

2021

“Tea, with Roti and Butter, Mister?” An Examination of a Single Phrase in a Sentence from Finnegans Wake

Sudarshan Ramani

University at Albany, State University of New York, sramani@albany.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/liljournal>



Part of the [Language Interpretation and Translation Commons](#), and the [Translation Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ramani, Sudarshan (2021) “Tea, with Roti and Butter, Mister?” An Examination of a Single Phrase in a Sentence from Finnegans Wake,” *Living in Languages: Vol. 1* , Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/liljournal/vol1/iss1/6>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Archive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Living in Languages* by an authorized editor of Scholars Archive.

Please see [Terms of Use](#). For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@albany.edu.

“Tea, with Roti and Butter, Mister?”

An Examination of a Single Phrase in a Sentence from *Finnegans Wake*

SUDARSHAN RAMANI

Finnegans Wake is James Joyce’s final work. Written in a highly idiosyncratic English, the *Wake* is peppered with multilingual puns, allusions, references, many of them drawn from other languages. The nature of the linguistic achievement of the *Wake* is such that it has achieved literary fame as a work of unsurpassed difficulty, an artistic and aesthetic stunt far in advance of most literary experimentations of the last century. There’s a cottage industry of scholarly works dedicated to decoding and deciphering the novel, and this essay seeks to make a tiny contribution to that pile. Drawing on the insights of Atherton, Campbell, Russell, and Hayman, among others, this paper focuses on the “how?” of *Finnegans Wake* rather than the “what?”. By telescoping a single phrase from a single sentence of the novel, one can draw insight into the many ways in which Joyce has broken down traditional hierarchies of translation and reading.

The topic of my paper concerns a part of a single sentence, to put under the microscope a single six-word phrase in a novel that runs 600 pages in most standard editions. It’s a sentence in Hindi but transcribed and transliterated in English. As a reader, I have long held an interest in the “how” of this sentence. In what circumstances, and in what manner was James Joyce able to acquire enough of a grasp of Hindi to write this phrase? The deliberate active choice of inclusion, on the part of the author, of this non-Western and non-European phrase, as part of his portmanteau-laden and pun-reliant literary language, seemed unusual to me as a multilingual reader from India, knowing Hindi and English well enough to recognize this allusion instinctively. Investigating some of the potential means by which Joyce derived the source for this allusion had led me to formulate that Joyce was attempting to challenge the largely Western audience that would first receive *Finnegans Wake*. This paper is an exploration of a single Hindi phrase in *Finnegans Wake*. This Hindi sentence is only significant for this paper on account of its commonplace conversational nature, and its accessibility to me as a reader. It is not by any means the sole or only major quotation of Indian texts, since Joyce, near the end of *Finnegans Wake*, also quotes Sanskrit phrases from the *Upanishads*, much of it drawn from works he read in translation and commentaries by Theosophists such as Blavatsky (Atherton 228). This is merely an exploration of a single point of contact rather than engaging with all the influences and ideas from India that Joyce drew on for *Finnegans Wake*.

As far as common consensus goes, the plot of *Finnegans Wake* is the story of a man identified as HCE and his wife, ALP, and their children (two sons, a daughter) who live in the Chapelizod area of Dublin around the turn of the 20th Century. In book 1, chapter 3, Joyce describes a street scene in Dublin in this fashion:

Any dog's life you list you may still hear them at it, like sixes and seventies as
eversure as Halley's comet, ulemamen, sobranjewomen, storthingboys and dumagirls,
as they pass its bleak and bronze portal of your Casaconcordia: Huru more Nee,
minny frickans? Hwoorledes har Dee det? Losdoor onleft mladies, cue.
Millicentotrigintadue scudi. Tippetty, kyrie, tippetty. Cha kai rotty kai makkar, sahib?
Despenseme Usted, senhor, en son succo, sabez. O thaw bron orm, A'Cothraige,
thinkinthou gaily? Lick-Pa-flai-hai-pa-Pa-li-si-lang-lang. Epi alo, ecou. Batiste, tu-
vavnr dans Lptit boing going. Ismeme de bumbac e meias de portocallie. 0.0. Os

pipos mios es demasiada guarso por O piccolo pocchino. Wee fee? Ung duro.
Kocshis, szabad? Mercy, and you? Gomagh, thak. (Joyce 54; emphasis added)

This paragraph starts out in English with references such as “Halley’s comet,” which is colloquial and widely understood. Right after “Halley’s comet” though there is a comma and what follows is a series of phrases, which for a strictly English reading audience become increasingly incomprehensible and unrecognizable. They are transliterated in the Latin alphabet, so they are essentially legible, but the flood of words is immensely strange and hard to parse. A hypothetical reader who can recognize every phrase in the above paragraph would have to be someone who has traveled widely or otherwise has interacted with people across a major cross-section of the planet. A short list of the languages transliterated above are – Bulgarian, Russian, Norwegian, Dutch, Spanish, Turkish, Chinese, Hindi, Italian, French. The innate presumption of *Finnegans Wake* is that the majority of its readers, original and afterwards, would find it untranslatable and illegible and that the hypothetical reader it’s written for is likely one to be generated in response to the challenges posed by the *Wake*.

As a reader from India raised in a multilingual household, I grew up knowing English, Hindi, Tamil. So, I could recognize one of the phrases in this passage: “Cha kai rotty kai makkar, sahib?” This can be translated into roughly, “Tea with Roti or Butter, Mister?” Knowing the Hindi phrase and its usage made me recognize this as an utterance by an Indian waiter in a Dublin city-street in the early 20th Century. My response as a reader to this scene was curiosity and recognition. Recognizing the fragment with surprise and wonder that somehow a canonical modernist experimental work has a small piece that I can recognize and claim for myself as a reader, as well as curiosity as to how exactly did Joyce create it and insert it into the book. It’s a sentence in Hindi transcribed in the English alphabet but still recognizable to any speaker. Not because this is a famous catchphrase or quotation from a work of literature, but rather it’s a quotidian phrase of the kind you come across at any restaurant or roadside eatery in India. In the overall scheme of the book my excerpt above and the phrase I have isolated is not a significant event in terms of story or plot. From a narratological perspective, this scene above would qualify as part of the cultural code of the text as defined by Roland Barthes in *S/Z* (Barthes 16-17). But my reading explores it as a *seme* which Barthes noted is a code directed towards a reading that indicates “instability, dispersion, and flickers of meaning” (Barthes 17). Yet, only a multilingual speaker of Hindi and English would be able to identify this as a cultural code, i.e., know at once what knowledge from the world is being referred to with the mention of this one line in Hindi.

It’s useful now to turn to the documentation about the composition of *Finnegans Wake*. From an early age, James Joyce had an ear for languages and was fluent in several tongues including Latin, French, Italian and German. When a young Joyce wished to express his admiration to his hero Henrik Ibsen, he wrote a fan letter to him, in Norwegian which he picked up just for the letter (Atherton 154). His knowledge of multiple languages had shaped the language in his earlier fiction, but *Finnegans Wake* achieves a zenith in being composed entirely and exclusively in a language of allusions and puns. This is Joyce’s final novel, a book that he labored on for 17 years. Much of that labor went towards the construction of the highly idiosyncratic version of English in which it is composed. The nature of the puns of *Finnegans Wake* has provoked a good deal of commentary and discussion, since even a simple sentence can have complex multiple meanings.

A good example was identified by Jacques Derrida, who was fascinated by the multilingual pun in the phrase “He war” which he discusses in “Two Words for Joyce.” “He war” is a phrase of multiple meanings in at least three different languages. It can mean, at a

minimum, “he fights war” in rough un-conjugated English (Derrida 22). However, it also alludes simultaneously to the German verb “war”, which means “was;” so, it means in English “He wages war” and in German, “He was” (ibid). There’s also a third meaning when one considers that the name of the Judeo-Christian God in Hebrew when spoken out loud is Yah-Weh a phrase that originally meant “I am that I am” and Yah-Weh assonantly rhymes with “He war” (ibid). So, the two-word sentence “He war” means “He was” in German, “He Waged War” in English, while also referring to “I am that I am” in Hebrew, all at the same time (Derrida 22). This is but a small demonstration of the complexity of the language of the *Wake*. Joyce’s own brother, Stanislas, described *Finnegans Wake* as “a crossword puzzler’s Bible,” that the act of reading the *Wake* is often a jotting down of words to trace out and solve the various layers of meanings and allusions that it contains (Atherton 20).

It is widely documented that Joyce in preparing *Finnegans Wake* consulted many books in different languages as sources—as many as 40, as Derrida noted with delight (Derrida 22). Research has shown that while Joyce had a great ear for languages, he did not by himself speak or read many of the languages he used in the *Wake*; nor did he read all the books he alluded to and made use of in the *Wake*, though he did read and know a considerable amount of these books. As noted by James Atherton, during the writing of *Wake* Joyce had assembled “runabout men” to do what might be considered field work (Atherton 22). The “runabout men,” a group of admirers, friends, and researchers, were tasked with finding references in libraries, compiling lists of foreign words, summarizing books, drawing from a range of dictionaries with cross-references (ibid). They drew from languages across the world, extending beyond the European language families with which Joyce was broadly familiar.

Which is to say that a significant amount of the language used to compose *Finnegans Wake* is second-hand knowledge and information, rather than first-hand contact and appreciation. For instance, to make some Chinese-to-English puns, Joyce contacted a Chinese student in Paris and got information from him, which he then used in *Wake* (Atherton 227). Other times, they drew from reference works. As noted by Karl Reisman, Joyce made use of words from Swahili and Hausa, which he derived, via his research team, from a dictionary published in 1924 by F. W. Taylor (Reisman 29). Joyce’s second-hand use of these references was so skillful and precise that a doctor in Nigeria was able to spot the references in Swahili and translate them (29-30). Such examples of words borrowed from personal scourgings and one-on-one encounters with international passersby explains in part “how” Joyce came to include phrases such as the Hindi phrase “Cha kai rotti kai makkar, sahib?”. He derived second-hand access to cultural and semantic codes that he did not fully know, through engagement with the colonial immigrant class of the European metropole. The language of *Finnegans Wake* is a result of Joyce’s choice to incorporate their presence into the language of the novel. In other aspects, Joyce’s borrowings from Non-Western words and ideas were of a more conventional nature. Joyce drew influences and ideas from a range of texts such as the *Koran*, the *Upanishads*, and other Eastern influences; but in most cases, these works were engaged with in translated forms and through commentaries via Western writers rather than direct personal contact and research (Atherton 223-228). References of the latter kind do not represent the viewpoints of the colonial world quite like the second-hand derivations from the Chinese student.

Let us return to the Hindi phrase: “Cha kai rotti kai makkar, sahib?”. I can translate this roughly as “Tea, rotti, and butter, mister?” or “Tea, or roti, and with butter, mister?” It’s a statement made by a waiter at a restaurant. Now it’s important to stress that as a Hindi

speaker, I can state that Joyce's transcription of Hindi is not correct grammatically. The correct grammatical sentence, at least in the Bombay dialect would be closer to: "Chai kai saath roti aur makan, baisaab?". Joyce presented the sentence in a pidgin-like manner without connecting prepositions and articles. It's possible that Joyce had in mind bread toast; and it's possible that Joyce simply substituted roti, which is an Indian flatbread, with bread, based on a quick glance at a dictionary or some source text he perused unaware of the actual context. As such one can argue that Joyce made an error in translation from English to Hindi. As a reader, I can only guess that Joyce's intentions were simply an Indian waiter telling a customer, "Tea, bread toast, with a side of butter, mister?"

The language of *Finnegans Wake*, and the manner of its composition and production, indicates that Joyce wrote for a wide readership, a geographically displaced community of readers across the world, made possible by the spread of the English language via imperialism and commercial trade. The case of the Swahili reader in Nigeria shows that, in some way and form, Joyce imagined him among his audience without knowing Swahili himself. One can read this as a gesture of inclusion, and the fact that a native speaker outside Europe can personally decipher aspects of *Finnegans Wake*, borne out by this anecdote, provides an entry into the text for myself, as a reader from India, knowing Hindi and English. Through this investigation of a single phrase, in a single sentence of the *Wake*, one can now understand an aspect of what the author's brother characterized as a "crossword puzzler's Bible." By including these untranslated chunks, Joyce enlarged the sense of readership for which the *Wake* was created.

Despite its daunting avant-garde difficulty as a work of narrative, Joyce leveled the community of readers around *Finnegans Wake* to create an array of entry points. A writer from a western background comes to *Finnegans Wake* tracking down dictionaries from English-Swahili or English-Hindi alternatively; whereas speakers of those languages can pick those references casually. The untranslatable in *Finnegans Wake* endures any attempts to decode or locate it, offering a paradoxical accessibility. While very much an authored work, Joyce sought to include in his creative vision, aspects of life, culture, and history outside himself, through collaboration with his researchers, conversations with international students. As Joyce remarked:

"It is not I who am writing this crazy book. It is you, and you, and you, and that man over there and that girl at the next table." (qtd. in Atherton 59).

Works Cited

Atherton, James S. *The Books at the Wake: A Study of Literary Allusions in James Joyce's Finnegans Wake*. The Viking Press, 1960.

Barthes, Roland, Richard Miller, and Richard Howard. *S/Z*. Hill and Wang, 1974.

Boldrini, Lucia. *In Dante's Wake. the Dantean Poetics of "Finnegans Wake"*, University of Leicester 1996. *ProQuest*, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/301461223>.

Campbell, Joseph and Robinson, Henry Morton. *A Skeleton Key to Finnegans Wake*. New York Viking Press, 1972.

Derrida, Jacques. “Two Words for Joyce.” *Derrida and Joyce: Texts and Contexts*. State University of New York Press, 2013.

Hayman, David. *A First-Draft Version of Finnegans Wake*. University of Texas Press, 1963.

Joyce, James. *Finnegans Wake*. Faber and Faber, 1975.

Reisman, Karl. "Darktongues: Fulfulde and Hausa in *Finnegans Wake*." *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 31 no. 2, 2008, p. 79-103. muse.jhu.edu/article/233972.

Mathews, Charlene. *Debased, De-Oedipalized, Deconstructed: "Finnegans Wake" and the Apotheosis of the Postmodern Text*. Case Western Reserve University, 1994. *ProQuest*, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/304096296>.