



Multilingualism and Literature

Fourteenth Annual Study Day of the Centre for Literary and Intermedial Crossings (CLIC)

Venue: Vrije Universiteit Brussel, November 29, 2024

Bringing together scholars from different disciplines such as cultural studies, intermediality studies, translation studies, and comparative literature, the Fourteenth Annual Study Day of the Centre for Literary and Intermedial Crossings aims at providing a new understanding of multilingualism as a theoretical concept, analytical category, textual practice and lived experience in the study of literature.

Rainier Grutman defines literary "multilingualism" as "the use of two or more languages in the same text" (Grutman, "Multilingualism", 183). Following on from Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of polyphony, literary multilingualism can also be combined with social language differences and diversity of speech. This is not only a question of language mixing, but first and foremost of various discourses, idiolects, sociolects, as well as dialects and historical varieties of a language whose interplay Grutman called "heterolingualism" in his work on the novel in Québec in the 19th century (Grutman, *Des langues qui résonnent*). These heterolingual differences in the text can correspond to speaker differences by expressing the social and cultural location of the respective speakers (Dembeck, "Für eine Philologie der Mehrsprachigkeit", 28).

The processing of linguistic differences in literature often also means the dismantling of a national language ideology and the highlighting of linguistic-cultural border crossings in the text. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *Kafka. Pour une littérature mineure* refers to how Kafka, as a German-speaking Jew from Prague, incorporates the foreign-language elements - Czech, Yiddish - in his literary texts. Against the background of the First World War and nationalism in Europe, the combination of national language and collective identity is also radically questioned by the historical avant-garde. The international DADA movement takes nationalism *ad absurdum* by consciously multilingualizing its performances and at the same time deconstructing the alleged 'purity' of individual languages by replacing them with a childlike, pre-rational idiom. In postcolonial literature, the adopted colonial language can paradoxically also be used as an idiom of emancipation or subversion, as can be observed not only in Anglophone postcolonial literature, but also frequently in French-speaking Maghreb literature. In this light, the Algerian writer Kateb Yacine therefore describes French as a "booty of war", a "butin de guerre" (Yacine, *Le Poète comme un boxeur*, 132), to say in French to the French reading public that it is explicitly not French. In an interview, the French-Algerian author Malika Mokeddem claims that the Arabic words in her French texts have a political meaning because she wants to "coloniser le français" in and with her linguistically hybrid literature (Mokeddem in Helm, *Malika Mokeddem*, 29). Hybridization of the former colonial language plays an important ethical role not only in postcolonial literature, but also in the discourse of postcolonial literary theory. Thus, Gayatri Spivak strives to enrich English with Bengali in her works. According to her, writing in an imposed (e.g. colonial) language comes with the ethical responsibility of drawing on one's mother tongue in order to hybridise the 'target' language through the ethical concept of *matrin* (maternal debt) (Spivak, "Translation as Culture", 14-15).

The pronounced linguistic reflexivity in multilingual literature, which goes hand in hand with an emphasis on the fundamental polysemy of linguistic expressions, has an ethical dimension to the extent that it can demonstrate the multiplicity of thought and thus also the diversity of human coexistence. In language criticism (*Sprachkritik*), as found in authors such as Yoko Tawada or philosophers such as Jacques Derrida, the notion of language as 'possession' is constantly repeated. Derrida indeed calls into question the relationship between birth and blood on the one hand and



language on the other in *Le monolingualisme de l'autre*. Taking this critique further, Yasemin Yildiz frames monolingualism as a dominant paradigm that needs to be overcome (in *Beyond the Mother Tongue*).

This study day will touch on questions of multilingualism from different perspectives, and on their methodological implications for literary studies, first and foremost with regard to literary multilingualism as a political and cultural practice. The aim of the study day is to further our understanding of authors' experiences of multilingualism, their function, opportunities and problems as cultural mediators. It aims at circumnavigating a broad spatial and temporal spectrum. The focus of the study day is neither limited to the analysis of multilingualism in the context of European languages and cultures, nor to one specific genre or historical period.

Submissions for 20-minute papers may include, but are not restricted to:

- theoretical approaches to the concept of 'multilingualism' in (translated) literature
- multilingualism as agency and medium of political commitment (issues of freedom, resistance and human rights)
- multilingualism and diasporic communities
- influence of multilingualism on canon formation
- postcolonial studies in relation to multilingualism/translation
- translation, censorship and multilingualism
- multilingual journals as media establishing a critical counter-hegemony of literary texts and their translations

Registration:

300-word abstracts and a 100-word bio should be submitted by March 30, 2024. Please send your abstract to: Arvi Sepp (arvi.sepp@vub.be), Eva Ulrike Pirker (eva.ulrike.pirker@vub.be), Ann Peeters (ann.peeters@vub.be) and Cedric Van Dijck (cedric.van.dijck@vub.be).

The language of the conference is English. A publication of the proceedings with selected contributions is planned in the *Journal for Literary and Intermedial Crossings (JLIC)*.