

MULTILINGUALISM AND CULTURAL TRANSFER

In his book *Multilingüismo y lenguas en contacto* (2016), Juan Carlos Moreno Cabrera refutes two myths of global monolingualism: on the one hand, the retrospective myth, based on the story of the Tower of Babel, according to which humanity, a long time ago, had one language for communication; on the other, the prospective myth which expects that in the not so distant future, humanity will have one global language for communication. Moreno Cabrera states that multilingualism – *i.e.* the capacity of humans to learn other languages – is exactly the mechanism developed by humanity to obtain cooperation between different linguistic communities. The author then examines two views on the role of language in communication: the instrumental-referential view (language as an instrument for transmission of information) and the representational-social view (language as a medium for expression of individual and social visions on the world) (Moreno Cabrera 165-168). In that light, this special issue focuses on how languages can express the cultural richness of an individual or a community, more specifically on how multilingual literature and film transfer this cultural variety to their respective audiences.

It should not come as a surprise that many writers as well as film directors draw on their daily use of more than one language as a creative resource. Writing in different languages might have been a common practice since Antiquity and the Middle Ages, but it is especially since the rise of Postcolonial Studies that critics investigate the linguistic hybridity of different types of narratives from several perspectives. In her *Bilingual Aesthetics: A New Sentimental Education* (2004), which presents a quite radical view on language dynamics in current societies, Doris Sommer states that “[i]n today’s readjustments to global dynamics, mono is a



malady of adolescent societies. The world has outgrown a one-to-one identity between a language and a people” (xv).

In the debate on multilingualism, however, it is noteworthy that scholars do not agree upon its definition, in particular with regard to related concepts, such as polyglotism, heterolingualism or translanguaging. In his authoritative essay “Refraction and Recognition. Literary Multilingualism in Translation” Rainier Grutman, for instance, opts for heterolingualism as he is not so much interested in the “mimetic qualities of multilingualism”, but more in the “dialogical interaction” between languages within a literary work (18, 19). Steven G. Kellman in his turn prefers the term translanguaging stating that “the creation of a new voice means the invention of a new self” (20). Nonetheless, as Yasemin Yildiz brings to the fore in her essay *Beyond the Mother Tongue, The Postmonolingual Condition* (2012), multilingualism is still haunted by the ideal of one true mother tongue. Brian Lennon rightfully points out that there is the material impossibility of a radically plurilingual literature because big publishing houses are not interested in it (Lennon 83). Multilingual texts or movies might problematize the concept of canonicity, often coined in terms of (one) language, which is still a fundamental drive for publishers and other actors in the field. The fact that languages occupy various positions, which are not stable and can range from central to peripheral, further complicates the debate on multilingualism, as well as the different positions of these same languages within a specific society or within the works of multilingual writers or filmmakers.

These questions on multilingualism originate from the one-day conference “Polyglots and Polysystems: researching multilingualism in contemporary Latin American and Latino literature and film”, held at KU Leuven, Antwerp, on March 15, 2019 (<https://www.vidasentraduccion.com/>, <https://www.éxodocs.com>). In the present issue, the selected authors further explore the topics addressed during the presentation – the respondents’ input has been most

valuable¹. The contributors tackle multilingualism in literature and film taking into account both the product and the process, examining how the phenomenon of multilingualism can be defined in relation to cultural transfer. The eighth articles bring together insights and methodologies from Literary studies, Film studies and Translation studies confronting new approaches and perspectives within these fields. The authors scrutinize to which extent multilingualism can be considered an intrinsic characteristic of a text/film or an oeuvre focusing on the modalities for its emergence, its functions and its specificity. While multilingualism works differently in literature and film, the assumption that, given its intrinsic characteristics and its different institutional contexts, the audiovisual and verbal medium of film facilitates multilingualism, will be countered in this issue. Regardless of the dissimilarities between literature and film, it can be argued that both film and literature enhance cultural transfer and various types of border crossings, whether on a linguistic, symbolical and/or metaphorical level through multilingualism.

It also needs to be emphasized that multilingualism in literature and film can dislocate certain socio-cultural systems, genres, theories and concepts. The use of more than one language by an author or filmmaker seems to involve “a redefinition of traditional [...] concepts” (Ruiz-Sánchez 59) to the extent that different literary but also filmic (sub)genres have a different effect on the manifestation and the function of multilingualism. One of the consequences is then the possible impact of multilingualism on and by the audience (readers/viewers). Paraphrasing Umberto Eco’s definition of “the

¹ We would like to thank the respondents of the one-day conference: Lieve Behiels (KU Leuven), Rita De Maeseneer (University of Antwerp), Natalie Dupré (KU Leuven), Peter Flynn (KU Leuven), Philippe Meers (University of Antwerp), Guillermo Sanz Gallego (UGent) and Arvi Sepp (VUB, University of Antwerp). Sanz Gallego and Sepp also contributed to this issue with respectively the following book reviews: *Multilingualism and Modernity: Barbarisms in Spanish and American Literature*, by Laura Lonsdale, and *Witness between Languages: The Translation of Holocaust Testimonies in Context*, by Peter Davies, both published in 2018

model reader”, one can claim that multilingualism in literature and film requires an ideal transcultural reader/viewer who can understand the complexity of the multilingual character of the text or film. The reader/viewer can also be considered a co-creator of multilingualism which then becomes a paradigm of reading: if the audience does not identify the other language, this will affect his reading/viewing experience. The exchanges between regional/national and transnational narratives can have different effects on different audiences.

Furthermore, multilingualism cannot be dissociated from monolingualism. David Gramling’s *The Invention of Monolingualism*, for example, reviews a series of claims, one of which caught our attention: “Monolingualism and multilingualism have become axes of verbal hygiene that arbitrates intercultural world-readiness according to certain polyglot forms of cosmopolitanism as opposed to others.” (Gramling 93) At present, linguistic imperialism has led to the marginalization of many other languages that now are only spoken by minorities or threatened with extinction. This assumption enables the authors of the issue to further verify how the two concepts interfere with each other and to what extent both monolingualism and multilingualism have an impact in different contexts. By doing so they aim to unravel to which extent filmic and literary texts address and counter the salient colonial form of monolingualism of the globalized society (Gramling), and to which extent multilingualism in film and literature changes our perception on other cultures and migration. Language is also a medium which helps persons to develop in a culture in which they grow intellectually and emotionally (Moreno Cabrera 202). Film and literature are key players in these dynamics within every culture to the extent that they are essential to the construction of narratives, which then can create identities, entail interactions between subjects and become a vehicle for cultural transfer. These and other issues urge scholars to question and rethink the concepts of cultural transfer, border and identity.

The first article, “The Invention of Multilingualism”, gives a theoretical and methodological framework of the issue, while

the other seven articles present case studies on the presence and impact of the phenomenon of multilingualism in literature and/or (documentary) film. David Gramling's article draws on the findings of his essay, in which he claims that "European elites in the 15th and 16th century needed to engineer panfunctional, isomorphic, translatable monolingualisms, which became the basis for colonial epistemologies". The author analyzes the curricula of US universities who increasingly embrace the "monolingual international" which he defines as "the practical principle that one can ultimately access and harness the value of multiple languages without actually learning them". This is only one "invention of multilingualism". Gramling's essay concludes with a critical view of multilingualism emerging from African and Latin American social theory and applied linguistics.

This view from Latin America is clearly present in Nadia Lie's article on language use in Latin American road movies. Lie distinguishes between two ways in which road movies deal with language, *i.e.* multilingualism and translanguaging. The first term refers to situations in which road movie characters who speak different languages try to understand each other, but end up finding that they are not able to communicate. The second term applies to situations in which characters assume language barriers between them will obstruct true communication; however, in the end they are able to communicate anyway. Through her analysis of this subgenre of road movies, Lie reveals the ambivalence of communication in general.

The ambivalence of communication is picked up by Ilse Logie in her article on Latin@ Writers, who parts from the idea that terms such as globalization and World Literature suggest that multilingualism rather than monolingualism is the sign of the present times. However, Logie argues that real literary practices of authors with Latin American roots living outside Latin America only partially reflect this hybridity. To illustrate this, she analyzes four contemporary autobiographies where language choices are explicitly connected to questions of identity. Logie sheds light on

the paradoxical strategies through which bilingual authors in the U.S. shape their struggle towards the postmonolingual paradigm.

A similar case of bilingualism in literature is that of Argentinian-Brazilian writer Paloma Vidal, whose short story collection *Más al sur* (2011) is a self-translation of her 2008 *Mais ao sul*, as the author herself emphasizes in the preface of *Más al sur*. In her analysis, Sarah Staes argues that through her self-translation, Vidal delved into her trajectory as a migrant and multilingual individual. Staes' article reveals how self-translation functions as another phase in the project of morphing the self, a process which Vidal had started while writing the original work.

Alexandra Sanchez, in her analysis of Hannah Weyer's *La boda* (2000) and *Escuela* (2002), relates the concept of bilingualism to another concept, that of barbarism. In the wake of Thomas Nail, she puts that bilingualism (of barbarism) is intertwined with the idea that the language of the barbarian's culture is inferior to the host's language and that today's anti-immigrant discourse, in the U.S. or elsewhere, is still imbued with the same conviction according to which immigrants are incapable or unwilling to learn the local language. The two documentaries taken into consideration by Sanchez portray how two Mexican-American sisters defy the barbarism expected of them because of their instable existence as seasonal fieldworkers. The sisters' bilingual and bicultural environment is deconstructed because it is confusing and undesirable. Both documentaries seem to counter optimistic accounts of mestizaje and hybridity.

In her contribution on Luis Carlos Davis's documentary *389 Miles: Living the Border* (2009), An Van Hecke ties bilingualism with cultural transfer in order to establish to what extent bilingualism in documentaries can change our perception on other cultures, border crossing and migration. Van Hecke's three-fold analysis relies first on Polysystem Theory, a concept which still provides an appropriate method for analyzing complex socio-cultural systems: viz. center and periphery, static and dynamic, homogeneous and heterogeneous, high culture and subculture, and

intra and interrelations (Even-Zohar). Secondly, it examines in detail the language diversity of all the social actors interviewed by Davis stressing that most of them speak Spanish whereas the documentary filmmaker and narrator addresses the audience in English. Finally, the article sheds light on two powerful Mexican symbols, the Virgin of Guadalupe and the wrestler mask, which are significant carriers of cultural transfer.

Through a reflection on the functionality of the presence of other languages in the filmic text, M. Dolores Lerma Sanchis intends to examine the translation of the cases of multilingualism found in the subtitling of Pedro Almodóvar's filmography while focusing on the translation of the multilingual extracts into Portuguese. With the data obtained, the author delineates translation trends or norms that prevail in the process for subtitling in the selected movies. Regardless of eventual technical restriction, multilingualism tends to fade in the subtitling process making way for a more monolingual perception of Almodóvar's filmic universe.

Inge Lanslots and Natalie Dupré problematize the concept of the border through a critical analysis of two documentaries by Phillip Rodriguez: *Mixed Feelings: San Diego/Tijuana* (2002) and *Los Angeles Now* (2003). The authors start from the common view on the U.S.- Mexican border towns as multicultural and relatively young transnational cities, which, despite their common historical past, grew apart because of different administrations. Today, border towns seem to change more drastically, as well as the identity (construction) of the population. Lanslots and Dupré analyze how Rodriguez translates urban imagery and ethnographic shifts to the screen. The authors claim that, in his portrayal of border towns, Rodriguez invites the audience to consider border towns from a mainly northern perspective and agrees to represent multilayered and connected worlds, while visualizing dual and divided spaces which leave little room to the "border struggles" which take place along and on the border. This final article raises the question to which extent Rodriguez' discourse on border towns does enrich the larger socio-cultural polysystem in terms of

transmission of knowledge and affects related to living experiences in urban borderlands.

In the interview by Ilse Logie, Rita De Maeseneer, professor of Latin American Literature at the University of Antwerp, Belgium, and expert in Caribbean Literature, looks back on her academic career which has been full of achievements. She explains how the Caribbean islands can be seen as a “laboratory” or as an excellent case study for essential questions in Latin America, such as hybridity, colonization, racism, and plurilingualism. The interview is a beautiful dialogue between two researchers who share and discuss many thoughts not only on multilingualism in literature, but also on questions as translation, especially of Caribbean authors in Europe, and the reception of their work. By including this unique interview with Rita De Maeseneer in a special issue of *Cadernos de Tradução* the editors want to pay tribute to and express their gratitude for her inspirational academic work.

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