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ACROSS LANGUAGE BORDERS: WRITING INTEGRATION AND BELONGING IN KINDERTRANSPORT DIARIES

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ABSTRACT

The diaries of six Kindertransport refugees who fled Nazi persecution in Germany and Austria to Britain in 1938 and 1939 offer unique insights into how language use reflects negotiations of identity and belonging. Moving beyond traditional concepts of bilingualism, a translanguing framework reveals how these young refugees navigated between German and English in their diary writings. Through close textual analysis, this research identifies various linguistic strategies including code-switching, the borrowing of words and phrases, script-switching between Sütterlin and Latin script, and gradual syntactic changes. These practices demonstrate how the refugees developed fluid, hybrid forms of expression that reflected their evolving cultural identities. While some diarists explicitly discussed language challenges, others displayed unconscious linguistic adaptations that signalled their integration process. Rather than shifting from writing texts entirely in German to writing entirely in English, these young refugees developed dynamic linguistic repertoires that allowed them to express complex experiences of displacement and belonging. Their diaries thus serve as valuable historical documents that show not only personal narratives, but also the intricate relationship between language use, identity formation and cultural adaptation in forced migration contexts.

Die Tagebücher von sechs Kindertransport-Flüchtlingen, die zwischen 1938 und 1939 vor der nationalsozialistischen Verfolgung aus Deutschland und Österreich nach Großbritannien flohen, bieten einen einzigartigen Einblick in die Art und Weise, wie der Sprachgebrauch die Verhandlungen von Identität und Zugehörigkeit widerspiegelt. Über das traditionelle Konzept der Zweisprachigkeit hinaus zeigt ein translangualer theoretischer Rahmen, wie diese jungen Flüchtlinge in ihren Tagebuchaufzeichnungen zwischen Deutsch und Englisch navigierten. Durch eine genaue Textanalyse werden verschiedene sprachliche Strategien identifiziert, darunter Code-Switching, das Entlehnen von Wörtern und Phrasen, der Wechsel zwischen Sütterlin- und Standardkursivschrift und allmähliche syntaktische Veränderungen. Diese Praktiken zeigen, wie die Flüchtlinge hybride Ausdrucksformen entwickelten, die ihre sich überformenden kulturellen Identitäten widerspiegelten. Während einige Tagebuchschreiber explizit über sprachliche Herausforderungen schrieben, zeigten andere unbewusste sprachliche Anpassungen, die auf ihren Integrationsprozess hinwiesen. Anstatt einen einfachen Wechsel von der deutschen zur englischen Einsprachigkeit zu vollziehen, eigneten sich diese jungen Flüchtlinge ein dynamisches Sprachrepertoire an, welches ihnen ermöglichte, ihre komplexen Erfahrungen von Vertreibung und Zugehörigkeit auszudrücken. Ihre Tagebücher dienen somit als wertvolle historische Dokumente, die nicht nur persönliche Erzählungen beleuchten, sondern auch die komplizierte

Beziehung zwischen Sprachgebrauch, Identitätsbildung und kultureller Anpassung in erzwungenen Migrationskontexten.

Diaries serve as intimate records of their authors' thoughts and experiences, making them invaluable historical documents. Beyond the act of recording, diary writing can be viewed as a form of personal expression, weaving together identity, memory and a sense of belonging through the use of language and everyday encounters.¹ This relationship between language and self becomes particularly complex when examining the experiences of refugees, where linguistic identity is often challenged and transformed. Traditional sociolinguistic models have previously conceptualised language change in migration contexts as a linear process: Susan Samata argues that 'language shift is described by sociolinguists as a process happening over two to three generations' and instead focuses on 'language attrition [that] has examined the ways in which speakers can lose the ability to access their languages through processes of attrition'.² Similarly, Suzanne Romaine suggests that language shift can also occur during voluntary or involuntary migration which does not necessarily include a process over several generations but can happen to first-generation migrants as well.³ Both approaches imply a progression towards eventual monolingualism in the host language. While these frameworks are valuable, they may oversimplify the complex linguistic realities experienced by displaced individuals, particularly children who must simultaneously acquire new languages while preserving connections to their countries of origin.

This article challenges linear language shift narratives by examining the diaries of six Kindertransport refugees, unaccompanied children who fled National Socialist persecution in Germany and Austria for Britain between 1938 and 1939. Rather than documenting an eventual switch from German to English, the diaries reveal the development of translingual practices that defy conventional models of linguistic assimilation. Through their diary entries, these young refugees created hybrid linguistic expressions that reflect their ongoing negotiations of identity and belonging.⁴ By analysing both conscious and subconscious linguistic practices, this study

¹ A detailed discussion of the practice of diary writing would go beyond the scope of this article. For influential work on this subject see, for example, Philippe Lejeune, *On Diary*, ed. by Julie Rak and Jeremy D. Popkin, Biography Monographs (University of Hawai'i Press, 2009); and Desirée Henderson, *How to Read a Diary: Critical Contexts and Interpretive Strategies for 21st-Century Readers* (Routledge, 2019).

² Susan Samata, *The Cultural Memory of Language, Contemporary Applied Linguistics*, 5 vols (Bloomsbury, 2014), v, p. 1.

³ Suzanne Romaine, 'Multilingualism', in *The Handbook of Linguistics*, ed. by Mark Aronoff and Janie Rees-Miller (Wiley, 2017), pp. 541–56 (pp. 551–52), doi:10.1002/9781119072256.ch26.

⁴ Eva-Maria Thüne's article explores the longitudinal aspects of language use of former Kindertransport refugees. See Eva-Maria Thüne, 'What the Kindertransportees Tell Us

demonstrates how language becomes a dynamic tool for navigating displacement, contradicting assumptions about progression towards monolingualism and instead highlighting the fluid, multilingual reality of refugee experience. While it draws on linguistic concepts and terminology, this investigation approaches the language of the diaries primarily through close reading, treating it as a literary and cultural phenomenon rather than subjecting it to one single formal linguistic analysis.

The analysis that follows uses six diaries written by Kindertransport refugees in their early months and years in Britain, now held in various archives. It explores the material practices of script and language switching, investigates how language served as a vehicle for negotiating belonging, and examines grammatical and structural aspects of the refugees' evolving linguistic repertoires. This approach highlights how languages can intertwine and evolve within the narratives of these young refugees, ultimately showing how language becomes a dynamic tool, not only used for communication but also for expressing a multifaceted identity and navigating a new sense of belonging. Through a close exploration of these diaries, we gain access not just to personal anecdotes, but also to a deeper understanding of how language itself evolves: subtle shifts in vocabulary, tone and expression reflect the ever-changing landscapes of language use and the negotiation of experience.

The Kindertransport, a rescue mission that brought nearly 10,000 children to the UK between 1938 and 1939, has been extensively studied.⁵ It provides the historical framework for this investigation into translanguaging practices displayed in the diaries. The Kindertransport scheme originated in proposals by Jewish aid organisations and individuals in Britain following the November Pogrom which made the British government implement a visa waiver scheme. This facilitated the migration of child refugees from German territories to Britain, under strict conditions and on the understanding that they would emigrate by the age of eighteen. The scheme operated under significant constraints: children could only bring one suitcase, were prohibited from travelling with their parents or adult relatives, and were required to secure guarantees from British sponsors who would assume financial responsibility for their care. The official framing of these children as temporary residents rather than permanent refugees

about the Acquisition of English', *Jewish Historical Studies*, 51.1 (2020), pp. 165–82, doi:10.14324/111.444.jhs.2020v51.011.

⁵ Numerous studies examine the scheme critically: Tony Kushner, *Remembering Refugees: Then and Now* (Manchester University Press, 2006); Louise London, *Whitehall and the Jews, 1933–1948: British Immigration Policy, Jewish Refugees, and the Holocaust* (Cambridge University Press, 2000); and Bernard Wasserstein, *Britain and the Jews of Europe 1939–1945*, Oxford Paperbacks (Oxford University Press, 1988), just to mention a few. The studies raise questions not only on the relationship between the Kindertransport refugees' official status as exiles/transmigrants and their own perception of it, but also on the individual identity performance and development compared to the identities (as transmigrant, as more adaptable to society etc.) that were imposed on them.

created a liminal space that shaped their experiences of identity formation and belonging.⁶

While the Kindertransport has received extensive media attention in what Tony Kushner describes as ‘the largest number of histories, memoirs, exhibitions, plays, documentaries, films [...], and memorials’ of any twentieth-century British refugee movement, this study seeks to further examine the complexities that lie beneath the narrative of humanitarian triumph.⁷ Over the years, the Kindertransport has, as Kushner suggests, become a key event in British refugee and migration history. The decision to prioritise child refugees was not only driven by humanitarian motives, but also by strategic considerations. Children were perceived as more adaptable to British society, offering a potential solution to concerns about future integration.⁸ However, this assumption masked the many challenges that the young refugees faced as they navigated exile, displacement and cultural assimilation. Their diaries can be a testimony to those challenges, and the language use within them serves as a lens for how they dealt with these challenges and negotiated their sense of belonging.

This article offers a close reading of six diaries held in archives in Britain and the United States: the Wiener Holocaust Library (London), the Leo Baeck Institute (New York), the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM, Washington, DC), Leicester University Library Special Collections, and one private family collection. These diaries were selected based on three criteria: their availability and accessibility; the age of the diarists, who were between ten and seventeen years old at the time of writing; and their documentation of the formative early years of refugee life in Britain between 1938 and 1946. The corpus consists of the following diaries: Helga Bejach (aged seventeen, Leicester University Special Collections); Leopold Weil (aged fifteen, Wiener Holocaust Library); Elisabeth Orsten (aged twelve, USHMM); Kurt Seelig (aged ten, Leo Baeck Institute); Ilse Shatkin (aged sixteen, Wiener Holocaust Library); and Ingeburg Sigler (aged fourteen, private collection). Each diary provides a unique perspective on adolescent displacement, adaptation and identity during and after the refugee journey.

The age differences prove significant in the analysis: younger children like Kurt show more subconscious linguistic adaptation, with their language use reflecting exposure rather than deliberate choice-making.

⁶ The legal parameters of the Kindertransport, how it was established and organised as well as other discussions on the impact have been the subject of numerous studies including Jennifer Craig-Norton, *The Kindertransport: Contesting Memory*, Studies in Antisemitism (Indiana University Press, 2019); Claudia Curio, *Verfolgung, Flucht, Rettung: die Kindertransporte 1938/39 nach Großbritannien* (Metropol, 2006); Vera K. Fast, *Children's Exodus: A History of the Kindertransport* (I. B. Tauris, 2011); and Andrea Hammel, *The Kindertransport: What Really Happened* (Polity Press, 2024).

⁷ Kushner, *Remembering Refugees*, p. 141.

⁸ See Judith Tydor Baumel-Schwartz, *Never Look Back: The Jewish Refugee Children in Great Britain, 1938–1945*, Shofar Supplements in Jewish Studies (Purdue University Press, 2012), pp. 51–52.

This manifests in potential Anglicisms and grammatical shifts that appear to stem from daily interaction rather than conscious linguistic strategy. Older teenagers like Ilse and Helga demonstrate more deliberate language choices. All diaries were transcribed from their original handwritten forms, maintaining original spelling, punctuation and script variations. The transcription process also highlighted marginalia, corrections and crossed-out passages, which often reveal the diarists' linguistic decision-making processes while crafting these documents. Referencing the diaries in the following analysis, I will indicate how to locate the corresponding entries through scan numbers or page numbers if they were available. These correspond to either the physical items or, as in Elisabeth's case, to the material available online.

The research focuses particularly on the period of 1939 to 1943, when initial settlement and integration were most visible. The analysis examines both quantitative patterns (frequency of language use, length of entries in each language, evolution of vocabulary) and qualitative features (emotional registers, cultural references, identity markers) to build a comprehensive picture of how these young refugees navigated their realities. These diaries offer a unique first-person perspective on the linguistic development and lived experience of child refugees in exile, providing contemporaneous linguistic reflections that complement studies based on interviews or later memoirs.

The Jewish identity of these child refugees adds another layer of complexity to their linguistic negotiations, though this dimension is manifested subtly in the diary entries examined. While the diaries do not contain explicit Hebrew or Yiddish linguistic markers, nor do they include extensive discussion of religious practices, the absence itself is significant. This absence of explicit Jewish linguistic content in their diary writing may reflect the assimilation pressures these children faced, their focus on immediate daily life in England, or perhaps the secular nature of many of their families. However, their identity as Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi persecution undoubtedly shaped their language and emotional relationships with both their mother tongue and their new language, even when not explicitly articulated in their writing.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Rather than viewing language as static and fixed within rigid categories of monolingualism or bi- and multilingualism, it is crucial to embrace the fluidity of translingualism. Translingualism, as defined through this research, represents an open approach that recognises fluid, hybrid forms of expression where languages blend, influence each other and create new forms of expression.⁹ While bi- and multilingualism share many similarities

⁹ For a detailed discussion of the concept of translingualism, see Suresh Canagarajah, *Translingual Practice: Global Englishes and Cosmopolitan Relations* (Routledge, 2013), doi:10.4324/9780203073889;

and are often defined as the ability to speak or have varying proficiency in two or more languages,¹⁰ I suggest that translanguaging, where languages cross freely, offers a more open approach to analysing language use in the diaries of the Kindertransport refugees.¹¹ Steven Kellman's concept of translanguaging describes the act of writing in a language other than one's native tongue, which can lead to the creation of a 'new voice' and ultimately the 'invention of a new self'.¹² This perspective emphasises the creative potential of linguistic displacement rather than viewing it solely as loss. The linguistic phenomena observed in the Kindertransport diaries — like code-switching, borrowing and hybrid expressions — are not simply signs of a language in decline, but rather evidence of the creation of dynamic, hybrid translanguaging repertoires that allow these young refugees to navigate their new reality.

Recent studies on migration, globalisation and culture have shifted towards multidisciplinary approaches to language. Scholars like Gill Valentine, for example, 'explore the role that choice and use of language play in how young people make sense of their identities and affiliations within the specific situated context of everyday encounters',¹³ emphasising context-specific language practices over abstract linguistic competence. This approach proves particularly relevant for child refugees, who negotiate multiple linguistic and cultural systems while forming their identities during crucial developmental periods. Unlike adult migrants with established linguistic identities, child refugees face the unique challenge of simultaneously acquiring new languages, maintaining heritage languages and developing their sense of self.¹⁴ As Krishna, Harris and Mitchell demonstrate in their analysis of Kindertransport experiences, most refugees learned English through self-teaching and peer interaction with

and Steven G. Kellman, 'Translanguaging and the Literary Imagination', *Criticism*, 33.4 (1991), pp. 527–41.

¹⁰ Talking about bi- and multilingualism, François Grosjean identifies various forms of language change such as language decline, shifts and mixing, and highlights how bilingual people negotiate between these bilingual behaviours. While he does not use the term multilingualism, he draws on the similarities between both terms and insists that they can be used synonymously. What becomes evident in his discussion is the static nature of both terms and thus such considerations reinforce why we approach the language use through a lens of translanguaging; see François Grosjean, *Bilingual: Life and Reality* (Harvard University Press, 2010).

¹¹ For a more detailed and expanded discussion on the differences and similarities of bi- and multilingualism, see the literature review in Larissa Aronin and D. M. Singleton, *Multilingualism* (John Benjamins, 2012).

¹² Kellman, 'Translanguaging and the Literary Imagination', p. 533.

¹³ Gill Valentine, Deborah Sporton and Katrine Bang Nielsen, 'Language Use on the Move: Sites of Encounter, Identities and Belonging', *Transactions*, 33.3 (2008), pp. 376–87 (p. 376), doi:10.1111/j.1475-5661.2008.00308.x.

¹⁴ See, for example, Andrea Hammel, Stephanie Homer and Anita Grosz, *Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and the Child Refugee of the 1930s in the UK: History Informing the Future* (Aberystwyth University, 2020); and Andrea Hammel, Stephanie Homer and Anita Grosz, *Discrimination and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) in the Lives of Child Refugees of the 1930s: Learning for the Present and the Future* (Aberystwyth University, 2022).

limited institutional support, while simultaneously experiencing decline in their native language skills unless maintained through family connections or German-speaking foster families.¹⁵ These difficulties were further compounded by the trauma of displacement, as Brigitta Busch observes in her work on ‘Spracherleben’:

Relocating the center of one’s life, within a country, or from one country or continent to another, always means a change both in the life world (Lebenswelt) and in the linguistic environment with whose practices, discourses, and rules one is familiar. [... C]hanging location and language can also be experienced as a hardship or as a source of ongoing emotional stress — sometimes even leading to traumatization or to re-invoking earlier traumatic experience. This is particularly likely in cases of forced displacement, and if the situation after emigration continues to be experienced as precarious, uncertain, or even hostile.¹⁶

This leads to a display of mixing what is familiar and recognisable with what is new and unknown. Relocating to a new country and language environment can be emotionally taxing, leading to a blend of familiar and new linguistic expressions. However, the new environment does not necessarily need to be experienced as hardship; rather, it can also be seen as an opportunity. For Kindertransport refugees, language arguably became a tool for negotiating new experiences and shaping notions of belonging. Through their diaries, we gain insights into how they navigate these challenges and express their identities. Examining their linguistic repertoire reveals the diverse linguistic elements that characterise everyday interactions for these refugees.

SWITCHING LANGUAGES AND SCRIPTS

At various points in their diary writing, Kindertransport refugees appear to have made either conscious decisions to write in different languages or scripts, sometimes explicitly reflecting on these linguistic choices, or displayed subconscious changes in their writing styles. These practices suggest the complex ways in which language, belonging and identity intersected in their daily lives. Rather than simply replacing German with English, these young refugees developed fluid, hybrid linguistic repertoires that often combined elements of both languages and writing systems. In this context, script, too, can carry significance, particularly given the close

¹⁵ Ujjwal Krishna, Jody Harris and Rebecca N. Mitchell, ‘Exploring the Integration of Child Refugees in the United Kingdom: The Case of the Kindertransport’, *Jewish Historical Studies*, 51.1 (2020), pp. 119–41 (p. 138), doi:10.14324/111.444.jhs.2020v51.009.

¹⁶ Brigitta Busch, ‘Expanding the Notion of the Linguistic Repertoire: On the Concept of Spracherleben — The Lived Experience of Language’, *Applied Linguistics*, 38.3 (2015), pp. 1–20 (p. 1), doi:10.1093/applin/amv030.

ties between handwriting styles and cultural identity. It shows how language and belonging are intertwined. Scholars have previously argued that certain scripts can be an expression of a shared identity or of belonging to a community.¹⁷ Arguably, this ties script and writing to specific national, local or ethnic groups. Therefore, for some of the Kindertransport refugees, script choices carried significance, serving as visual markers of their transition from their countries of origin to their places of refuge. ‘Kurrent’ script, often referred to as ‘Sütterlin’, the historical form of German cursive handwriting, was linked to German language and educational traditions. While it was conventional practice for German speakers to use Kurrent for writing in German and Latin script for writing in other languages such as French or English, deviations from these conventions in the diaries of Kindertransport refugees invite closer interpretation.

What makes script-switching significant in these diaries is not the conventional use of different scripts for different languages, but rather instances where they decided to not use Kurrent anymore, even when continuing to write in German. Yet these changes of script use must be interpreted carefully within this broader context of established writing conventions. In some of the diaries written by Kindertransport refugees, we notice that they start writing their diaries in Kurrent and switch to Latin script for later entries. Rather than representing a conscious abandonment of their former script, this switching can be understood as part of an ongoing process of repertoire expansion, where refugees developed multiple script options and deployed them contextually. Arguably, this switch can serve as a visual marker between a writing practice that is connected to their lives in their country of origin and the standard practices in their country of refuge.¹⁸ The fact that Ilse, Elisabeth and Ingeburg alternated between their school-learned script and Latin script, even when writing entries in their mother tongue, demonstrates that script-switching had become an expression of ongoing language practice and identity work. Ingeburg, for example, does not comment on the change between her entries for 3 September 1939 and 5 October 1939.¹⁹ Yet, in the entries following the one on 5 October 1939, she continues to write some words or letters in Kurrent alongside Latin script. This suggests a period of transitional practice rather than an abrupt shift. This silence itself may

¹⁷ See, for example, Markus Schiegg and Lena Sowada, ‘Script Switching in Nineteenth-Century Lower-Class German Handwriting’, *Paedagogica Historica*, 55.6 (2019), pp. 772–91 (pp. 774–75), doi:10.1080/00309230.2019.1622574; and Peter Unseth, ‘Sociolinguistic Parallels between Choosing Scripts and Languages’, *Written Language & Literacy*, 8.1 (2005), pp. 19–42 (pp. 19–20), doi:10.1075/wll.8.1.02uns.

¹⁸ Laura Hobson Faure also highlights how script-switching from Sütterlin to a more standard cursive can function as a visual marker for the distance between their lives now and their pre-war lives; see Laura Hobson Faure, ‘Exploring Political Rupture through Jewish Children’s Diaries: Kindertransport Children in France, 1938–1942’, *Journal of Modern European History*, 19.3 (2021), pp. 258–73 (p. 259), doi:10.1177/16118944211017765.

¹⁹ Ingeburg Sigler, ‘Ingeburg Sigler Diary’, Private Archive of Nick Sigler.

be significant, indicating how naturally these writing practices had become embedded in her daily routine, or alternatively, how the complexity of her adjustment rendered such changes difficult to articulate directly. Having said this, all diarists eventually end up solely using Latin script.

Importantly, these changes in script use often occur alongside significant pauses in diary writing, sometimes for several weeks or months. While script-switching should be understood as part of the material dimensions of literacy practice rather than symbolic gesture, it does appear to function, in some cases, as a visual and material mediation between language systems. Even without conscious intention, the alternation between scripts may reflect the ongoing processes of negotiating belonging and evolving self-perceptions that characterised the refugee experience, and as such remains an important, if subtle, dimension of the linguistic lives of Kindertransport refugees.

Beyond script changes, the diaries reveal frequent instances of language switching. These practices encompass both code-switching (moving between languages within conversations or texts) and borrowing (incorporating words from one language into another), creating what can be understood as translingual expression, where languages intertwine and blend to create hybrid forms of communication. One example that shows both script-switching and writing about language can be found in Elisabeth Orsten's diary. The then twelve-year-old girl from Vienna writes in her entry on Easter Sunday 1940:

From now on I will write in German or English whatever I feel like and keep you my dear book as a diary. The reason for this is that Brittain²⁰ told us that is a good thing to keep a diary, and even if it comes at first a little bit difficult, one must make oneself write.²¹

The entry on Easter Sunday 1940 is not only written in English but also in Latin script rather than in Kurrent, which she had used in her previous entries. In this entry, she states an intention of writing in either language which suggests that she wanted to maintain her German but also become more proficient in English by using the practice of keeping a diary in both languages. Having said that, this is the first and only entry she writes in English before returning to writing in German until she ultimately fully switches to English after emigrating to the USA. However, her intention to switch between languages as she pleases still indicates a fluidity of language use and with this a sense of belonging that is fluid, as she not only changes language but also script. For her next entry, she changes back to German

²⁰ Elisabeth explains in her memoir that 'the mistress for English and History was known as "Brittain", which was actually her family name'; see Elisabeth M. Orsten, *From Anschluss to Albion: Memoirs of a Refugee Girl 1939–1940* (Acorn Editions, 1998), p. 83.

²¹ Elisabeth Orsten, 'Elisabeth Orsten Papers: Series 3: Diary 1939–1944; File 1: Diary and Key 1944', United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2000.417.1, scan 35.

and to Kurrent. This change back to German is explained in the entry on 19 April 1940:

Einige Tage her hatte ich einen Brief von Fräuli in welchem sie sagte daß sie hoffe ich schreibe in mein Buch wie verabredet. Und so bekam ich Gewissensbisse, und dachte daß ich doch in Deutsch und in Zukunft täglich schreiben müsse.²²

Her entry draws on the interconnectedness between language acquisition and maintenance as well as the daily practice of diary writing. But for Elisabeth, it is not only the irregularity here that causes her 'Gewissensbisse'. We can assume, as she mentions she should write 'doch in Deutsch', that she also feels bad about writing her last entry in English and thereby not adhering to the promise she made to Fräuli. She alludes to this in her memoir published in 1998:

This [the entry on Easter Sunday 1940] is the only English entry in the main part of the diary because a few days later on Friday, 19 April, I switch back to my tidy German script, explaining that I have had a letter from Fräuli, in which she urged me to keep my diary as promised. Her reminder has given me qualms of conscience, and therefore, I decided to write only in German, and to do so every day.²³

These feelings of guilt highlight how language use is linked to feelings of belonging or non-belonging to a community or a specific group and that it can foster or maintain connections between people. Both entries point towards Elisabeth being motivated by suggestions made by other people when it comes to choosing which language to write in. Based on this, there is a correlation between her motivation and the function of diary-keeping in exile as a document to be shared with loved ones at home later.

Elisabeth's diary is not an isolated example of how aware the Kindertransport refugees were of their linguistic surroundings. While we should refrain from making generalisations, there are certain aspects that can be found in several diaries such as the switching between languages or the gradual shifting from one language to another. Ingeburg Sigler, age fourteen at the time, demonstrated strategic code-switching within her entries. After writing in German about her schoolwork and potential evacuation, she switched to English for more personal reflections in her entry on 20 October 1940:

Heute ist Sonntag.

Ich habe grade eine schrecklich lange Zeit Schularbeiten gemacht und bin nun endlich fertig. [...] Onkel Leon will versuchen es einzurichten, dass ich

²² Ibid., scan 39.

²³ Orsten, *From Anschluß to Albion*, pp. 92–93.

evacuiert werden kann (weil so viele Bomben in der Nähe waren), my opinion on this part not being developed properly I better not write anything until things happen. (Which I hope they do not, because of Peter.) I'm making him feel a bit uncertain about my feelings.²⁴

The content of Ingeburg's English passages is similar to her German ones, but the switch to English in this context appears consistent with a desire to conceal her thoughts, such as, in this example, her crush on Peter. This apparent strategic language choice raises the question of whether she selects languages based on her intended readership. If we consider that some Kindertransport refugees may have anticipated family members back home reading their diaries, Ingeburg's English entries can be understood as targeting a more restricted readership. Her German entries appear to be written with a broader audience in mind, while the English passages seem intended for her eyes alone or perhaps for those who shared her bilingual experience.

That said, the use of two languages is not necessarily tied to the objective of sharing the diary, but it can be part of identity formation and development, as in Leopold Weil's case, who later changed his name to Leonard Lawrence.²⁵ He starts his diary on 20 October 1939 in Italian, then includes an English entry which seems to be based on a school assignment in which he reflects on his last days in Germany and ultimately, on 12 October 1941, he switches to German. He explains:

Wann ich mein Tagebuch zuerst begann, vor 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ Jahren, schrieb ich, als Begründung, dass ich ein Andenken der damaligen bewegten Zeiten davon machen will, dass ich mich dadurch im italienisch üben will, und drittens dass ich mich mit der Tagesbuchs Hilfe erziehen werde in Charakter, im Benehmen, sodass ich durch meine eigene Anstrengung ein nützlicher und wertvoller Mensch werden soll.²⁶

Leopold's multilingual trajectory suggests patterns that are consistent with both conscious language use and what appear to be unconscious effects of linguistic displacement. While he explicitly highlights diary writing as a means to maintain and improve his Italian, a widely recognised second language acquisition practice,²⁷ his German demonstrates clear signs of attrition despite being his mother tongue. His reflection contains several

²⁴ Sigler, 'Ingeburg Sigler Diary'.

²⁵ Leonard Lawrence, 'Leonard Lawrence: Diary and Notes 1939–1943', 2007, Wiener Holocaust Library, 1730/2.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Looking into language teaching strategies and diary writing would go beyond the scope of this investigation, but scholars of pedagogy and language teaching have highlighted that keeping a diary can be beneficial to language learners; see, for example, Carol Severino, "'Multilingualizing' Composition: A Diary Self-Study of Learning Spanish and Chinese', *Composition Studies*, 45.2 (2017), pp. 12–31.

grammatical errors: the confusion between temporal conjunctions ('wann' instead of 'als'), incorrect preposition use ('im italienisch' rather than 'auf italienisch') and awkward possessive construction ('mit der Tagesbuchs Hilfe' instead of 'mit der Hilfe des Tagebuchs'). These linguistic slips are particularly significant because they occur in his most reflective, conscious commentary about language use. This suggests that even deliberate language maintenance could not fully counteract the effects of English dominance in his daily environment. Presumably, as it became increasingly difficult to maintain both German and Italian while acquiring English, he switched to keeping his diary in German, though paradoxically his German had already begun to show signs of interference and decay. What becomes evident is that language use played a crucial part in the everyday lives of Kindertransport refugees, serving simultaneously as a tool for identity formation, community belonging and practical communication, while also revealing the inevitable linguistic consequences of forced displacement and adaptation.

NEGOTIATING BELONGING THROUGH LANGUAGE

There are several examples that show how the Kindertransport refugees negotiated belonging on a linguistic, rather than on a solely content level in their diaries, including borrowing and translanguaging grammar use. Following Busch's line of inquiry where she questions 'how linguistic variation can serve to construct belonging or difference', we can examine how their language use reflects advancing integration.²⁸

Despite speaking a different mother tongue seemingly not being a problem for the Kindertransport refugees at first glance, some were subjected to negative experiences identifying them as foreign or outsiders. Elisabeth covertly reflects on feelings of non-belonging when she writes about playing with two other children in the neighbourhood on 19 April 1940: 'Aber die beiden wispern so viel zusammen, daß auch diese Freude von mir genommen ist.'²⁹ She implies that she was not well integrated in the neighbourhood by highlighting otherness. While these instances do not overtly mention language, we can assume that Elisabeth faced issues based on her nationality and language abilities. Significantly, Elisabeth's own language use in this entry reveals unconscious linguistic integration: her use of 'wispern' (rather than standard German 'flüstern') and the construction 'die Freude von mir genommen' (rather than 'mir die Freude genommen') demonstrate unnoticed English influence on her German, even as she reflects on feelings of exclusion. This paradox illustrates the complexity of language acquisition during displacement, showing that

²⁸ Busch, 'Expanding the Notion of the Linguistic Repertoire', p. 3.

²⁹ Orsten, 'Elisabeth Orsten Papers', scan 40.

integration occurs simultaneously with experiences of non-belonging at a subconscious level.

It is crucial to recognise that translanguaging practices in these diaries serve multiple functions, not all of which are conscious or strategic. Language can function as a tool for concealing private thoughts, as a means of expressing something that is easier to articulate in a particular linguistic variety, and as evidence of subconscious language acquisition processes that occur below the level of awareness. These different functions often operate simultaneously, creating layers of meaning and integration that resist simple categorisation. Kindertransport refugees use English words within their German entries as they pick up on them during their interactions with others in the country of refuge as well as hearing, seeing or reading them in newspapers, on the radio, on billboards etc. The code-switching and borrowing of words that happens here signify an expansion of their repertoire. On some occasions, the Kindertransport refugees Germanise words or use German words which are closer to the English equivalent. On 5 September 1939, Kurt writes 'Lenchen Pick ist rum gekommen und sagte: "Wir sollen uns alle da und da mieten."' ³⁰ Here, Kurt potentially picked up an English word (to meet) and spelled it in a way that he thought was German. This illustrates an awareness of the language environment around him and hints at a subconscious expansion of his vocabulary and repertoire. The English word 'meet', which he writes down as 'mieten', is closer to him than the German 'treffen', as presumably 'meet' is used often in his everyday environment. This illustrates the perceptiveness and awareness of the language environment around him, and his efforts to expand his vocabulary and repertoire. Kurt uses interlingual homophones that sound similar but have different meanings. The German 'mieten', therefore, becomes a false friend here and Kurt connects two words in his repertoire based on their similarities in sound and spelling. Similarly, 'ist rum gekommen' reflects the English 'came round' rather than standard German 'ist gekommen'. These examples highlight a process that includes both successful linguistic uptake and moments of linguistic confusion or error, but crucially also reveal the limitations of assuming intentional language negotiation in all instances. Kurt's spelling variations illustrate that he is developing familiarity with terms through oral encounters like conversations, radio or other aural input and attempting to render them in writing. However, the extent to which he is consciously 'aware of the language environment' versus subconsciously absorbing and reproducing linguistic patterns remains unclear. This represents what Busch describes as the embodied, lived experience of language becoming part of one's repertoire through emotional and bodily inscription, a process that includes both positive integrative experiences and moments of linguistic

³⁰ Kurt Seelig, 'Kurt Seelig Collection (AR 11115): Kurt Seelig Diary, 1939–1940', Leo Baeck Institute, Box: 1, Folder: 2, p. 15.

uncertainty, but which may occur largely below the threshold of conscious awareness.³¹

The Kindertransport refugees display receptiveness to their new language environment by expanding their repertoires and picking up words from their everyday language encounters, but this expansion encompasses both intentional adoption and subconscious acquisition. This dual process highlights how they are developing a sense of belonging on a linguistic level that operates across multiple dimensions of awareness. This is further supported by diary entries showing how they adopt colloquialisms, turns of phrase and other specific words to expand their vocabulary and write about their experiences. For example, sixteen-year-old Ilse writes on 15 October 1940: 'Von meinen Eltern seit Mai nichts gehört, Ali verschollen, Geni schreibt nicht, Ich bin fed up mit dem ganzen verpfuschten Leben!'³² Other examples of her using the phrase 'fed up' can be found in her entries from 13 May 1945 ('Alle fahren weg, ich wollte, ich hätte eine Zukunft. Möchte gerne heiraten. Bin sehr fed up mit allem'), 29 August 1945 ('Geni ist auch fed up') and on 30 June 1947 ('Bin sehr fed up allein zu sein, weiß wirklich nicht mehr was los ist').³³ The repeated use of this colloquialism demonstrates its successful integration into her active repertoire, representing her adoption of English idiomatic expressions that effectively capture her emotional states for which this particular phrase provides a readily available and perhaps more satisfying form of expression than German alternatives.

Another example of hybrid writing that is an instance of code-switching rather than borrowing can be found in Ilse's entry on 14 April 1940: 'Es sind noch 2 andere Spanier hier und viele wollten schon weggehen mit mir but I am not interested at all.'³⁴ I argue here that Ilse is not excluding a potential reader deliberately but instead suggest that there are particular ways of voicing one's emotions that are closer to her everyday experience and environment. Therefore, the code-switching can be seen as a display of which language is more easily accessible to the diarist, and, at the same time, this switching between languages in one sentence signifies a proficiency in both. It illustrates a translingual use of language, as she is moving through languages and thereby breaks down a binary assumption of languages being static.

Looking at the use of English words and phrases within the German entries can reveal patterns in those variances. Taking Ingeburg's diary entries as examples, we can see how she uses English expressions frequently, such as in her entry on 22 September 1940: 'Diese Woche begleitete er [an

³¹ See, for example, Busch, 'Expanding the Notion of the Linguistic Repertoire', p. 5.

³² Ilse Shatkin, 'Ilse Shatkin: Diary and Papers 1929–1946', 2012, Wiener Holocaust Library, 1844, p. 129.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 166, 170, 183.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

unnamed boy from her former class] mich fast jeden Tag bis nach Hause und einmal merkte es T. Claire (But I really do like him).'³⁵ On 3 December 1940, she writes: 'Da sind so viele Sachen die ich schreiben müsste, aber I can't be bothered.'³⁶ While it is tempting to interpret these switches as strategic, suggesting that English provides a form of personal code or that particular expressions fit emotions better, the evidence does not definitively support such intentional use of language for concealment. Alternative explanations, such as the simple convenience of English phrasing for particular concepts, remain equally plausible. Arguably, Ingeburg feels that this particular expression fits her emotions better and she chooses to use this instead of a German equivalent. However, this may reflect subconscious linguistic accessibility rather than conscious strategic choice. The switching between and mixing of languages in these examples highlights how translanguaging language use offers greater opportunities to express oneself, but the motivations, whether conscious or subconscious, often remain opaque. What the diaries often do not reveal are the explicit motivations or reasons for writing parts in English or including specific phrases.

Including phrases and words in another language in the entries can also happen the other way round and thereby hint at a nostalgic use of German. Helga, whose diary is written entirely in English, includes a particular German colloquialism and some German words which remind her and us readers of her country of origin. On 1 January 1945, the seventeen-year-old writes 'Prost Neujahr! Cold weather is getting better thank goodness' using the traditional German way of wishing a happy new year.³⁷ Evidently, she does not use German very often as this is one of the few examples alongside her referencing celebrating New Year's Eve with 'Sandkuchen, Glühwein, etc.' and using words like 'Apfelstrudel' in her entry on 25 December 1944 and 'Weihnachtsfeier' in her entry on 24 December 1946.³⁸ What becomes apparent when looking at the dates is that Helga often refers to German terms during the Christmas period, which suggests that she links her new experiences of celebrating Christmas and New Year in England and America to her childhood memory of spending this period in Germany. According to Eva-Maria Thüne, a nostalgic use of German can be seen as a way to 'resist losing their first language, German, which in a way was their last bond with their parents and their previous childhood'.³⁹ Such nostalgic use can also show that some particular experiences and emotions are still easier to express or write about in German than in English which, over the years, has often become closer to the Kindertransport refugees than their native language.

³⁵ Sigler, 'Ingeburg Sigler Diary'.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Helga Bejach, 'Helga's Daily Diary January 1944–1946', Leicester University Library: Special Collections, ACC 2019/21.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Thüne, 'What the Kindertransportees Tell Us', p. 167.

STRUCTURAL ASPECTS OF LANGUAGE USE

Our understanding of language acquisition and maintenance among the Kindertransport refugees requires examination not only of lexical borrowing and semantic shifts, but also of the deeper structural transformations that occur at a grammatical level. Moving beyond considerations of vocabulary and pragmatic language use, we should also briefly examine the structural aspects of the Kindertransport refugees' writing that demonstrate how their grammatical competence in German was increasingly influenced by English syntactic patterns. This analysis reveals a complex process of linguistic convergence that extends far beyond simple lexical borrowing to encompass fundamental aspects of sentence construction, prepositional use and morphosyntactic organisation. The theoretical framework for understanding these changes draws on contact linguistics research, which demonstrates that syntactic convergence typically occurs gradually and affects specific grammatical subsystems before spreading to broader structures. In the case of German and English, the typological differences between the two languages create areas of vulnerability to cross-linguistic influence, especially in prepositional systems, word order patterns and auxiliary verb constructions.

The most frequently observed structural changes in the Kindertransport diaries involve prepositional use, particularly in expressions of movement and location. One common source of interference is the English preposition 'to', which is used broadly for directional movement and can influence learners' choices in German. In contrast, German requires a more specific selection of directional prepositions depending on the context: for instance, while 'nach' is the standard preposition for movement towards places, 'zu' is used with people or institutions and usually requires a determiner ('zum', 'zur'). This typological difference creates a site of particular vulnerability to cross-linguistic influence. Ten-year-old Kurt's diary, for example, illustrates this in several entries such as the one on 4 January 1940 where he notes: 'Frank kommt heute. Ich gehe zu Cockfosters um ihn zu mieten.'⁴⁰ Here, Kurt uses 'zu' incorrectly to indicate movement towards a place, directly mirroring the English 'to Cockfosters'. Standard German would require 'nach Cockfosters' for movement towards a city or location, as 'nach' functions as the unmarked directional preposition for proper nouns denoting places. The use of 'zu' in this context without a determiner ('zu dem Cockfosters' would be grammatically possible but pragmatically marked) demonstrates clear English syntactic influence on German prepositional selection.

Elisabeth Ornstein's diary provides additional evidence of this prepositional convergence. She writes: 'Wenn wir endlich mit allen Koffern

⁴⁰ Seelig, 'Kurt Seelig Collection', p. 23.

zu London kamen gingen wir zu Brunswick Gardens.' The repeated use of 'zu' for directional movement towards both London and Brunswick Gardens mirrors the English pattern of using 'to' uniformly for directional constructions, regardless of the type of destination. Standard German would distinguish between 'nach London' (movement towards a city) and potentially 'zu Brunswick Gardens' (movement towards a specific address), but Elisabeth's use suggests a simplification towards the English pattern.

A particularly striking example of prepositional transfer appears in Elisabeth's idiomatic use: 'Ich weiß's aber in meinen Augen obwohl Daphne sich verstellt geht sie selbst viel zu viel.'⁴¹ The phrase 'in meinen Augen' represents a direct translation of the English idiom 'in my eyes', whereas standard German would employ 'meiner Meinung nach' or 'für mich'. This transfer operates not only at the prepositional level but also demonstrates how entire prepositional phrases can be borrowed as pragmatic units, suggesting deeper structural convergence between the two linguistic systems.

These structural changes collectively demonstrate that the Kindertransport refugees' linguistic competence cannot be adequately characterised through monolingual frameworks that treat German and English as separate systems. Instead, their language use shows translingual characteristics, where structural patterns from both languages combine to create hybrid grammatical systems that serve their communicative needs while reflecting their lived linguistic experience. The systematic nature of these changes which affect prepositional selection, auxiliary verb constructions, possessive marking and conjunction systems indicates that structural convergence occurred across multiple grammatical subsystems simultaneously. Furthermore, the fact that these structural changes appear consistently across multiple diarists of different ages and backgrounds indicates that they reflect broader processes of contact-induced change rather than individual developmental patterns. The convergence towards English structural patterns reflects the dominance of English in the refugees' daily communicative environment and demonstrates how syntactic accommodation occurs in response to communicative pressures and social integration processes.

It is crucial to recognise that these structural changes occurred largely below the level of conscious awareness. The young diarists were not deliberately choosing to adopt English grammatical patterns; rather, these convergences represent subconscious adaptations that emerged naturally through their daily immersion in English-speaking environments. However, while these modifications may have been subconscious, their systematic occurrence across multiple grammatical domains reveals significant gaps in the support systems available to refugee children for heritage language maintenance. The absence of formal German language instruction,

⁴¹ Orsten, 'Elisabeth Orsten Papers', scan 84.

limited access to German-speaking peer groups, and the prioritisation of English acquisition over German maintenance created conditions where structural convergence was inevitable. These linguistic changes thus serve as unintended documentation of the broader institutional failures to provide comprehensive language support for displaced children and made reunions with family after the war much more difficult.⁴²

CONCLUSION

The diary writings of six Kindertransport refugees challenge traditional models of linguistic assimilation by revealing conscious and subconscious translanguaging practices. Rather than documenting a linear progression from German monolingualism to English monolingualism, these personal documents show how language can be seen as a mirror of different stages of the Kindertransport refugees' integration. Their diary entries reveal conscious and subconscious adaptations that created hybrid forms of expression ranging from Elisabeth Orsten's deliberate decisions about language choice to Kurt Seelig's subconscious adoption of English syntactic patterns in his German writing. These practices represent not linguistic deficiency or incomplete language maintenance, but rather creative responses to the unprecedented challenges of cultural adaptation. Thereby, the Kindertransport refugees' language practices defy Thüne's assertion that learning English quickly meant German was 'forgotten' or 'hidden away',⁴³ as well as Susanne Romaine's characterisation of bilingualism as just 'a stage on the way to eventual monolingualism'.⁴⁴ Instead, these diaries demonstrate fluid, creative responses to unprecedented challenges of cultural adaptation.

The translanguaging framework proves essential for understanding these phenomena because it recognises the creative potential of multilingual practice beyond binary conceptions of language competence. The refugees' strategic use of different scripts, integration of English phrases like 'fed up' within German sentences, and structural borrowing of English prepositional patterns demonstrate how languages come together to create new forms of meaning-making that serve evolving communicative needs. Looking at the manifestation of trans- and to some degree multilingualism in the form of hybrid writing then also allows us to draw connections between the deployment of language and notions of belonging through language. Some children show both a multilingual (languages are still

⁴² One striking example of these difficulties is Ruth Barnett's memoir where she reflects on the issues of being reunited with her parents after the war, her limited knowledge of German and general identity struggles: Ruth Barnett, *Person of No Nationality: A Story of Childhood Separation, Loss and Recovery* (David Paul, 2010).

⁴³ Thüne, 'What the Kindertransportees Tell Us', p. 167.

⁴⁴ Romaine, 'Multilingualism', p. 551.

distinct) and translanguing (languages cross freely) use of language in their diaries, whether this is through conscious choices or in subconscious ways. The diaries that were initially written in German and later shifted to English yield valuable information on negotiations of belonging and identities in flux. However, it is important to emphasise that these shifts are often rooted in changing circumstances in the exile experience and it therefore becomes necessary to highlight the interconnectedness of the deployment of language, the exile experience and the Kindertransport refugees' understanding of belonging.

Particularly the aspects of repertoire and register, of multi- and translanguing, and of language use often point towards a fluid change as the Kindertransport refugees adjust to their new environment. The analysis reveals how language became a site of both loss and innovation for these children. While former Kindertransport refugee Hannah Weinberger's later reflection on the 'neglect of my native language' as connected to 'loss of identity' acknowledges the costs of linguistic displacement,⁴⁵ the diaries analysed in this article show that the refugees' language practices were more resilient and creative than such narratives of loss might initially suggest. Their translanguing writing preserved connections to their German-speaking past while facilitating integration into English-speaking environments, creating linguistic bridges that sustained them through profound disruption.

However, it should be emphasised that the structural changes documented in these diaries occurred largely below the threshold of conscious awareness, particularly in the diaries of younger refugees like Kurt. This highlights the impact of immersive language contact on young speakers. These modifications do not just represent interference but also systematic adaptations that enabled effective communication across linguistic boundaries. The consistency of these patterns across multiple diarists suggests broader processes of contact-induced change that could benefit from further investigation in migration linguistics.

To conclude, the diaries of Kindertransport refugees vividly illustrate the inevitable shifts in language while defying the notion of a single, eventual monolingualism. Reading the diaries through the lens of translanguing enables us to uncover the rich hybridity in these diaries, showing how refugees navigate new environments and forge identities through their evolving linguistic repertoires. These shifts, intertwined with the exile experience, highlight the deep connections between language, belonging and identity. Studying these diaries is essential: they unlock unique insights into the cultural adjustments, evolving identities and linguistic journeys of the Kindertransport refugees.

⁴⁵ Hannah Weinberger later changed her name to Hickman; Hannah Hickman, 'My Inner Language', *The Keep*, University of Sussex Library, Weinberger Papers SxMs182/4/7.