Joyce, at the end of ‘Oxen of the Sun’ and in *Ulysses* as a whole, explores the ways in which hybrid and creole forms demonstrate both the limits of language and the expressive diversity inherent in linguistic mixing, a mixing that find its apotheosis in what Paul Léon describes as the ‘probably perfect’ ‘petit nègre’ of *Finnegans Wake*. In Beckett, ‘petit nègre’, a pejorative term for ‘pidgin’ which is also, colloquially, used to denote the ‘bad’ or ‘broken’ French of the non-native speaker, is used by the narrator of *L’Innommable* to describe his own discourse (I 152), reflecting his sense of linguistic estrangement as well as the dual-language nature of the trilogy itself. Beckett translates the term, in *The Unnamable*, as ‘pidgin bullskrit’ (T 382), a sophisticated pun which, as this chapter will demonstrate, encapsulates the function of bilingualism in Beckett’s oeuvre: in these words, a simplified hybrid form of language (pidgin) which at the time carried strong connotations of misuse and involuntary error, combines with linguistic erudition (Sanskrit), to form deliberately meaningless obscenity (bullshit). That the term ‘pidgin bullskrit’ is itself produced in and through translation is significant, its punning semantic doubling reflective of the linguistic and textual doubling that underlies its existence. Pidgins develop as simplified languages to facilitate communication between different language communities; Beckettian ‘pidgin bullskrit’ functions instead to maximise the ambiguity, arbitrariness and complexity of interlingual processes. The Joycean ‘unlearning’ of English, as we have seen, produces interlingual complementarity and semantic enrichment that would be proclaimed by Jolas and other contributors to *transition* as the future of the English language, a logical and natural progression from the language’s already inherently heterogeneous nature. In Beckett, the turn to French as primary language of composition, and the heightened
sense of the language-learner’s disadvantage that that brings, produces an oeuvre in which we find a complex tension between learning and ‘unlearning’, between the desire for correctness and the fascination with error, between mastery and misuse. In this chapter, I will be focusing in particular on the trilogy in French, and demonstrating the ways in which Beckett, over the course of the three novels, exploits his disjunctive relationship with French to move away from discursive forms of estrangement towards what Molloy punningly calls ‘décomposition’, a term which, by containing both ‘composition’ and its opposite, embodies the linguistic act whereby language paradoxically articulates its own disintegration.3

‘Grammatik und Stil’, Beckett wrote to Axel Kaun in 1937: ‘Mir scheinen sie ebenso hinfällig geworden zu sein wie ein Biedermeier Badeanzug oder die Unerschütterlichkeit eines Gentlemans. Eine Larve. Hoffentlich kommt die Zeit […] wo die Sprache da am besten gebraucht wird, wo sie am tüchtigsten missbraucht wird’4 [‘Grammar and Style! To me they seem to have become as irrelevant as a Biedermeier bathing suit or the imperturbability of a gentleman. A mask. It is to be hoped the time will come […] when language is best used where it is most efficiently abused’5]. To hope for a time when language is ‘am tüchtigsten missbraucht’ is oxymoronic, simultaneously invoking efficiency/competence (tüchtig) and misuse/abuse (misbrauchen) but it is, for Beckett, directly linked to the use of a foreign language: he describes ‘den Trost’ [‘the consolation’] that he has ‘mich so gegen eine fremde Sprache unwillkürlich vergehen zu dürfen, wie ich es mit Wissen und Willen gegen meine eigene machen möchte’6 [‘of being allowed to violate a foreign language as involuntarily as, with knowledge and intention, I would like to do against my own language’7]. Beckett, here, is influenced by the writings of Fritz Mauthner, who, in his explorations of the limits of language, Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache (1901–2), is fully aware of the paradoxical nature of the endeavour to critique language using the only tools, words, that are available for such a critique. Most of Beckett’s characters share the ‘need of semantic succour’ that, in Watt, ‘[resists] formulation in a way no state had ever done’,8 and indeed, Beckett’s letter to Kaun is heavily relied upon by critics for precisely the same reason that Beckett himself later denounced it as ‘German bilge’:9 it explains linguistic failure in terms that are far too clear and comprehensible to be consistent with Beckett’s aims. At around the same time as he was writing to Kaun, Beckett was beginning to explore the possibilities of using a foreign language as a means of more effectively exploring the limits of language, initially in