

## **A Report on the European Society for the Study of English (ESSE) Conference, Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic, August 29<sup>th</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> September, 2018**

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The 14th conference of the European Society for the Study of English (ESSE) was held from 29th August to 2nd September 2018 at Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic. The ESSE conference takes place every two years and has been held in various different locations around Europe since the first event in Norwich, UK, in 1991. Masaryk University faculty buildings are centred around the downtown area of Brno city. Only two hours from Vienna, Brno is in the heart of Europe and its city history provided an ideal location to contemplate the past, present, and future of English studies. For teachers and researchers based in Japan, this conference provides opportunities to connect with colleagues internationally while also gaining an understanding of the broad range of English studies in Europe's diverse countries. A number of roundtable discussions helped to approach topics in depth, looking at such topics as cross-border dynamics, rising populism in Europe, and the changing world of the news media. In this conference report, I will attempt to describe some of the highlights of this culturally and educationally enriching event.

The ESSE conference brings together academics from an impressively broad range of disciplines, from the humanities, translation studies and linguistics. The conference is organized using sub-themes, and through these, sessions are built and planned. Depending on interest and availability, the conference themes can be one session (two hours) or up to three (three time-slots, totaling six hours). A brief perusal of the conference program reveals some of the primary concerns and popular topics of the conference. It also sets the scene for the post-session discussions which were both lively and varied. My interest this time was on the research and discussions explicitly related to contemporary novels, as I am teaching Kazuo Ishiguro to an undergraduate class this autumn semester. Ishiguro has, of course, received increased attention in Japan since winning the 2017 Nobel Prize in Literature, but his impact in other languages and cultures outside the UK and Japan were unknown to me. It was interesting and professionally rewarding, therefore, to be able to attend some sessions on Ishiguro and to consider his work in an international context as a result of participating in this event. In the next section, I briefly describe the plenary talks, selected literature-based talks, and selected language-based talks.

## **Plenary talks**

Plenary presentations at the ESSE conference were varied and appealed to the range of interests amongst the delegates. Anne Fogarty from University College, Dublin talked about how James Joyce and the stylistic experimentation he explored continues to influence contemporary writers in Ireland. Marta Mateo from the University of Oviedo, Spain, talked about English literature in musical translation, referring to opera, musicals and film productions of different kinds. Her approach was particularly suited to a multi-lingual audience whose interests are broad. Josef Schmied from Chemnitz University of Technology, Germany, approached the topic of academic writing with a talk on functional linguistic approaches to abstracts, theses and articles. He used the work of Halliday, Swales and Hyland, familiar to applied linguists and those who are working with textual analysis. Finally, Alfred Thomas from the University of Illinois, Chicago, gave a plenary entitled “Shakespeare’s Bohemia: Religious toleration in an age of confessional polarization.” In the first part of this enlightening talk, we learned of the importance of the context and meaning of “terror” – using examples from Shakespeare’s London. By illustrating the fate of Guido Fawkes and the other gunpowder plotters, the meaning of the word “terror” during Shakespeare’s time could be better understood. This talk weaved together historical details relevant to what was Bohemia and is now the Czech Republic, along with literary readings. This plenary was very well received by the ESSE audience.

## **Selected literature-based talks**

As my particular interest at this conference was Kazuo Ishiguro, I begin with some notes from several related presentations I attended. My particular course is a teaching license seminar reading *Never Let Me Go* (NLMG), and I was interested to find that the novel is widely read in Europe and in the UK. Typically a high school text, NLMG is challenging in English and for second language learners presents particular difficulties. In a session on the topic of ageing in speculative science fiction, there were two Ishiguro talks. The first, focusing on the post-human, was entitled “Posthuman cloned bodies in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*” by Pelin Kumbet from Turkey. Kumbet’s talk was a summary of her PhD research using the topic of the posthuman/transhuman, pointing out the similarities and differences between NLMG and other related texts. In Ishiguro’s text, for example, the long life of humans can only be made possible by the shortened lives of the posthuman protagonists. These manufactured human clones do not get to enjoy any of the benefits of the scientific discoveries of the age, and this is in sharp contrast to the beliefs that readers may have in feeling optimistic about scientific discovery. In countries where a black market in

transplanted organs is already becoming a significant social burden, the topic has particular and immediate meaning. The discussion from participants at the end of the NLMG session offered additional perspectives which I had not considered, including those of the ethical dilemmas faced in real medical situations today, including those related to organ donation and the black market related to organ transplantation, but also difficult decisions faced by parents who have one child with leukaemia (and may be able to save that child if they have another, using the bone marrow to save the sick child). While such discussion deviate from Ishiguro's original story and message, the post-session conversations mirrored those concerns which readers around the world have found so engaging. Whether related to speculative science-fiction, or real science and current fears, the novel has a peculiar ability to capture the reader's imagination. In a second talk in the same session, Sarah Falcus and Maricel Oro Piqueras discussed fantasy, memory and loss in *The Buried Giant*, Ishiguro's 2015 novel. The themes of historical and individual memory were discussed in relation to the topic and the conference overall, and Ishiguro's novels appear to be uniquely placed between fantasy and real-world concerns to enable inclusion in theme-based sessions such as this one on ageing.

Other literature-based talks explored popular topics such as the works of Dickens, Shakespeare, and a variety of different writers. As to be expected, approaches from the field of corpora studies have been hugely influential and researchers can now use powerful online tools to analyze language in fiction with new data and methods emerging constantly. Sessions on Dickens looked at keywords, lexical chunks, and analysis of individual lexical items in depth, employing methods from a variety of fields. The contrast between traditional literary criticism and the empirical methods of using fiction as corpora are becoming blurred. Scientific methods have become more mainstream, and new researchers are doing the work of literary linguists as they pore over old texts in new ways.

As well as classic literature, there were many sessions on contemporary fiction and media also. Neil Gaiman, A.S. Byatt, and Terry Pratchett were all topics explored in one session dealing with myth and fairy tale. Margaret Atwood and Margaret Mitchell were brought together in a similar session. In the field of film and media studies, several presentations on the Netflix series "Black Mirror" showed the impact of such topics. For those teaching and using literature of such types with learners in Japan, the ESSE conference brings together new methods in analysis.

### **Selected language-based talks**

Specialist language-based seminars were held on environmental issues as they arise in the

media, how Twitter is changing opinions on a range of topics including protest and politics, and pragmatic considerations such as humour and aggression in online language use. The range of interests and research skills of these academics was also very impressive. EMI and CLIL were frequently mentioned in summary, assuming the knowledge and understanding of the audience. In one session I attended, art history, linguistics, and architecture were brought together in an “international” themed topic. Popular approaches were stance and engagement analysis from discourse studies, as well as applications of theories from World Englishes. There was a special session on language and crime, using stylistics and forensic linguistic methodology.

In keeping with the cognitive turn and a use of corpora for linguistic investigation, many sub-themes made use of digital methods to explore their topics. One example was the session entitled “Lexis in Contrast: Empirical Approaches” convened by several Czech-based researchers. Translation, cross-linguistic code-switching, and lexical borrowing were all investigated in ten separate sessions. Translations of different linguistic artefacts such as travel documents and news media were of interest here, using methods from comparative discourse analysis using parallel texts. L2 academic speech and writing was explored by a number of presenters from Finland and Sweden. In another session, L2 needs for those with special educational needs was the focus. Cognitive-linguistic approaches to grammar, teaching, and second language acquisition studies were discussed in another session, also with ten separate presentations. While it may have been possible to track the connections between all talks, and the conveners attempted to continue conversations as much as possible, the diversity across session topics sometimes made this a difficult challenge.

### **Social program**

The conference events spanned four days and included a number of activities for conference attendees. The main conference venue was itself a film theatre, and various types of theatre events were offered as part of the post-conference evening activities. The social program and opportunities to meet other delegates was a particular strength of this conference. Each day had ample coffee breaks, each with generous food provided, which drew the participants together for discussions in between sessions. Many participants were from areas outside Europe, including North America and Asia.

While there were some veteran ESSE delegates at the conference, there were also a number of first-time presenters. It was sometimes the case that the groups of presenters knew each other well and had strong academic ties going back many years. This was to the benefit of the audience in the sense that the conference topics had been carefully planned.

As part of the conference, the student organizers had planned some additional social events for participants to enjoy. Along with a convention dinner and trips to do sightseeing in the city of Brno, there were theatre events. Being in the Czech Republic for this conference was the perfect time to learn about Czech theatre. I attended the excellent “Physical Poetry” performance of Petr Vasa, which provided suitably lively and multi-lingual entertainment. His invented language “translatin” was a fitting metaphor for the conference itself, which appealed to members from all corners of Europe. At this particular time in Europe’s history, it is essential for us all to remember the connections we still have, despite many differences.

### **Concluding thoughts**

Presenting at or attending the ESSE conference helps to remind us of Europe’s diversity, and also what is shared by the nations which make up the European area. There is much to see and learn about life in Europe, for those who are locals, and those who have migrated to call Europe their home. At this conference, sessions on migration, travel, and the diaspora represented the energy and ideas of those people. This conference would be an ideal place from which to initiate international collaborations with colleagues in European universities. The atmosphere was friendly and welcoming, even for a first-time ESSE participant. At the time of the next conference, in 2020, the issues such as Brexit will have further influenced Europe’s changing political and educational landscape. While the future in Europe is uncertain, the links between languages and culture continue to thrive in the English studies community through events such as the ESSE conference. The next conference will be held in Lyon, France, in 2020.