

*Language and Bilingualism in Antigone Kefala's Alexia (1995)  
and The Island (2002)*

**Catalina Ribas Segura**

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**Abstract:** Migrants modify the spaces around them: not only by leaving one territory but also by occupying another one. In fact, their physical appearance, their behaviour, their clothing, their preferences and/or their language may be factors used both by locals to pinpoint them and by immigrants themselves as identity markers. Greek-Australian Antigone Kefala explores the significance and uses of language in her tale *Alexia: A Tale for Advanced Children* (1995) and in her novella *The Island* (2002). In these texts, Alexia and Melina –the main characters, respectively- use language as a central tool in their struggle to make sense of the world they live in. Being migrants and bilingual, Alexia and Melina have a relation with language that is not understood by many, mainly locals. Kefala uses language as a marker of difference, but, as shown by Jane Warren (1999), this difference can also be a sign of ethnic pride. Consequently, this article not only explores the relation between language and the main characters in *Alexia* and in *The Island* but it also introduces other strategies migrants may use to approach languages. The questions to be answered are the following: “What is the relation of migrant characters with their mother tongue? And with the new language, culture, territory and space?” and “Are there alternative strategies?” The expected conclusions are that language can be understood as the ‘enemy’ and ‘friend’ (Kefala 1995: 104) which can both empower and disempower migrants, but which relates them to the space and people around them. Given the fact that language is a live entity, the strategies may be numerous and may vary in time.

**Keywords:** language, bilingualism, “wogspeak”, hybridity, Greek-Australian literature, Antigone Kefala.

Words have wings  
They're always on the move  
They make it their business  
To travel back and forth  
Between sexes  
Between races  
Words are out of business

Without these spaces  
They steal upon the stricken soul  
And rob her of her rage  
By earning it on their shoulders  
And laying it on the page.

*Words.* Maria Preethi Srinivasan (2012)

Maria Preethi Srinivasan dedicates this poem to the memory of Indigenous Australian writer and academic Dr Ruby Langford Ginibi and explains that, “though a writer may look for words, in reality it is the words which find the writer and give him/her that much needed feeling of liberation that comes through self-expression” (58). Words help people verbalise their feelings, their understanding of the world and their interaction with others. This article explores the relation of bilingual or multilingual speakers with words and languages. In order to reach this goal, the following pages introduce the relation between language and bilingualism and language and hybridity. Then, they present Greek-Australian writer Antigone Kefala and analyse the use of language in her works *Alexia: A Tale for Advanced Children* (1995) and *The Island* (2002).

### **Language and bilingualism**

The benefits of bilingualism and multilingualism in all stages of life have been proved by many researchers. Marian and Shook (2012) recall that the advantages of bilingualism not only affect childhood, as bilingual children adjust better to environmental changes, but also to adults, whose brains develop a better cognitive control. What's more, Marian and Shook claim that elderly people benefit from speaking more than one language because those who show symptoms of developing Alzheimer's disease do so five years later than monolingual elders and, even when the brains of bilinguals are more damaged, the patients perform better than monolingual ones (7-8). Consequently, some of the advantages of bilingualism, Marian and Shook summarize, are related to “better attention and task-switching capacities than the monolingual brain” (1) as well as “improved metalinguistic awareness”, “better memory, visual-spatial skills, and even creativity”(8).

In spite of all these positive effects, some consider bilingualism and linguistic diversity a menace and demand that bilinguals use only the official language of the country. This demand is especially targeted at immigrants who use different languages as they are considered outsiders and, consequently, potential enemies. Sociologist Madan Sarup (1996) explains that enemies are “associated with struggle” (10), while friends are related to cooperation. Strangers, on the other hand, are placed in an in-between position as they are “neither friend nor enemy” (10), but certainly “not ‘one of them’” (7). Migrants are persons who have “crossed the border”, who seek

a place to make ‘a new beginning’, to start again, to make a better life. The newly arrived have to learn the new language and culture. They have to cope not only with the pain of separation but often also with the resentments of a hostile population. (Sarup 1)

If identity is “the story we tell of ourselves and which is also the story that others tell of us” (Sarup 3), the language/s people use not only determine their way of relating to others, but also the form of understanding and approaching the world. Thus, speaking a language is an intimate process, as Maria Preethi Srinivasan implied in her poem. As Zhengdao Ye (2007) also explains:

The sounds of our mother tongue are like no other sounds. They are the first sounds coming from within ourselves, giving tangible forms to our thoughts and feelings, which put us in touch with the outside world and with the people around us. They are the sounds that are most dear to us. Of all the sounds that we can hear, they are the most meaningful to us. They are in fact internal to ourselves. (66)

Being a migrant implies facing many challenges, one of which can be a limited knowledge of the language of the country or of the nuances in meaning of some words and expressions. As Françoise Král defends in *Critical Identities in Contemporary Anglophone Diasporic Literature* (2009), the reasons may relate to the

asymmetry of the bilingual subject [which] is the reflection of a more general asymmetry linked to the power struggle of the two countries whose languages are spoken by the diasporic subject (Mignolo, 2000) [as well as to the fact that] the diasporic subject, for personal or historical reasons, assigns each language to a specific task for the simple reason that he cannot relate to the two languages in the same way. (136)

Migrants also need to translate their social values into the host culture, a process which Král calls “transvalence”. In her opinion, this course of action “requires that one not only acts the way one used to in one’s home culture but succeeds in translating one’s social status in accordance with the process of validation of the host culture” (115-6). This process implies the “translation” of cultural capital, a concept coined by Ghassan Hage (1998) following Pierre Bourdieu (1986). Cultural capital not only implies mastering a language but it “represents the sum of valued knowledge, styles, social and physical (bodily) characteristics and practical behavioural dispositions within a given field” (Hage 53). This capital is not cumulative, each characteristic has a different fluctuating value and migrants will never be able to obtain the total capital. In fact, by trying to master as much cultural capital as possible, migrants emphasise their position as outsiders who do not belong because they were not born with it.

Language is one of these values. As Françoise Král explains, bilingual subjects can have a different relation towards the languages spoken. Král comments that for those who live in a country where their mother tongue is not the official language nor the most used, the relation towards the second language can be similar to that of a father or a step-mother. According to Král’s terminology, a mother tongue is the language of affect, a father tongue is the language of domination and cognitive development and a step-mother tongue is more distant and less threatening than a father tongue (131-42).

The relation between migration and translation is also studied by Fiona Allon (2002). She argues that “Migration is directly and inevitably a process of cross-cultural translation, a passage of movement between different languages, cultures and worlds” (107). However, this translation not only is a change of words with the same meaning,

but also “a dynamic articulation of in-betweenness” (Allon 107). The nuances of words may not be grasped by the speakers, either children or adults, and they may make the speaker feel out of place and, sometimes, an observer rather than a participant. Occasionally, as Irene Ulman (2007) indicates, there can be moments of uncertainty when using a colloquial expression in the language which is not one’s mother tongue because the speaker may not sound ‘authentic’. Ullman affirms her familiarity with the following situation:

using a colloquial phrase which you didn’t grow up with and which doesn’t really belong to you because you don’t come from the culture that produced it. Questions rush through your mind. Is it an authentic thing to say? Will you look and sound authentic? You are not sure you can pull it off, you want to try it on for size, and there’s a moment of uncertainty. (51)

This example emphasises Král’s argument that “the language used by the immigrant is never used in the exact same way as his [or her] mother tongue” (157): not only because the migrant has to learn the language, but also because using specific expressions may highlight the foreignness of the speaker. Unfortunately, migrants’ speech is considered to be more authentic if the language produced is disordered and grammatically incorrect because this implies that the migrant has not assimilated (Gunew 1986 and 1990) and is still otherised. In fact, no matter how hard the migrant tries to earn this characteristic of cultural capital, she/he will always be perceived as an outsider because that person was not born with such capital and is trying to acquire its traits.

In Australia, migrants of southern-European origin developed a way of talking known as ‘ethnic Australian English’. Jane Warren (1999) argues that it is spoken by first-generation migrants, who tend to employ their native language with members of their communities. Logically, their proficiency in English depends on different factors, such as their knowledge of English before their arrival in Australia or their contact with native speakers of English. On the other hand, 1.5-generation migrants, that is, those who were born in one country but schooled in Australia, and second-generation migrants, or those who were born in Australia of at least one migrant parent, are proficient in English, because they learn this language at school, and may also learn their parents’ language/s at home. During adolescence, children’s relationship with their parents’ culture usually varies and young adults tend to have three attitudes. First, they can stop speaking the language of their parents and reject their culture, that is, total absorption into English. Second, they can choose to maintain the family’s culture and immerse in it, that is, total engagement with the parents’ culture. Third, they can manage to reconcile both cultures. Their proficiency in English allows 1.5 and second-generation migrants to “shape and transform the English language to create a new linguistic and social space of its own” (Warren 87). Consequently, they can use the strategy of changing accents and speech patterns depending on the situation. That is to say, second and 1.5-generation speakers can use either ‘standard Australian English’ or ‘ethnic Australian English’ if they want to differentiate themselves from their parents or the host culture. This strategy is called ‘wogspeak’.

Thus, depending on the circumstances, those 1.5 and second-generation migrants can choose to speak English with either accent and mark their close or distant relationship with English and what it represents. Being able to understand and relate in two cultures implies being able to subvert the languages and play with them, to create new linguistic

strategies and variations. Regarding their role as translators for their parents and elders, speaking English “can lead [these children to develop] an ability to act as bridges between parents and the wider society, or to a deep understanding of the position of the outsider” (Bottomley 133). Therefore, 1.5 and second-generation migrants may see and understand language as a tool of domination. Accordingly, speaking English can be perceived as a dominant cultural capital needed to succeed in the host country.

### **Language and hybridity**

The concepts of in-betweenness and hybridity were developed by Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* (1994). Bhabha explains that there exists a system of binary forces which have shaped the contemporary world: certain cohesive groups dominate or have dominated others, such as the coloniser over the colonised, white over black and man over woman. These groups express such dominance through a discourse supported by historical events and facts. Postcolonial Studies, among other disciplines, aim to explore the identities of these groups and to determine the process of identity construction. Nevertheless, Bhabha disagrees with the idea of fixed mutually-exclusive binary identities, and suggests the concept of the fluidity of identities. As a consequence, there are not just two identities, but a myriad of them which are placed in between these two opposites. As Bhabha states in the introduction to *The Location of Culture* (1994),

These “in-between” spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood –singular or communal- that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sides of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of denying the idea of society itself. (1-2)

That is to say, the two opposites share some commonalities which Bhabha names a “Third Space” because it is not just one or the other, but an interstice where, for example, “Colonizer and Colonized negotiate their cultural difference and create a culture that is a hybrid” (Ramos 3). The culture in this “Third Space” is a hybrid of the other two because it does not destroy any of them.

Post-World War II migrants have certainly modified Australian society to the extent that in the 2011 census 46% of the population was first- or second-generation migrant. Critic Sneja Gunew (1990) explains that “by definition, to be a *new* Australian was to be a boundary crosser, a transgressor, in the eyes of those who like to think that they had already been t/here” (111). Consequently, for a significant number of Australians, English may not be their mother tongue. Therefore, the high linguistic variety existent in Australia modifies the way English is spoken: not only with “broken English” and “ethnic English”, but also with vocabulary that is incorporated into Australian English.

Françoise Král (2009) indicates that language serves two purposes: integration, as it permits communication, and resistance, as “the immigrant affects the language and to a certain extent works on it when using it” (156). Speaking a language does not only imply using some words and expressions to convey a message, but also knowing the tone, the nuance in meaning of the words implied as well as understanding humour, sarcasm, silences and cultural references. As a result, the immigrant may have to translate a concept, express one that does not exist in the host culture, or learn new notions. Besides linguistic conversion, migrants also need to translate their social values

into the host culture in order to get social recognition. Král refers to Emmanuel Renault's idea of the three spheres of social recognition: that of one's family and friends, of one's workplace, and of the nation where one lives. With the aim of social recognition in mind, migrants may use different strategies to achieve it, one of which can be using linguistic varieties for one's purposes.

In the case of Greek migrants to Australia, speaking English can be a liberating experience as the language feels more distant and less embedded with cultural expectations on roles and patterns of behaviour. For many, speaking English represents a new beginning, a new chapter in their lives which they embrace in order to leave bad memories behind and/or to explore the opportunities Australia offers. On the other hand, English can also represent a barrier that limits a migrant's ability to communicate with those who do not speak their mother tongue and, consequently, makes this person dependant on other people's will and time to help and translate. This frequently is a source of frustration and disempowerment as adults are made to feel inadequate and many turn to children or grandchildren for help to do the activities they aim to. Some of the texts children translate include a wide spectrum of registers: from school notes, to visits to the doctor, or bureaucratic information. Community languages, then, are taught in Saturday classes at state schools so children learn to value the language of their parents and grandparents. However, because community languages are not taught during the regular academic timetable, these may be considered to have an academically inferior status to that of English (as Bottomley (1992) recalls, French, Latin and German are the traditional foreign languages studied at school). As a result, language can be perceived as an instrument of liberation or of domination.

The relation that migrants have with language and the host culture is often explored by Antigone Kefala in her texts. This paper aims to analyse two of her works in prose: *Alexia: A Tale for Advanced Children* (1995) and *The Island* (2002), along with investigating the characters' relationship with the new language, culture, territory and space and the strategies used to overcome linguistic and cultural difficulties. In order to fulfil these goals, the following pages present the writer, Antigone Kefala, then analyse the tale and the novella mentioned.

### **Antigone Kefala: multilingual migrant, monolingual writer**

Antigone Kefala was born in Braila (Romania) in 1935. Her parents were of Greek origin and, in 1949, after World War II, the family was forced to leave their home and go to Greece as refugees. At that time, Antigone Kefala spoke Romanian and French, but had forgotten the Greek her grandmother had taught her as a child. Once in Greece, she went to high school and had to learn the national language. In 1951 the family migrated to New Zealand, also as refugees. While in this third country, she learnt her fourth language, English, and graduated with a Masters of Arts degree from Victoria University in Wellington. In December 1959 she migrated to Sydney, Australia, where she has since lived.

Kefala is part of a generation who experienced the beginnings of the policy of multiculturalism in Australia. As a consequence of the attacks Australia suffered during World War II, the White Australia policy (1901-1975) began to be lessened. This

restrictive law did not welcome immigrants from countries other than the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland and the majority of the population of the country was white and of European ancestry. In fact, those who did not speak English as a mother tongue were otherised: Indigenous Australians were forced to learn English and children of the Stolen Generations were forbidden to speak their mother tongues. Also, those inhabitants of non-British ancestry did not enjoy the same rights as the majority and were effectively discriminated by legislation (1901 *Immigration Restriction Act*, the Dictation Test and the Certificate Exempting from Dictation Test, 1901 *Pacific Islanders Labourers Act*, 1902 *Franchise Act*, 1903 *Naturalisation Act*, 1908 *Old Age and Invalid Pensions Act*, 1914 *War Precautions Act*).

At the end of World War II, almost 100% of the population in Australia was white (Indigenous Australians were still not counted in the census) and 98% of British descent. After the attacks, the country's new motto became "Populate or Perish" and the number of inhabitants in Australia trebled in sixty years: in 1944 Australia had 7 million inhabitants and in 2011 the number of citizens surpassed 22 millions (ABS). The government established some programs to help migrants assimilate to the Australian ways, such as the Adult Migrant Education Program (1947) (later called the Adult Migrant English Program) and the 'Good Neighbour Movement' (1949). The 1958 *Migration Act* regulated the changes, effectively lessened the White Australian policy and allowed the arrival of thousands of migrants from many European countries (mainly between the 1950s and 1970s), Asian countries (especially after the mid-1970s), and African and Middle Eastern countries (largely after the 1990s).

Consequently, Kefala arrived in Australia during a period of time when the country welcomed certain migrants, but received others with hostility: as first-generation migrants were foreigners, they were often considered 'the other'. Similarly, many second-generation migrants felt discriminated against because, to a greater or lesser extent, they were influenced by the culture of the migrant parent/s. Despite the fact that Australia is one of the most multicultural and multilingual countries in the world where more than 200 languages are spoken, bilingualism and multilingualism are not enhanced and author Eva Sallis (2007) considers it "a linguistic Third World, a land in which languages are threats and too often stamped out and forgotten" (151). Thanks to the increase in population, new areas of academic disciplines appeared in the 1980s and 1990s, such as Greek-Australian or Asian Australian Studies.

According to *AusLit: The Australian Literature Resource*, Antigone Kefala taught English as a second language, worked in a library and served as an arts administrator with the Australian Council. Kefala read extracts from her work on ABC Radio National and gave numerous readings around Australia and abroad. She edited *Ethnic Arts Directory* (1978) and *Multiculturalism and the Arts* (1986) and has participated in many anthologies, such as *Re-Telling the Tale: Poetry and Prose by Greek-Australian Women Writers* (1994, edited by Helen Nickas and Konstandina Dounis) or *Mothers from the Edge: An Anthology* (2006, edited by Helen Nickas). Her main poetry publications consist of *The Alien* (1973), *Thirsty Weather* (1978), *European Notebook* (1988), *Absence: New and selected poems* (1992) and *Poems: A Selection* (2000). Kefala also published prose fiction, such as, *The First Journey* (1975), *The Island* (1984), *Alexia: A Tale of Two Cultures* (1984), *Summer Visit: Three Novellas* (2003) and *Sydney Journals* (2008). Kefala's love for language and detail was also explored in the edition of her published texts. Owl Publishing House issued a bilingual English-

Greek edition of *Alexia* under the title *Alexia: A Tale for Advanced Children* (1995) and a trilingual English-French-Greek version of *The Island* (2002).

Antigone Kefala writes in English because this is the only language she knew as an adult (Nickas 226). However, her style is influenced by the other cultures and languages she experienced and learnt. When she first submitted her works to publishers, some of their responses “hinted vaguely at the artificiality of [her] language, its exaggerated tone, an English with which they could not identify in linguistic or any other terms” (Nikro 153). Thus, her language changed and became more subdued or denser (Nickas 227). Kefala’s style is poetic even in the way she writes prose and she uses figures of speech. In *Alexia*, for example, she uses the literary figure of personification in the description of “the Instruments” (38-42). Kefala experiments with language and its boundaries, and the type of imagery, vocabulary and texture she uses are not quite English. For Kefala, language is an important issue, although her approach to this language “is not quite an English approach” (Nickas 227). The author explains that her language is “foreign to Australian “mainstream” readers” as well as to Greek readers (Nickas 228) as it has influences of the four languages she studied (Romanian, French, Greek and English). Besides, her writing style has been defined as modernist and Kefala, together with Dimitris Tsaloumas, is considered the main example of modernist writing in Greek-Australian literature. Kefala’s style is characterized by a quiet tone and a number of subtle implications and suggestions in the thoughts and dialogues of the characters. Kefala does not explore all the topics in depth but leaves them for the reader to develop and wonder about them. Kefala is a delicate writer who demands an active attitude from the reader in order to grasp the topics she suggests. The following sections analyse Kefala’s use of language in *Alexia* and in *The Island*.

### **The use of language in *Alexia***

*Alexia* is a fairy-tale for adults. Despite the fact that the main character is a child, the wittiness and irony of her comments denote that it is a “more mature narrator who guides our response to the story”, as Helen Nickas points out (Kefala 1995: 17). *Alexia*, her father, her mother and her elder brother Nicolas are “Refugees from the latest Great War”, who “had been forced to leave their Old Country” and move to “a large island in the South Pacific, south west of Pago Pago” (*Alexia*<sup>1</sup> 32). This island could be New Zealand, but this is not stated anywhere in the tale. Hers is a middle class family who have a passion for playing musical instruments and reading books. However, due to the War, the family could not save their library, nor the icons and chalices of *Alexia*’s grandmother, but only their musical instruments (two violins, two violas and two cellos). These are played by father and Nicolas and are considered part of the family. In order to make her point, *Alexia* describes the distinct personality of each instrument. In *Alexia*’s family, music is a language shared by all the members: either as players or as listeners.

In the new country, father, mother and Nicolas are only allowed to do manual labour, but *Alexia* can go to school. The different sounds, noises and language in the new country cause uneasiness in each member. In the Old Country, father and Nicolas used to rely on music to express their feelings and to relate with others. In the New Country, music is not an asset and, consequently, father and Nicolas face more difficulties than mother and *Alexia*. One of the struggles the two men encounter relates to their new



relation with music. Father turns to it as an escape from the dullness of his job: he continues to play his violins, composes a piece and even writes his memoirs (*Alexia* 48). However, Nicolas' use of a driller to dig roads, which implies making noise, blocks his ability to play his instruments at home and he comes to understand music as "a Miracle that belonged to the Old Country, but which was not considered of great importance here" (*Alexia* 70).

Another difficulty lies in the different meanings a word can have according to their grammatical category. For example, father, who works in a factory making matches, knows the meaning of the noun "fire", but not that of the verb "to fire", and he is puzzled when his boss tells him that he is going to fire him for finishing five minutes early. One of meanings he may guess is that his boss is threatening to set him on fire. On the other hand, Nicolas' workmates call him "Bill" and he mistakes the proper noun with the common noun. While his colleagues just use a general noun for males to address him, Nicolas states that he does not own money to anyone.

The two women (mother and Alexia) seem to adapt better. Mother works in a pyjama factory and she is also surrounded by the noise made by the sewing machines, but she can listen to the radio. She also talks with other co-workers in the ladies room and makes some friends. One of them, Eva, enjoys literature and, since her arrival in the Island, she has started to read local narrative. Eva finds out that "the Myths of the Original People resembled Myths everywhere: Men belonged to a superior club –the Heavens, and Women belonged to an inferior club –the Earth" (*Alexia* 63). The local mythology, thus establishes and defends a patriarchal system, the social model Eva had in her homeland and, probably, the one Alexia's family also had in their country of birth. Antigone Kefala challenges this notion in this tale as, in spite of the public and "superior" role of men, women are those depicted as more resourceful. Men are supposed to enjoy social prestige, but father and Nicolas do not feel comfortable at work and they are not popular. The women, on the other hand, have friends at work or at school and they seem more cooperative. Women have often been considered the guardians of culture, not only in the home country but also in migration. Sometimes, first-generation migrants need to adapt to the host country in order to find strategies to teach their own culture to their children.

The female characters in *Alexia* are depicted as those who make the most of their opportunities. Mother had read lots of novels in the Old Country and uses the gained knowledge to deal with her present uneasiness in a more collaborative way. Alexia is sent to school and is thus given the opportunity to learn the language and traditions of the New Country. Although she is sad, she tries to hide her feelings and be quite talkative because "Mother had taught her that it is not very polite to be sad in the presence of other people" (*Alexia* 64). However, the way her classmates and teachers talk is different: "with their lips only, not with their eyes, their faces or their hands" (*Alexia* 68). A refugee friend of hers explains that the reason why islanders use minimum expressions and sounds and why they try to exclude "Foreigners, Intellectuals, Conversation, Artists, Emotions, Laughter, Volubility and so on" (*Alexia* 82) is because they had been forced to swear an Oath of Silence (*Alexia* 68) and an Oath of Hate (*Alexia* 82). This seems an effective strategy for the girls to make sense of the different patterns of behaviour in the new country, which deeply troubles them and make them feel excluded and inadequate.

Nicolas and Alexia also feel uneasy trying to comprehend the nuances in meaning of some concepts, such as “relax” and “happy”. Nicolas does not understand the usage of the words “relax”, “relaxation” or “being good at relaxing” (*Alexia 72*) as he cannot find a similar notion in his mother tongue. He is confused and, when he looks for the definition in the dictionary, its explanation seems extremely vague for him to relate to: “Relax – cause or allow to become loose or slack or limp, enfeeble, mitigate, abate...” (*Alexia 72*). The new culture appears to be impenetrable and it highlights Nicolas’ condition as outsider. On the other hand, Alexia is puzzled by the broad connotations of the concepts of “happiness” and of being “happy” and by the way Islanders often enquire about her personal happiness. In her perception, these feelings are “the ‘apotheosis’” (*Alexia 98*) and they lie “totally outside her life” (*Alexia 98*). Nevertheless, she cannot share these thoughts and she does not reply when she is asked whether she is happy:

Was she happy eating her [Miss Prudence, the teacher’s] mashed potatoes?  
Being in her house with the grandfather clock chiming? Happy living on the  
Island? or Happy living in the World? (*Alexia 100*)

Kefala uses these two examples of the inexistence of a concept in a given language and of lack of correlation between the meanings of a word in two languages to stress the struggle lived by migrants, regardless of their education and age, in order to acquire cultural capital. Nicolas and Alexia know that language is a necessary tool in order to adjust to the new country and this is the reason why they feel confused with some concepts: had they no interest in relating with islanders, they would ignore linguistic gaps.

Another cultural problem Alexia and Nicolas face is the issue of time. Nicolas explains that the islanders have forgotten how to invent it. Antigone Kefala remarks the absurdity of this behaviour by using the exaggeration technique, the same that 1972 Nobel Prize of Literature Heinrich Böll explored in his short story translated as “Algo Pasará” (1954) in Spanish or “Action Will Be Taken” (1954) in English. The main character enjoys thinking and resting, but he needs to earn some money and goes to a factory to pass an aptitude test. There, he realises that even the breakfast provided is part of the test and, consequently, he does what is expected from him: continuous movement and consciousness on every single action taken, even when eating. He gets the job and works there until his boss dies of a heart attack. At the wake, the main character looks so sad and upset that he is offered a job as a mourner walking behind coffins. He readily accepts the new job as it gives him time for thinking and being idle, his favourite activities. Böll critiques a society full of automatons, people who do not live but just work to improve their CVs, who do not know the difference between working and the actions needed by the human body, people for whom everything holds the same importance and who have no values. Antigone Kefala makes the same point in her tale *Alexia*. Nicolas explains the following idea to his sister: islanders do not differentiate between work and free time, everything holds the same importance and, by doing so, they are forgetting how to live. In Nicolas’ words:

He felt that Time had been taken out of Music, and out of them too, and that they were losing the knack of inventing it, day by day, naturally, effortlessly. And once one became aware of the process, so intimately aware, it was a

wonder that they were still alive, they could all die, anytime, he thought, forgetting how to invent Time. (*Alexia 76*)

Understanding time is another cultural concept which also refers to cultural values, just as “relaxing” and “happiness”. By not differentiating work and free time, interpersonal relations hold the same importance, and colleagues and workmates can be as close as family and friends. Thus, social networks and the importance of blood relations and family ties are not distinguished. This has implications on their identities: Nicolas and Alexia seem to come from a culture that prioritizes group relations, kinship and forging bonds, while society in the new country seems to encourage individuality. Nicolas seems to be troubled about and paralyzed by this change while for Alexia language represents the key she can use to adapt and have a future she can enjoy. Alexia considers that islanders lack creativity and use sounds more often than words. If she manages to differentiate these sounds and master the language and its nuances, she will be able to understand the world that surrounds her. Nicolas seems to face a harder struggle and gives the impression of being in distress.

Alexia also realises that language and space are interwoven in the new country and that the greatest topics of conversation are the weather and the grass. Language not only determines the perception of one’s surroundings but also of other people. Alexia perceives the landscape as vast and empty, which can be extrapolated to her perception of islanders as people who do not show their emotions. The fact that the two main topics of conversation are the weather and the grass indicate two neutral topics which do not enquire about personal wellbeing and are not polemic. Alexia’s perception of the landscape as void is emphasized by the views out of the windows in her school, as it reminds her of the war in the old country:

everything looked very pretty, but empty, as if all the people had deserted the place, had gone underground, waiting for a major bombardment. The eerie silence was like the one she remembered after the sirens had stopped and before the planes had arrived. (*Alexia 66*)

In her eagerness to make sense of the actions of the islanders, Alexia comes up with the idea that locals may perceive landscape as a threatening presence which needs to be dominated, or colonised:

the grass grew so high that the Island People had posted sentries everywhere to watch its advance, so that the country could be put on the alert in case of invasion, and expeditions were carried against it as a matter of routine, week after week. (*Alexia 84*)

Alexia is amused by the playfulness of language, especially with names such as milk bar, that is, a bar of milk, “a ‘Darling’ bus, a suburb called ‘Bonny Rock’, a ‘Cabbage Tree Lane’, in a place called ‘Summer Fields’” (*Alexia 90*). In the third part of this tale –the first one being the departure from the Old Country and the second one the experience as a migrant- (Tsianikas 2002), Alexia uses the knowledge she has gained so far and decides to study hard to scrutinize the language and its nuances, so as to understand the way islanders communicate. Thus, she decides to study Language at university level. For her, language represents the means which gives sense to the world. As Kefala writes:

Alexia was sure that one could prove the existence of God without a Tree or a Quadrangle. Language, she felt was more potent, inventive and durable than people imagined, and produced daily miracles that no one noticed any longer and everyone took for granted. (*Alexia* 108)

Language and Literature, then, prove to be useful tools to understand the new society and adjust to life in the new country.

### **Language in *The Island***

Kefala's novella *The Island* can be considered the continuation of *Alexia* (Hawke 2010). In this work the main character is Melina Pappas, who is a refined young woman pursuing her university studies. She likes the Arts and she can sing, dance and play a part in plays. Melina lives in an island whose landscape and people resemble those in *Alexia*, and which could be New Zealand. There is also a minor character named Babis, who is analogous with Nicolas: Babis claims that he cannot play the guitar because the guitar cannot speak anymore and all resonance is gone (*The Island* 144).

In *The Island*, Kefala focuses on perceptions and the consequences of interaction as well as on verbal and non-verbal communication. Already on the third page of the novella the reader knows that the protagonist is considered an outsider, a displaced person: Melina was born abroad, arrived as a child and was schooled on the island, that is, she is a 1.5 generation-migrant (Ommundsen 2012). This in-between position affects the way she is perceived. She is passionate and shows it in her mannerisms and speech. However, islanders are defined as cold and indifferent as their body language is subdued to their detached speech. One of such occasions is the tutorial she has with Ashton, a classmate and friend, and Dr Jackson, their professor. This is how Melina perceives the tutorial:

I spoke. I could see from his face that he had not the faintest idea what I was saying, the meaning stopped somewhere mid-air between us, he incredulous that he will ever understand me, I incredulous that he will ever understand me ... I could see in his whole attitude the immense surprise at being confronted, here in his own room, at the University, by something as foreign as myself. The implied extravagance of my voice, the rapid nervousness of my movements, my eyes that looked too directly at him. He made social concessions outwardly, but inwardly he kept repeating to himself –why the hell do I have to put up with this in my everyday life, one is not safe anywhere these days. The intensity of the preoccupation absorbed his concentration. He turned to Ashton for relief, Ashton who was waiting indifferent, his hands motionless. (*The Island* 60-62)

Melina appreciates classical music and literature and she also sings solos. She is interested in languages, feelings and emotions and the way they are expressed in different cultures. While Ashton, the ultimate islander, reads Hardy, an example of the literature he can relate to, Melina quotes Baudelaire. Thanks to her first affair, Melina realises how many sweet expressions are used in the Greek language to talk to beloved

ones -such as a mother to her daughter or a man to his lover-, but also about concepts dear to one -such as an archimandrite talking about the church as if it were a bride- (*The Island* 112). Melina notices these words as if she were studying the language, thus, as an outsider. Despite the fact that Melina was schooled in the island, she feels she is constantly crossing cultures: in the way she notices language, her non-verbal communication, or even the sophisticated clothes of her aunt, which she sometimes wears. As Fiona Allon (2002) argues:

Migration is directly and inevitably a process of cross-cultural translation, a passage of movement between different languages, cultures and worlds [and this translation] is not a simple and straightforward trajectory from 'here' to 'there'; it is a dynamic articulation of in-betweenness. (107)

In the third part of the novella, Melina feels foreign, beautiful and exotic in several situations and she thinks she is perceived in these positive terms. At the end of the text, Melina seems to finally accept –not happily embrace–her position as an in-between person: able to understand how islanders act but also strong in her own perception as different and not fully understood. These two years in her life are determinant in her process of becoming a young adult: she explores her identity as a woman, as a migrant and her thirst for knowledge and understanding. The novella finishes when Melina reaches a coherent discourse she perceives as her own.

Melina's position in society is explored in depth. At the beginning of the novella, which expands over a two-year period, Melina is working on her first holiday job in an office. This may be at a university department since her boss, Erik Gosse, is doing research on the first inhabitants of the island and aims to

revolutionise the attitude of the country to its past. He claim[s] that in order to understand history, one need[s] a type of vision that only people placed at the crossroads [can] provide. That is, people who [live] between cultures, who [are] forced to live double lives, belonging to no group. (*The Island* 36.

Melina's boss aims to show the existence of this space and to focus on the hybrid perspective of this part of society, which, he hopes, will help overcome differences and improve relations among the first inhabitants and the colonisers of the island. As Melina is neither a coloniser nor a colonised, but a person who migrated from another country, Erik Gosse considers her a hybrid, a person "in between" (*The Island* 36) who can build bridges between the other two groups. In order to fulfil his research, Gosse and Melina meet a friend of his: "a young man that belong[s] to the mythical race that [Erik] was trying to write about" (*The Island* 42). Melina feels empathy with Erik's friend due to the way he talks about his family, his ancestors and the past of his people. He refers to his family members as "his bones" (*The Island* 44) and explains that each person has an individual perspective which is magic. He talks about the past as if it were "immediate to him, that belonged to him, to his family, to his parents, to the great grandmother he spoke about" (*The Island* 44). Melina thinks that she "and all the people in the narrow colony [she] seemed to move in" (*The Island* 44) relate to their past in the same way:

all transplanted people who talked constantly of the past, that dashing figure with hot blood in its veins, and a warm skin, always rushing into some adventure ... A part that was given to us children with the air and the

seasons, as an everyday diet, till it became a sort of breath that moulded us and which we could no longer escape. And we began to talk of it as ours, unsure at the same time, while we performed the rituals, trying to place ourselves in a stream of time in which everything had meaning, hoping that we would suddenly acquire a value and a weight that nothing around was capable of giving us. (*The Island* 44)

Melina perceives the past as Erik's friend does, which is contrary to the approach of most islanders, who do not talk "about it in their everyday lives" (*The Island* 36). Past and present go hand in hand in Melina's life in the way she speaks and relates to others. Melina often remembers past experiences, such as when her mother took her as a child to the Salt Lake spa in summer (*The Island* 46-52). Nonetheless, she considers that "all the exciting things had happened before I was born, or when I was too little to remember" (*The Island* 56). Melina was born when the war began, so the exciting things took place in a past which did not include the horrors of war and the difficulties and challenges of migration, and in a territory –Greece–she hardly remembers. Besides, for Melina's mother, "The past [is] here to torture us all the time" (*The Island* 56). The relation of Melina with other times is also present in the oneiric world. In each part of the novel, the main character describes a nightmare she has. Only the first one receives the comments and interpretation of Melina's mother. Although the nightmares are different, they all include animals and running, either chasing someone or escaping from a threat.

Past and present also influence the way Melina perceives the landscape and the language she uses to describe it. Melina feels restricted in this country, she is not at ease. The island is not a place where she senses the elements caress individuals with the warmth of the sun and a soft breeze. On the contrary, she says:

We were trapped again. There was no future here. We had no future. Who could imagine a future in this mean, cold, grass-trimmed country. I hated it. I hated the whole place, the green hills and the sheep permanently grazing the same spots, as if they had been painted there, and the wind going through you, coming at you out of corners, chilling the surface of the sea, bleached dark green like dying leaves. (*The Island* 72)

Kefala uses the figure of speech of personification to explain Melina's relation to the territory as Melina wonders whether the harshness of the territory and of the weather is a strategy of the land to oust humans:

The secret heart of the land seemed to be yearning for that uninterrupted silence free of humans that had been there before, the presence of that time still in the land's memory. (*The Island* 70)

The relation between the land and islanders has a subdued tension. On the one hand, as in *Alexia*, islanders feel threatened by the nature that surrounds them, mainly by the grass, and try to dominate it. In Melina's description:

On Sunday gardeners were out in force again, cutting the grass, trimming it, shearing it, with machines, by hand, stubbornly trying to keep it to that fanatic short-haired green carpet. A consistent war was being waged, a war

to the death, this desperation in their hearts not to be annihilated by the grass.  
(*The Island* 68)

On the other hand, islanders are able to perceive the beauty of the landscape and to enjoy it while ignoring its inconveniences. Melina treats islanders with sarcasm as they “stoically” go to the beach on a picnic while the day is rainy and windy (*The Island* 70). This depreciation of the comfort is present in their urge to save material effects rather than take care of their own bodies because they consider “the human [to be] incidental and dispensable [whose] needs were only physical” (*The Island* 70). In these lines Antigone Kefala recalls the absurdity of some human attitudes, just as she did in *Alexia* with the islanders’ inability to invent time.

Verbal and non-verbal communication, people’s attitudes and being aware of how one is perceived by others are central topics to *The Island*. In this novella, Antigone Kefala explores language, migration and identity creation, as she did in *Alexia*.

## Conclusions

As seen in the analyses of *Alexia* and *The Island*, the relation of migrants with their mother tongue changes when there is a second language they need to use in their everyday lives. Some strategies may be avoiding the learning and the socializing with speakers of the second language as a way to maintain their self-assurance in their identities, or accepting the need to learn this language and to enhance meeting others who speak the second language.

In *Alexia*, the main characters show different approaches to the experience of migration. While the father hardly relates with others who are not his own family, Nicola feels puzzled by the experience of migration, the mother befriends other migrants and speaks the second language with them and Alexia goes to school and socializes with migrants and settlers. Their different levels of socialization affect their perception of the territory and the culture: the more a character relates to settlers, the more this character analyses patterns of behaviour.

In *The Island*, Melina realises that, in spite of her time on the island, she still struggles with the phlegmatic behaviour of the settlers and the different verbal and non-verbal communication techniques used. Her perception of settlers is extrapolated to that of the landscape and their lifestyle. However, her relation with other migrants is not always smooth and she approaches languages, including her mother tongue, as a curiosity to be studied.

For Kefala, language is a signifier of difference: in *Alexia* it means high culture and education, and in *The Island* it is the eagerness to appreciate other cultures. Antigone Kefala explained that “learning a foreign language involves a growing ability to sense its depths and shallows, its variable resonances, its evocative reverberations, its verbal chiaroscuro” (Nikro 151). Kefala uses the perceptions of Alexia and Melina to elaborate on the development of their identities, on their strategies to construct their selfhoods. Kefala does not focus on the moment or causes of migration, but on the role that the new language –both verbal and non-verbal- plays in the understanding of the new

culture, their inhabitants and in the identity formation processes of the two main characters.

Migrants may consciously decide to transform the learnt language and use it as a tool for their own benefit. The technique of speaking either 'ethnic Australian English' or 'standard Australian English' depending on the circumstances or the aim of the speaker is a valid strategy which tries to achieve the visualisation, and maybe also the acceptance, of hybridity. Second and 1.5-generation migrants' use of language transforms their perception of their own bodies and of the spaces around them. They may feel as in-between people, to use the term coined by Melina's boss in *The Island* and also by Homi K. Bhabha (1994). Kefala "think[s] beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and [...] focus[es] on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences" (Bhabha 2). The migrant characters in Kefala's texts push their displacement to the limit as their means to accept their daily lives (Nikro 158). Consequently, as Alexia says, language can be an enemy or a friend:

A Language is like a human being, diffident at first and distant, difficult to approach, to understand. It has a resistance that goes with its instinct for survival. Yet there is a lot of sympathy in a language, and a willingness to co-operate, to allow newcomers to its secrets, and to its kingdom, which for every language is a different one. (*Alexia* 104)

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<sup>1</sup> Hereafter, the title "Alexia" or "The Island" will be used in the quotations when stating a direct reference from the novels *Alexia: A Tale for Advanced Children* (1995) and *The Island* (2002).

**Catalina Ribas Segura** is a lecturer in the English Department at the University College Alberta Giménez (CESAG, Palma de Mallorca). She wrote her MA thesis on Greek-Australian literature and her PhD thesis on Greek-Australian and Chinese Australian literatures. She has taught a number of courses on language and cultures in English-speaking countries. Her main interests include migration, identity and contemporary Australian literature. She is a member of the Australian Studies Centre at the University of Barcelona.