

(UN)MAKING LINGUISTIC BORDERS: PERSPECTIVES FROM CONTEMPORARY POST-GERMAN POETRY¹

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Abstract

Building upon Yasemin Yildiz's seminal reflections on the postmonolingual condition and responding to the call for a postlingual perspective articulated by Yasser Elhariry and Rebecca Walkowitz, this paper proposes the term 'post-German' as a more nuanced descriptor for poetry published in Germany from 1989 to 2020. Through close readings of poems by José F.A. Oliver, Uljana Wolf and Xoşewîst, the study explores how these texts – each responding to historical contingencies spanning the local and the global – offer a critical interrogation of borders and the practices of bordering in relation to nationalism and belonging. Crucially, this politico-cultural critique is inextricably bound to a linguistic inquiry, illuminating the aesthetic dimensions of the issues addressed. By alternately effacing and reinforcing linguistic boundaries, the poems interrogate their arbitrariness and conventionality, thereby exposing monolingualism as a historically contingent and ideologically constructed paradigm. In doing so, they challenge entrenched understandings of language as a fixed, discrete and countable entity, while simultaneously raising profound questions for literary scholarship. Ultimately, they not only contest literary taxonomies structured around linguistic difference but also demonstrate the necessity of reassessing established interpretive methods.

Keywords: Post-German poetry; linguistic borders; multilingualism; translingualism; José F.A. Oliver; Uljana Wolf; Xoşewîst.

Until quite recently, in Berlin – where I reside and am writing this paper – those walking through the so-called Kulturforum near Potsdamer Platz, a former border zone once marked by the Berlin Wall, would have encountered a vibrant installation titled *BORDERS* (2023) by graphic designer Ariane Spanier (Figure 1). Spanning 350 metres of construction fencing, this installation transformed the space into a striking piece of public art. It featured sixty slogans in both English and German, each encouraging reflection on the meanings and implications of borders. One interrogative slogan in particular resonated with me every time I passed: 'Where does the border start? Wo fängt die Grenze an?' A seemingly mundane question that might at first glance be dismissed as a platitude, it nevertheless incisively highlights a fundamental characteristic of borders: despite their pervasive presence, spanning both abstract and concrete dimensions, they remain inherently contingent, relational and precarious in nature.

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Figure 1 Ariane Spanier. (2023). *BORDERS*. [Graphic artwork]. Museum des 20. Jahrhunderts am Kulturforum, Berlin, Germany. Copyright by David von Becker / Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.

In a similar vein, ‘Where does the border start?’ is also the question at the core of three contemporary poems by Uljana Wolf (b. 1979, East-Berlin, GDR), José F.A. Oliver (b. 1961, Hausach, FGR), and Xoşewîst (b. 1987, Hasaka, Syria). Published in Germany between 1989 and 2020, these poems are imbricated with historical contingencies, ranging from the local to the global, and critically examine borders and bordering practices, particularly in relation to nationalism and belonging. Beyond a shared thematic focus, these poetic texts couple their politico-cultural critique with a linguistic one, probing the aesthetic dimensions of the issues they address. By interrogating the arbitrariness and conventionality of linguistic borders – at times blurring them, at others reinforcing them – the poems expose monolingualism as a historically contingent and ideologically constructed phenomenon. In doing so, they challenge conventional notions of language as a fixed, discrete and countable entity, while simultaneously raising complex questions for literary studies. Not only do they contest literary taxonomies based on language difference, but they also highlight the necessity of reassessing reading and interpretation methods.

These poems, in both form and content, confront the limits of inherited national-linguistic classifications and invite a reconsideration of the categories through which literature is named. In this respect, it is argued that such literary texts are more appropriately designated as ‘post-German’ rather than being classified as either ‘German’ or ‘German-language’. The former designation is more accurate in capturing the capacity of these texts to disrupt conventional understandings of language and language difference, challenging normative views of monolingualism and questioning the boundaries traditionally associated with literary categorisation. Following a brief examination of the rationale and implications of the concept ‘post-German’, this paper analyses poetic texts by Wolf, Oliver, and Xoşewîst to elucidate key

aspects of post-German poetry, while acknowledging that the spatial limitations of this paper preclude a more thorough discussion.

Why post-German? Some preliminary thoughts

The assumption that every individual ‘possesses’ only one language and that, consequently, there exist homogenous language communities which are, in turn, constitutive units of nation-states, is nowadays widely acknowledged as a modern Western discursive construct (Dembeck & Mein 2014, 53; Gramling 2016, 1–3; Yildiz 2012, 2). In this vein, the literary scholar Yasemin Yildiz (2012) aptly terms this normative view the monolingual paradigm (2). Nevertheless, the insight that monolingualism constitutes a relatively recent and non-universal paradigm in Western literature predates Yildiz’s influential study, as earlier scholarship had engaged substantively with literary multilingualism. For example, Leonard Forster’s book of lectures *The Poet’s Tongues: Multilingualism in Literature* (1970) has often, and rightly, been recognised as a landmark publication for its exploration of polyglossia in poetry from the Early Modern period to the early 1960s (Dembeck 2017, 148; Kilchmann 2024, 20–21; Yildiz 2012, 15). Besides, scholarly interest in the field has seen an exponential growth since the turn of the millennium, to the extent that some have come to postulate the emergence of a multilingual turn (Espino Barrera 2024, 256). Yet one has to agree with Till Dembeck (2018) that ‘[a]lmost all of these studies analyze literary texts against the background of monolingual norms, thereby implicitly taking the distinctness of different languages for granted’ (570).

If the notion of language as a static, distinct, and countable entity represents but one lens through which linguistic expression is understood, what alternative narratives might be considered? In other words, could the discourse of linguistic difference, often framed as the traversal of borders, be reconceptualised to embrace a more fluid and dynamic understanding? This question gains particular significance when considering poetry published in Germany over the last three decades, which increasingly challenges the idea of a monolingual norm and its associated normativity. These works employ a diverse array of writing techniques that could more conventionally be characterised as multi- or translingual, offering fertile ground for rethinking language and language difference.² As noted earlier, such poetic works might be most aptly characterised as post-German. This term draws on Yasemin Yildiz’s seminal study *Beyond the Mother Tongue* (2012), where she conceptualises the post-monolingual condition as ‘a field of tension in which the monolingual paradigm continues to assert itself and multilingual practices persist or reemerge’ (5). By foregrounding the tension itself, rather than privileging either end of the spectrum, Yildiz articulates a theoretical framework capable of accounting for a heterogeneous range of literary linguistic practices that unsettle the assumption of a stable correspondence between language, national community, and territory, particularly insofar as these practices may diverge from one another or appear internally contradictory. Furthermore, the notion of post-German responds to the plea by Rebecca Walkowitz and Yasser Elhariry (2021) for a postlingual perspective; that is, one that underscores the intrinsic

² Juliette Taylor-Batty and Till Dembeck (2023) identify terminological debates as among the most pressing concerns in literary multilingualism studies (8). The distinction between ‘multilingual’ and ‘translingual’ remains contested due to both proliferation of competing terms and inconsistent definitions (10). They tentatively associate ‘multilingualism’ with text-oriented and ‘translingualism’ with production-oriented approaches, while conceding that ‘the two cannot be separated so easily’ (10). Disciplinary differences add to the confusion: for instance, ‘translingual’ in linguistics typically designates ‘unbounded’ language use, whereas in literary studies, it is often used to designate a speaker of at least two ‘bounded’ languages’ (12).

constraints of linguistic systems as a whole. In fact, they observe that even ‘extant literary histories of bi-, multi-, pluri- and translingualism have operated within static monolingual paradigms, however expansive’ (8) and they advocate for models that endeavour to move beyond these limitations.

There is, however, one crucial aspect of the designation ‘post-German’ that remains to be considered: the complex temporality articulated in the prefix ‘post-’. Perhaps it is best to begin with what it is not. It is not a triumphalist, progressivist post- that suggests a departure from a worse, monolingual past in favour of a better, multilingual future. Such a view would not only be simplistic but also incorrect. In fact, one should not overlook the fact that monolingualism, while an illusory construct, is rooted in complex, tangible, and often violent historical processes, and it continues to serve as a fundamental organising principle. To quote the critical theorist Robert J. C. Young (2016), ‘[...] [B]y moving from the monolingual to the multilingual, we are not escaping the politics and history of the national construction of languages but staying in exactly the same place, in the prison house of a language’ (1219). In this regard, the prefix post- signals a critique of the assumption that a clear distinction can be made between monolingualism and multilingualism. Such a distinction presupposes a particular concept of ‘lingualism’ – or *Sprachigkeit* in German – the idea that languages are uniform, clearly delineated, and therefore countable (Arndt, Naguschewski & Stockhammer 2007, 26; Gramling 2017, 35).

In light of this, Alexandra Ksenofontova’s suggestion in her article ‘The Multiple Values of the Prefix “Post-”’ (2024) offers a useful framework: it can be proposed that, akin to Anker and Felski’s post- in post-critique (Anker & Felski 2017, 1), the post- in post-German is a ‘weakened’ form. That is, the effort to explore new ways of conceiving language(s) is simultaneously accompanied by an acknowledgment of the impossibility of drawing clear-cut distinctions and the enduring impact of the monolingual paradigm. In this line of thought, the post- in post-German hints at the possibility of an epistemological shift, as it implies a critique of the idea of language as a discernible, countable, and classifiable unity. Moreover, it indicates the time *since* the establishment of German as a national language in accordance with the monolingual paradigm around the second half of the eighteenth century. It is crucial to emphasise the significance of a historicised understanding, as the emergence of such a normative view has had effects that extend beyond the linguistic. Indeed, the historian Benedict Anderson (1983) observed that the ‘conception of nation-ness as linked to a private-property language’, as articulated for example by the late eighteenth-century German thinker Johann Gottfried Herder, ‘had wide influence in 19th century Europe and, more narrowly, on subsequent theorizing about the nature of nationalism’ (68). That the effects of this conceptualisation persist into the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, even as literary texts emerge that challenge its normative assumptions, is perhaps most incisively demonstrated in Yildiz’s aforementioned study of the postmonolingual condition. Focusing on prose from this period that is conventionally classified as German-language, her reading shows how such writing articulates a view of German that, as she contends, serves as ‘a curative to the proprietary, exclusionary claims made on the language’ (Yildiz 2012, 210).

Building on these theoretical premises, the following sections will examine, albeit cursorily, selected poems by Uljana Wolf, José F.A. Oliver, and Xoşewîst that critically address borders and bordering both thematically and linguistically. Far from aligning with the imagined

communities of Germany predicated on monolingual conventions, these works call for an analytical framework informed by postmonolingual and postlingual perspectives.

Looking for borders in Uljana Wolf's 'mappa'

Uljana Wolf has established herself as one of the most prominent voices in the panorama of poetry published in Germany over the past two decades – a period so vibrant that literary scholar Christian Metz (2018) has described it as a true 'Blütezeit' (1), a heyday for the genre. Both a writer and a translator, Wolf undertakes a critical reflection on language that informs her poetic and essayistic oeuvre. Central to this is her conception of poetry as translation, though, notably, as 'translation without a fixed target language' (Wolf 2021, 8, my trans.). When poetic writing is understood as an ongoing, open-ended process of translation – or, as Wolf describes it in her debut collection *kochanie, ich habe brot gekauft* (2005), a continuing '[...] grenzhandel / an der sprache' [border trade / on language] (47) – language itself is reconceived in a way that challenges the notion of discreteness. Within this framework, Wolf's third volume of poetry, *meine schönste lengevitch* (2013), emerges as particularly relevant to post-German perspectives.³ The very coinage *Lengevitch*, a Germanised approximation of *language*, already signals a programmatic dimension. Borrowed from Kurt M. Stein's little-known volume *Die Schönste Lengevitch* (1925), the term initially bore satirical connotations: Stein's Germerican, a blend of German and American English, ridicules 'mother language loss among German immigrants who nevertheless think they can still master their Vaterdeutsch correctly' (Wolf 2021, 105). In contrast, Wolf reclaims *Lengevitch* as a distinct aesthetic construct, marked by the shift in the title's article from the definite 'Die' [the] to the possessive 'meine' [my].

The exploration and contestation of linguistic as well as geopolitical borders finds compelling articulation in the poem 'mappa' from the same collection. Here, Wolf examines the concept of dwelling by tracing alternative etymologies of its titular Latin loanword – archaic in German but still common in Italian, where it signifies 'map'. Presented as a poetic dialogue with German-Jewish poet Nelly Sachs, the text probes nationalist ideologies through a question-and-answer structure:

mappa

was ist der wohnort? der wohnort ist
eine kreuzzehn. was ist die kreuzung?

in der verkorksten mundart der wälder
ist die kreuzung das wort baum. warum

spielen heimatländer in den lüften karten?
niemand hat die länder je nach hause gehn

sehn. ein baum im wald der nächsprache
ist im kartenspiel die zehn. aus seinem holz

³ Some of the ideas presented here were first developed in my earlier article: 'warum / spielen heimatländer in den lüften karten?' A Glimpse into Uljana Wolf's Post-German Poetry,' *Articulations* (June 2024), <https://articulations.temporal-communities.de/contributions/wolf-post-german-poetry/>.

werden auf der karte kreuze gemacht.
 die länder tragen ihren wohnort ein
 und legen die feder ins mäppchen
 zurück. was ist ein mäppchen? zurück.

mit Nelly Sachs (Wolf 2013, 22)

stationary

what is a domicile? a domicile is a star-
 crossed ten of clubs. what is a crossing?

in the flubbed dialect of these forests
 a crossing is the word tree. and why

do homelands play cards in the air? no one
 ever saw the homelands go home. a tree

in the forest of neighbouring languages
 is a club in this suit. out of its wood

someone makes crosses on a map.
 the countries fill in their domicile and

put the stationery back into its pencil
 case. what is stationary? put it back.

with Nelly Sachs (Wolf 2017, 12, trans. by Sophie Seita)

At first glance, one might reasonably question how a poem that appears ostensibly monolingual could be considered post-German. However, its paratextual elements – the cartography-themed title and the italicised note ‘*mit Nelly Sachs*’ – invite closer examination. The title gestures toward a recurring motif in Wolf’s oeuvre: her enduring fascination with maps, as illustrated in the poem ‘look on my card’ from her second poetry collection *falsche freunde* (2009) and exemplified in her short essay ‘In die Karten geschaut’ [A look at the cards], originally written in 2010 and reprinted in the volume of essays and interviews *Etymologischer Gossip* (2021). In this essay, Wolf engages in a poetological reflection on cartography, suggesting that poems, like maps, do not merely imitate reality but instead generate spaces through movement and multiplicity. By equating the poem with a map and ascribing to it a generative rather than a mimetic function, Wolf’s perspective resonates with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s conceptualisation of the map in *Mille Plateaux* (1980). The two French philosophers distinguish maps from tracings, asserting that ‘[s]i la carte s’oppose au calque, c’est qu’elle est tout entière tournée vers une expérimentation en prise sur le réel’ [What distinguishes the map from the tracing is that it is entirely oriented toward an experimentation in contact with the real] (Deleuze & Guattari 1980, 20; Deleuze & Guattari 1987, 12). Even more pertinent is their comparison of language to the map: ‘Le langage est une carte et non pas

un calque' [Language is a map, not a tracing] (Deleuze & Guattari 1980, 97; Deleuze & Guattari 1987, 77). Framed in these terms, the map functions as a site of negotiation that resists fixed borders and aligns with a postmonolingual and postlingual conception of language, already encoded in the poem's title and cartographic imagery.

The credit beneath the poetic text stands out both formally and thematically. It is typographically emphasised through italics and rhetorically marked by the unusual use of 'mit' [with], as opposed to the more common 'an' [to]. This reference to Sachs is not the first in the collection: in fact, the section 'mittens', from which 'mappa' originates, opens with the famous closing lines from *In der Flucht* (1959): 'Anstelle von Heimat / halte ich die Verwandlungen der Welt –' [Instead of a homeland / I hold the transformations of the world –] (Wolf 2013, 19). Here, Sachs shifts from the static notion of homeland to a dynamic, transformative world. This initiates a dialogue with the German-Jewish author, whose exile deeply influenced her literary exploration of Heimat. Wolf's own work, with its critical stance toward national borders, continues this theme. The poem specifically references Sachs's 'Suche nach Lebenden' (1971), where the 'I' and the 'you' perceive the same landscape differently – one sees a 'baum' [tree], the other a '†' (Sachs 2010, 218). Wolf draws on this juxtaposition, expanding it beyond the two interlocutors to explore the inter- and intralingual associations the words evoke: from 'wohntort' [place of residence] and 'kreuzzehn' [cross-ten] to 'kreuzung' [crossing] and 'baum' [tree], eventually to 'mäppchen' [pencil case] – a 'dwelling place' for stationery. This play with language, however, is more than a mere experiment. What Monika Schmitz-Emans (2021, 260) remarks in relation to Wolf's translations of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha may be equally applied to this poem: the text's ludic deployment of repetition is set against the gravity of the concern it articulates, namely the arbitrariness of nationalist borders in the case of 'mappa'.

The concept of uprootedness is also reflected through the notable imagery of playing cards. The poem poses and answers the following question: 'why / do homelands play cards in the air? / no one has ever seen the lands go / home' (Wolf 2017, 12). A clear allusion to the opening stanza of 'Wie viele Heimatländer' [How Many Homelands] from Sachs's volume *Fahrt ins Staublose* (1961) (Sachs 2010, 102), these lines invite contemplation on the immaterial nature of national entities, thereby calling into question the legitimacy of homelands themselves. The arbitrariness of such boundary demarcations is further accentuated by the image of the cross on the map, symbolising one's place of residence. The final verse loops back to the opening line, trapping the poem in endless repetition. Indeed, no conclusive answer is provided; rather, the original question is raised once more.

Uljana Wolf's essay 'Etymologischer Gossip im Gedicht' offers valuable insights, describing 'Etymological investigations [as] a fundamental component of poetic operations' (Wolf 2021, 219, my trans.). She contrasts the traditional use of etymologies to anchor words to specific cultural identities with a different approach:

Wenn ich sage, ein Gedicht sei *gossip*, dann meine ich vielleicht den Versuch, Möglichkeiten neuer Gemeinschaft, neuer Verwandtschaft zu imaginieren, durch illegitime, poetische Etymologien. Europäische Sprachgeschichte feministisch und dekolonisierend reappropriieren, verworren, disparat. (Wolf 2021, 221)

When I say that a poem is gossip, I might mean an attempt to imagine possibilities for a new community, a new kinship, through illegitimate, poetic etymologies. A reappropriation of European linguistic history in a feminist and decolonial manner, tangled, disparate. (my trans.)

Interestingly, Wolf critiques the monolingual paradigm by tracing its origins to the European linguistic tradition, effectively locating, to echo Spanier's question, the start of the border there, while simultaneously outlining a programmatic vision for its feminist and decolonial reappropriation. This perspective, which values opacity and difference, challenges the dominant narrative that claims to promote transparency but ultimately obscures its ideological biases. Underscoring the political and cultural dimensions of this critique, linguists Sinfree Makoni and Alastair Pennycook (2006) argue that the countability of languages extends the Eurocentric 'project of governmentality' described by Foucault (2). This is starkly reflected in cartographic traditions, which over the past 350 years have depicted the world as a mosaic of adjacent, non-overlapping, monolingual, culturally homogeneous territories, as David Gramling (2017) notes in relation to Western European political imaginaries (35). One might add that this spatial logic also underpins the notion of national literatures.

Re/dis/placed borders in José F.A. Oliver's 'dorfidylle heimattduft'

In 1989, poet and essayist José F.A. Oliver articulated a statement that encapsulates the *raison d'être* of his writing, which spans more than twenty publications – from his poetic debut, *Aufbruch* (1987), to his most recent publication, the volume of essays *In jeden Fluss mündet ein Meer* (2023):

Meine Sprache ist eine Absage an die offizielle Sprache eines Landes, das uns nicht anzunehmen vermochte und vermag. Durch diesen Akt der Verweigerung wird unsere Sprachlosigkeit besiegt und es werden Fragen aufgeworfen. Gleichzeitig wird aber auch die Sprache der Väter herausgefordert und deren Lebensformen mißtraut. (Oliver 1989, 11)

My language is a rejection of the official language of a country that was and is unable to accept us. Through this act of refusal, our voicelessness is overcome and questions are raised. At the same time, however, the language of the fathers is challenged and their ways of life are met with distrust. (my trans.)

This excerpt originates from the foreword to Oliver's second poetry collection, *Heimatt und andere fossile Träume* (1989), a work that critically engages with and subverts nationalist tropes. As with Uljana Wolf, Oliver's critique is inextricably linked with linguistic reflection. However, while Wolf asserts that 'the disturbance of the mother tongue or the individual language [...] is an aesthetic moment, not a biographical one' (Wolf 2021, 130, my trans.), Oliver, born in 1961 in Hausach, Baden-Württemberg, into a family of Malagueño immigrants, foregrounds the personal as a central element of his literary praxis. Yet, at the same time, as the quote above suggests, his poetic language is animated through a desire for rupture. In the same preface, the author reflects on his positionality as a poet grappling with what he describes as 'Sprachfetzen' (Oliver 1989, 10), shreds of language, encompassing the Andalusian and

Alemannic dialects spoken by his parents and in his native Black Forest, as well as the Standard High German and Standard Spanish acquired through formal education. Such heterogeneity is also poignantly captured in the image of an Andalusian village in the Black Forest, which also lends its title to his first essay collection, *Mein andalusisches Schwarzwalddorf* (2007) and stands as an affective tribute to the estrangement inherent in a life shaped by the intersection of diverse linguistic and cultural paradigms.

Oliver's second volume of poetry provides a compelling case for examining another post-German perspective, particularly through its engagement with the notion that the monolingual and standard norm, as Arianne Des Rochers (2023, 29, 35–36) highlights, rests on a hierarchical distinction between written and oral forms, as well as between national and regional language varieties. Notably, the poem 'dorfidylle heimattduft' [scent of homelan(d)guid], comprising forty-nine verses, weaves together the Alemannic dialect spoken by a saleswoman behind the sausage counter with excerpts from Goethe's *Faust I* (1808) in High German. The following are excerpts from the poem; the translation is provided for clarity and does not purport to capture the full complexity of the original:

[...]

derf's sunsch no ebbis si??

ha jo! e bißle Goethe, bittscheee!

Habe nun ach Philosophie Juristerei und

de Dokter mocht'r, ei ei ei

wie schee, wie schee, Lideradur

derf's sunsch no ebbis si usserem Schinke pur

Medizin und leider auch Theologie

s'Feschk isch gruusig gsi, vergeß i ni

selle bleed Kapell, Gott weiß worum

die Wurschk isch krumm, des isch saudumm

durchaus studiert mit heißem Bemühn

[...]

so ziehe ich schon Jahr um Jahr

herauf herab und kreuz und krumm

mich selber an der Nase rum

deutsch-sein, meinte ein freund, heißt,
goethe in sich zu spüren. (Oliver 1989, 15–16)

[...]
want a little something more??

oh yesss, a lil' bit of Goethe, pleaaase!

I've studied alas philosophy law and

doctor he wants to be, oh my oh my

how niiice, how niiice, liiiterature,

want a little something more beside our pure ham?

medicine and sadly theology too!

the feast was foul, I won't forget

that silly band, God knows what yet

the sausage is bent, what nonsense that meant

thoroughly studied with burning zeal

[...]
so year after year I drag myself

up and down, this way and that

leading myself by the nose

to be german, a friend said, means
to feel goethe within. (my trans.)

A brief excursus on the concept of *Heimat*, foregrounded in the poem's title, is necessary before turning to the text itself. Often translated as 'homeland,' *Heimat* spans a broad semantic field of spatiality, encompassing both private and public spheres (Bönisch, Runia, & Zehschnetzer 2020, 2; Crépon 2004/2014, 430). It ranges from an intimate sense of belonging – such as the home as living space and internalised world – to affiliation with a socio-political community. Its coexistence of emotionally charged and politically contested meanings became especially pronounced with the rise of nineteenth-century nationalisms and culminated under

National Socialism, which instrumentalised the term (Bönisch, Runia, & Zehschnetzler 2020, 2–4). Through the formula *Blut und Boden* (blood and soil), *Heimat* came to fuse territorial origin, lineage and affect. The poem's title, 'dorfidylle heimattduft', immediately conjures the stylised imagery traditionally associated with *Heimat*. The term *dorfidylle* (village idyll) draws on nostalgic and idealised representations of rural life, while *heimattduft* introduces a playful reimagining of the German word *Heimat*, echoing the title of the poetry collection itself. Reflecting on the neologistic term *Heimatt* more than twenty-five years after the book's publication, Oliver described his response to the traditional concept of *Heimat* as resolute: 'den setze ich für mich schachmatt' [I put it in checkmate] (Oliver 2015, 105). The deliberate misspelling of *Heimat* through the doubling of its final consonant signals a decisive break with a deeply entrenched ideological tradition in German history, one imbued with the ethnonationalist connotations of the term. In so doing, it also evokes the adjective *matt* (en. 'feeble', 'weak', 'dull', 'pale'), layering the neologism with additional semantic nuances that cast the concept in a negative light and suggest a sense of obsolescence. In a gesture akin to a chess move, Oliver delivers a symbolic checkmate to a narrative rooted in oppression and exclusion. This emphatic repudiation of exclusivist rhetoric – whether territorial, linguistic, or cultural – reveals a sustained critique of borders and emerges as a central thread in Oliver's prolific body of work. Consistent with this interpretation, Marc Mueller (Oliver 2018, 53) translates the neologism *Heimatt* as 'Homelan(d)guid,' combining 'homeland' with 'languid'; accordingly, the second noun of the title could be rendered as 'scent of homelan(d)guid.'

This repudiation of exclusivist rhetoric resonates throughout the poem. As Elke Sturm-Trigonakis (2006) aptly remarks, '[s]urely, there are only a few more elegant methods to undermine a canonised national poet such as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe' (35). She further observes that the poem not only subverts the conventional hierarchy between High German and dialect but also positions the Alemannic dialect as a direct response to excerpts from Goethe's canonical work. These excerpts, though not always quoted verbatim, reshape the Faustian monologue into a dialogue that retains its rhyming structure (Sturm-Trigonakis 2006, 34). This deliberate juxtaposition creates a dynamic interplay, blending elevated intellectual themes with the more mundane and everyday, further underscoring the poem's critique of cultural and linguistic hierarchies. Interestingly, it is not the Goethean quotes that are italicised, but the Alemannic dialect, marked in italics to establish a clear typographical boundary. This choice underscores the contrast between national and regional linguistic forms. As historian Eric Hobsbawm (1990) observes, the 'identification of the state with one nation [...] implied a homogenization and standardization of its inhabitants, essentially, by means of a written "national language"' (93). Nation-building required the suppression of internal diversity, with linguistic standardisation erasing regional dialects to promote a unified 'common language'. Rather than seeking to blur these distinctions, this poem instead confronts them directly, rendering them palpable and typographically explicit. This deliberate emphasis reveals the inherent artificiality of linguistic hierarchies and their entanglement with systems of power and authority. It frames the complex dynamic between the hegemony of a standard language and the lived experiences of language as an embodied social practice. The incorporation of Alemannic in the poem subtly recontextualises and relativises the notion of Germanness.

The concluding lines of the poem offer a pointed critique of German cultural policy, which often equates a genuine appreciation of the national literary canon, particularly Goethe, with an intrinsic element of German identity (Fachinger 2001, 51). By satirizing this claim to

exclusive ownership, the poem challenges conventional ideas of cultural belonging and national identity. The irony is deepened by the use of *Kleinschreibung* (lowercase) instead of the standard orthography, which traditionally capitalises all nouns, including common nouns.

In lieu of a conclusion: (im)possibilities in Xoşewîst's poetry

This initial foray into the landscape of contemporary post-German poetry concludes not with a summary, but with a brief reflection on the remarkable debut of poet and activist Xoşewîst (Abdulaziz Ramadan), *Leipzigît* (2020), which further illuminates the conceptual breadth of the term 'post-German'. This compelling booklet of twelve poems stands out for several reasons. As with the works of Wolf and Oliver, this volume of poetry was published by an independent press: in this case, it was issued by hochroth, an independent publishing collective with branches across Germany and beyond, renowned for tailoring print runs to meet demand. The broader role of independent publishing raises critical questions about how modes of circulation may either uphold or disrupt monolingual norms – questions Brian Lennon insightfully addresses in his groundbreaking study, *In Babel's Shadow* (2010), within the US-American context.

In *Leipzigît*, bordering experiences of oppression, flight, and displacement are scrutinised through the prism of language difference, which not only emerges as a prominent thematic focus, but is also vividly represented through both textual and paratextual elements. As linguistic difference is brought to the fore, its border-like character intensifies the experience of dividedness, and yet, at the same time, it invites traversal and subversion, as a closer look will reveal. The title itself is a case in point, combining Latin and Arabic scripts in a way that foregrounds what German literary scholar Monika Schmitz-Emans (2021) describes as *Fremdschriftlichkeit*: this mode of hetero- or multiscriptality stages an intensified engagement of the reader with language difference, oscillating between the semantic and sensory dimensions conveyed by any given script (241). Hence, for example, for readers unfamiliar with the Arabic alphabet, the visual juxtaposition of scripts may create friction between form and meaning, either encouraging or discouraging engagement with the text's linguistic complexities. Recognising that the German city name *Leipzig* has been merged with the Arabic suffix *-yât*, forming a neologism roughly translated as 'of Leipzig', might prove challenging. This creative synthesis reflects Xoşewîst's personal trajectory, as someone born in 1987 in Hasaka, within the Syrian part of Kurdistan, who resettled in Leipzig following the upheavals of the Syrian Civil War (2011-2024). The titles of the poems similarly integrate Arabic characters into German or English words, such as in 'frei·eit' (Figure 2), where the Arabic medial consonant *hā* replaces the Latin letter *h* in the German word *Freiheit* (freedom).

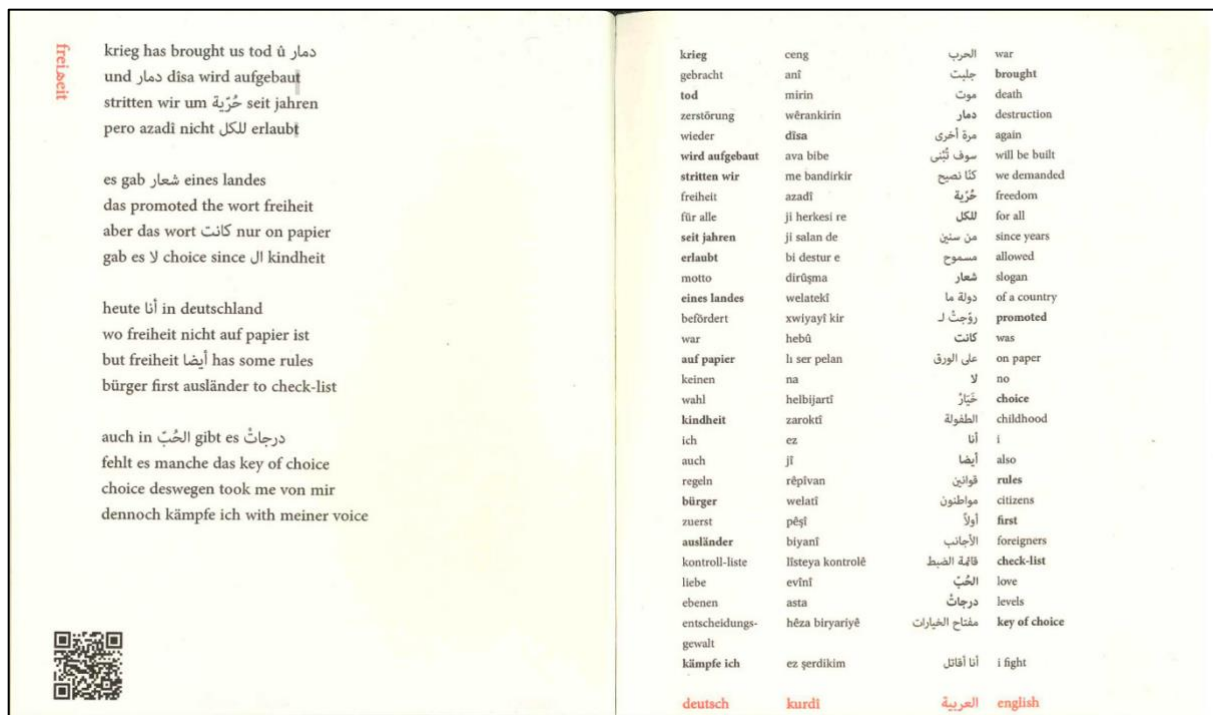


Figure 2 Xoşewîst. (2020). frei.eit. In *Leipzig* (pp. 18–19). Hochroth Verlag.

However, linguistic difference in this booklet extends beyond the use of multiple alphabets. The booklet incorporates up to five languages – German, Kurdish, Arabic, English, and Spanish – each marked by distinct power differentials, global reach and institutional status. While English, Arabic, and Spanish are widely recognised as world languages with significant transnational utility, and German enjoys national language status across several countries, Kurdish – used here as an umbrella term for a broad dialect continuum – lacks official national recognition. To support readers across this linguistic range, the booklet includes a glossary of key terms for each poem on the right-hand page. This approach, at least in theory, makes the book equally accessible to Arabic-speaking readers as it is to German- or English-speaking audiences. Yet, the index alternates between accurate translations and providing loose interpretations. While it serves to guide readers and encourage engagement with translation, it is intentionally non-exhaustive, as suggested in the pentalingual reading cues at the beginning of the book (Xoşewîst 2020, 2–3). In a comparable vein, Walkowitz (2020) writes of the typographic appearance in Ali Smith's novel *How to be both* (2014): '[t]he book makes us into collaborators: activators as well as receivers of language' (111). The same applies to this poetry collection, extending beyond typography. As Kristian Kühn (2020) observes in his review, the deliberate omission of certain words leaves key semantic intersections open to interpretation, encouraging readers to engage with themes of displacement, suffering, racism, and racial profiling as part of a complex puzzle. For instance, in the poem displayed above, the word *voice* is absent from the glossary, despite its significance as arguably the most crucial message of the poem, which reads as a manifesto on the role of poetry as a means of resistance and freedom. Fittingly, the poem concludes with a poignant declaration: 'dennoch kämpfe ich with meiner voice' [yet I fight with my voice] (Xoşewîst 2020, 18).

The distinctive post-German quality of this poetry collection, and of the poem 'frei.eit' in particular, does not simply reside in the juxtaposition of German, Kurdish, Arabic, and

English. To endorse such a claim would be to subscribe to the narrative of the monolingual paradigm, which perceives multilingualism as nothing more than a multiplication of languages (Yildiz 2012, 14). Rather, the presence of different languages and scripts lends itself to being read as a generative space that resists fixed hierarchies and stable equivalences. On the one hand, language difference is emphasised through various textual devices such as different scripts or the multilingual glossary. These elements reproduce the impression of a tangible border on the written page – between different alphabets, between a word in one language and its presumed equivalents in others. In a way, this can be seen as a further development of the dramatisation of language difference in Oliver’s ‘dorfidylle heimattduft’, where the alternation between italics and roman type marks the contrast between Standard High German and the Alemannic dialect. On the other hand, beyond the realm of print, linguistic differences may not be as noticeable or striking to the reader. Readers are afforded the alternative to experience the poem aurally, recited by the poet, through the scanning of a QR code or by visiting the publisher’s website. This exographic feature relativises linguistic boundaries, while simultaneously redefining both the scripts and the glossary as embodiments of alterity. Importantly, this representation of otherness is not static or singular, but rather is bound to the dynamic interplay between the familiar and the unfamiliar, which varies from reader to reader, from listener to listener. By staging linguistic alterity as a site of negotiation rather than a fixed point of difference, Xoşewîst’s poetry epitomises the epistemological shift central to the post-German perspective: an ongoing reimagining captured in the closing line of the opening poem from *Leipzig* ^{لَیْپْزِیْگ}, ‘möğlşkei-en’ [possibilities]: ‘chanting for eine möglichkeit’ (Xoşewîst 2020, 4).

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