immediately paused to look down into the water and observe her crumpled reflection, then a car went past which made her think of her dead father, who had a crazy love of cars which she never could reciprocate, and then the wind was so loud that she could not hear the song she was playing on her iPod for a moment, and this song as always made her think about the boy far away in another country with whom she had recently spent a crazy night where she told him various secrets of her sexual history and her teenage years, and at four in the morning they had finally parted with this knowledge that although they had not slept together they did both believe that at some point in this life they would be naked together in a bed, and it was this thought that accompanied her to the other side of the bridge, where she paused to hail a taxi. She stood there, waiting. And perhaps if a taxi had arrived immediately then Jaleesa would have gone to the gym and her final prophecy would have come true, but she was thinking so much of this boy in another country that it suddenly occurred to her that no, she would not hail a taxi because she would not go to the gym, and that in fact she would never go to a gym ever again.

There it was. She was no longer a bodybuilder. She knew this very abruptly but also completely. That's how quickly your life can change and when you think about it that's a relief, that things can change so fast, when you also consider how infinite and slow they are, as well.

Adam Thirlwell / Natalia Greig [00:20:49] [Repeated with interpretation] There it was. She was no longer a bodybuilder. She knew this very abruptly, but also completely. That's how quickly your life can change. And when you think about it, that's a relief that things can change so fast when you also consider how infinite and slow they are as well.

Alejandro Zambra [00:21:14] Hi, I am Alejandro Zambra, I am a Chilean writer. I am not a translator but I did translate this short story because I liked it very much, and I wanted to share it with some people and, well I hope you like it. And if you don't like it, you can be sure that that is because of my translation.

[00:21:49] Cinco Profecias.

[00:21:54] - [00:27:52] – Alejandro Zambra narrates a Spanish translation of *Five Prophecies* by Adam Thirlwell, heard at [00:16:04]- [00:20:49]. As Alejandro reads, he is interrupted by Google Translate, which interprets his words back into English, although inaccurately.

Adam Thirlwell [00:27:54] Now the finale there of Alejandro's translation of my story was all re-translated there by Google Translate. And I love Google Translate but I also have one, maybe political anxiety. The map of Google Translate is the map of the world's current hierarchies. It's algorithmic and therefore it's dependent on how much data it receives for how good it can make itself. When there's a lot of data like Spanish to English it can be wonderful when there's very little data like maybe Spanish to Kikuyu. It's less impressive. But then that isn't a problem with the tech. I think so much of the problem with

the world and the more we think about these technical inventions the more multiple we can hopefully make the world.

[00:28:38] I mean I know, all these funny tricks we're doing here are games. No one needs to listen to a story like this and it may, in many ways, destroy it. But sometimes, when you interrupt a process you can also make discoveries about what's really going on which you never noticed when inside the flow of it. And in interrupting a story with its translation or the other way round, I think it's possible to come to some conclusions.

[00:29:03] It's possible to turn writing into something closer to conceptual art. I mean to think about a story not just for its meaning but also for any story is at all. It's also possible to come up with much more intricate funding models of what it is to read a story in translation. It's possible to use and improve many more wacky tech experiments and the fact that at the moment it seems so mismatched or even clunky is a proof that we think far too old fashioned me about the language in which we write or read or think. And what's most striking is the giant amount of moments in an interpretation when something is endangered.

[00:29:44] Just think about the other art of interpretation gossip. Think how almost always you feel you are misquoted when someone tells you something. You once said to them but that fragility of giving yourself up to another person shouldn't stop the process of translation and multiplicity. It should make us even more intent on making that process audible. And of course, one other way of rethinking things is in the work itself. And for me the major shift is in thinking about what a reader is, or more precisely, Where she is. Because sure, I write stories in English. But why should that mean that the best or even intended reader of a story is an anglophonic one?

[00:30:27] A novel's international after all. Its truest reader might be located thousands of miles away in Santiago, reading in Spanish. And once you think like that, you might well change how you think about an original, and a copy, and an original language, and a translated language. A translation might just seem like a second original, or a new creation.

Adam Thirlwell / Natalia Greig [00:30:53] [Repeated with interpretation] And once you think like that, you might well change how you think about an original, and a copy, and an original language, and a translated language. A translation might just seem like a second original, or a new creation.

Isaiah Hull [00:31:22] That was Adam Thirlwell's 'Polyglot Radio'. I have to say it's very interesting, at the top of the episode when he mentions novels having to be translatable to other nations to reach another state of validity. When I write I'm never thinking of it being translated. Maybe that's just the stage I am in my career and it's just where I am now, but the words I write, are meant for me to be said to myself. Whether I read them or I perform them or somebody else is reading them. I just think I meant to say this to myself for myself. I don't consider translateability in my own work. So I find it, I felt challenged which is good. It made me think of why I love my language so much, like why don't I consider other languages very interesting?

[00:32:21] Okay, so whatever, so anyway, basically now for each of these episodes I'm sharing an original poem in response to what we've heard. The art of translation brings up the idea of a universal language. This made me think of body language being a universal

language. Algebra which I was taught, is universal, is the same in every country. And the word alleluia which connects to God is the same in every language.

[00:32:55] algebra raises its neck

[00:32:56] i see the bodies deliver respect

[00:32:58] we were in common once but nonetheless.

[00:33:01] every apology falls on its face.

[00:33:05] translate

[00:33:05] translate

[00:33:06] algebra weak in the knees

[00:33:08] body of me sending a message

[00:33:11] letters led me to dead ends XY & Z

[00:33:13] head high indeed

[00:33:15] translate

[00:33:16] translate

[00:33:17] algebra sound in an ape

[00:33:18] mouthful of grapes body get good at escape

[00:33:21] alleluia in reverse

[00:33:23] this time hurts

[00:33:24] this time hurts

[00:33:25] wearing disguise of my words once I learned how to lie first

[00:33:31] algebra down on his luck

[00:33:35] body a folly a deux

[00:33:35] god without love

[00:33:36] siri's a little too much

[00:33:38] serious stirs sit with a circe

[00:33:39] I say the words "nobody heard me"

[00:33:42] then they all listen isn't it perfect

[00:33:46] I love with sound of a square

[00:33:47] I build a house but she isn't there.

[00:33:50] now I am without a

[00:33:52] flower affair

[00:33:53] Why use the mouth when it can't repair

[00:33:54] I was en route to it now an heir

[00:33:57] Hours of fruits found in my hair down at the roots about to relate

[00:34:02] Cloud is a tooth it chows on the air out in the blue how do you do a mountain a day

[00:34:07] Powerful proof is sounding yourself when everyone else in the room lies

[00:34:12] from far away real recognize real it translates to the eyes

[00:34:17] Origin man made in his mind

[00:34:36] Thanks for listening to the first episode of MIF originals written by and featuring novelist Adam Thirlwell, whose studio Creole opens at Manchester Academy on Friday the 12th of July 2019. You also heard the voices of author and barrister Phillippe Sans, Russian interpreter Natalia Greig, Manx broadcaster Bob Carswell and writer Alejandro Zambra. The music was by Vicki Clarke and Mira Calix. It was presented by me, Isaiah Hull, and produced by Jack Howson. It's a Reduced Listening and MF production.