

# Literary Multilingualism in Translation: Texts, Contexts, Agents

## Introduction

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The idea of this special issue emerged progressively two years ago from discussions in the seminar partnering the *Translation in History, Estonia 1850–2010: Texts, Agents, Institutions and Practices* research grant. The project studies Estonian translation history by considering translation as an active agent of cultural change that is functionally crucial to a culture's self-understanding and to the shaping of its identity. Estonian culture is thoroughly translational: the Estonian written standard and its literature were constituted by acts and processes of translation, and translation has continued to play a strategic role in the development of Estonian culture.

In our seminar discussions, the issue of multilingualism immediately came to the fore. Translation into Estonian has historically taken place within a multilingual context, as Estonian has been used (initially just spoken, from the 16th century also written) alongside several other languages such as (Low) German, Swedish, Russian, and now English. The first translators of the Bible and other religious texts into Estonian were German-speaking pastors, while the first Estonian authors and translators in the mid-19th century had received their education in German (later in Russian) and practised diglossia in everyday life. In such a situation, languages have been far more than mere instruments of communication, as they came to embody social hierarchies, symbolic values and identity struggles. Thus, German might have been the language of education and the preeminent source language for translations of the first generations of educated Estonians in the 19th century, but it was, at the same time, also the language of the landlords and colonisers, against whom the Estonian national movement developed its cultural and political agenda centred around the development of Estonian as a literary language. Russian was the language of power in the Tsarist as well as the Soviet periods of Estonian history and translation from Russian acquired an important role in the policies of Russification and Sovietisation of Estonian culture, while translation of Western literatures into Estonian came to symbolise resilience and resistance (as happened in the 1960s).

These are just some examples of the linguistic, cultural and social relevance of multilingualism in the Estonian history of translation, a relevance which urged us to

look internationally for research on multilingualism in the context of translation and translation in the context of multilingualism. We then realised that even if there were already several publications in this field, a venue that would bring together scholars working on literary multilingualism in translation was still missing. Hence the idea of this special issue, which was preceded by a workshop with all the authors at Tallinn University in the autumn of 2022.

### **Rethinking multilingualism**

Multilingualism is increasingly becoming an inseparable part of our everyday experiences, as well as our social and cultural interactions. Nevertheless, our understanding of multilingualism and the use of the concept in scholarly research often fail to address the complexity of the phenomenon, as they are based on questionable assumptions about the nature of language, language acquisition, linguistic hierarchies and language use.

Sociolinguistics (for example, Cenoz 2013) defines multilingualism merely as the ability to use several languages. The order of acquisition of these languages, aspects of proficiency, and language identity are hereby not of primary interest. Traditional language acquisition studies draw a clear distinction between L1 (mother tongue, the first language acquired) and L2 (the second language), tacitly assuming that L2 speakers never achieve the same level as monolingual native speakers (Selinker 1972 and the so-called formal approaches). However, as Vivian Cook (2010) shows, this is a rather simplistic picture because ‘language’ may mean different things to different researchers. It can, for instance, be understood as an abstract system, the virtual set of all existing and potentially possible utterances, or as a symbol that refers to a community and its identity. In sociolinguistics, the seemingly natural terms “mother tongue” and “first language” can be similarly defined using different criteria, such as the first language acquired, the origin of the speaker, proficiency (the language one knows best), inner and outer identification, or frequency of use (Skutnabb-Kangas 1984). These criteria can be also combined, as in the case of Roger Hewitt (1992/2003), who claims that instead of asking what one’s mother tongue is, the question should be whether the relationship with a given language is based on origin, proficiency or affiliation (i.e., identity). These aspects can, but not necessarily must, coincide (see also Rampton 1990).

In recent studies, the concept of mother tongue or native speaker is rejected altogether (Vulchanova et al. 2022). Instead, the multifunctionality of language use is highlighted. So-called non-native speakers might have an accent, but in their command of the language they might outperform so-called native speakers. Proficiency can also depend on the function in which the language is used. For instance, Joseph Brodsky wrote poetry in Russian but used English for literary criticism and essays.

This means that a sufficiently complex and adequate understanding of multilingualism must problematise the old distinctions between L1 and L2 and the notion of mother tongue. The same is true for the distinction between L2 and a foreign language. Traditionally, L2 is considered a language present in the linguistic environment, for instance, the majority language for members of a minority, and is distinguished from foreign languages, which are not available in the environment and learned through the education system. This distinction seems to collapse now that English has become a supra-regional lingua franca through popular culture and the internet; this gives us the possibility to effectively create a language environment in the desired 'foreign' language. Thus, the seemingly basic concepts often employed in the definitions of multilingualism are, in fact, rather complex even from a merely linguistic point of view. Adding culturally relevant questions such as language 'ownership' (i.e., who is a legitimate user, who is a 'native speaker', who speaks the language well) and linguistic identity will further complicate the issue.

### **Literary multilingualism and translation**

Multilingualism has also been part of the repertoire used by writers to shape the narratives and characters in their literary texts. It has been used to create the context of an era and to mimic encounters between languages in our everyday lives, thus highlighting linguistic, cultural and social hierarchies. Nevertheless, it would be reductive to consider multilingualism in literature as a mere mimesis of multilingualism in real life. Literature plays with language, sometimes deliberately twisting it to create estrangement effects, representing, for instance, contact between languages that do not exist in real life. In this regard, Rainier Grutman has suggested the concept of heterolingualism to refer to the use of multiple languages in literature, and to distinguish this from real-life multilingualism, which does not "exhaust the wide array of possibilities offered by juxtaposing or mixing languages in literature" (Grutman 2006, 18–19). While we are in agreement with Grutman, we will nevertheless adopt here the notion of literary multilingualism, which is meant to account for the use of multiple languages in literature and at the same time include the study of the cultural context and linguistic biographies of authors and translators. In fact, even if the primary research object of literary multilingualism is a (fictional) text, researchers have often extended their attention to the conditions of the emergence of textual multilingualism. To name just three, Grutman himself (2006) explains the French-Canadian context of Marie-Claire Blais' work, Rosenwald's (2008) *Multilingual America* deals with American writers' approaches to real linguistic encounters, and Yildiz (2012) shows how migration has challenged the concept of mother tongue in literary studies. In the articles in the present volume some authors have followed Grutman, opting for heterolin-

gualism, while others have stuck to multilingualism, particularly in the cases in which they refer to linguistic theories and, especially, translators' and authors' linguistic biographies.

Literary texts, similarly to all human art, are influenced by the input that authors receive from their surroundings, as well as their experience of travelling, and what they read. In this sense, literary multilingualism reflects the social and personal context of the author and her/his language biography (Franceschini 2022), which can be influenced by numerous factors such as the availability of contact with speakers of different languages, and the texts circulating in a particular culture. At the societal level, the choice of texts to be marketed and their readability are influenced by cultural preferences and linguistic hierarchies, as well as by the language skills of the community. Furthermore, political developments and migration can have an impact on these hierarchies and preferences. There are many examples, especially in turbulent times and in small countries or communities, of writers and poets making a start in one or several languages and later changing, for various reasons, which exemplifies the complexity of multilingualism and the functions of the different languages in the author's repertoire. Consider the Yiddish writer Sholem-Aleichem who fluctuated between Russian, Hebrew and Yiddish, eventually settling for the latter (because of his egalitarian attitudes he chose the language of the people, i.e. the majority of East European Jews spoke Yiddish). Contemporary authors often make rather explicit comments about their identity and language choice. For example, Boris Khersonsky, initially a Russian-language poet from Ukraine, recently wrote on his Facebook page in both Russian and Ukrainian that previously he had one mother tongue (Russian) and two homelands (Ukraine and Russia), whereas he now has two mother tongues (Russian and Ukrainian) but only one remaining homeland (Ukraine) (Borkhers, Oct 15, 2023). His poetry is becoming increasingly bilingual or even multilingual, combining Ukrainian and Russian as well as English and Yiddish in the same poem. Like Khersonsky, multilingual authors are increasingly self-reflective about their linguistic choices, uses and the changes in them and have produced a number of works on the topic that have drawn the attention of scholars, as witnessed in some of the papers in this volume.

Similarly, questions of identity and belonging expressed through language choice and/or literary multilingualism can be found in migrant and transnational literature. For instance, in his *Kanak Sprak. 24 Mißtöne vom Rande der Gesellschaft* (1995) Turkish-German author Feridun Zaimoğlu mimics the German spoken by Turkish migrants, linking multilingual language use to the personal and social tensions around hybrid identity. While in such cases multilingualism becomes a critical reflection on glocal identities that is rather difficult to translate, in other cases it mirrors the inherently translational nature of the texts that employ it. In this respect Rebekka Walkowitz (2015) has

drawn our attention to the fact that an increasing number of contemporary novels are “born translated”, as authors are increasingly conscious of the potential of their work to be read by global audiences with different linguistic backgrounds (through translation). A major feature of such literary works is, according to Walkowitz, their multilingualism, as their authors intentionally incorporate different languages, which function as bridges to foreign readerships.

Contextual and functional aspects of multilingualism also come into play when we consider translations. Both an author’s and a translator’s linguistic and cultural skill-sets are shaped by their personal and societal surroundings, their exposure to different cultures, their access to texts and language learning trajectories. However, while the translator is supposed to fully master the main language of a multilingual text to be translated, he or she and the reader of the translation may not fully understand the other languages used in the original or the contextual cues that accompany their use. This often results in the “toning down” (Delabastita and Grutman 2005, 14) or misreading of multilingualism in translation. Recognising the linguistic and cultural complexity inherent in translating literary multilingualism, translation research has shown interest in exploring the linguistic nuances involved in transmitting multilingualism (Sternberg 1981; Chan 2002), the modes and effects of translated multilingualism (Delabastita 1993), as well as the cultural and political embeddedness of literary multilingualism, which determines both its existence and the way in which it is translated (Delabastita and Grutman 2005; Grutman 2006; Meylaerts 2011; Yildiz 2012; Dembeck and Barr 2017). Moreover, the more personal roles of identity, language ownership, notions of hierarchy and belonging among all parties involved – whether the author, the translator, the contemporary or later reader – play a crucial role in determining the ways in which literary multilingualism was and is treated. Directing the focus to multilingualism also helps to rediscover and recontextualise old research topics such as self-translation (Evangelista 2013). As the articles in this special issue show, the translation of literary multilingualism is already a multifaceted area of study and will undoubtedly continue to expand in the future.

### **Toward a multi-layered view of multilingualism in translation: The thematic threads of the special issue**

Given the diversity of multilingualism in literary texts and the various translation strategies within different cultural contexts, these topics deserve to be investigated through translation history across different linguistic and cultural regions. In this special issue, we have invited specialists from different countries and disciplines to provide their insights into research on different aspects of literary multilingualism and its relations with different kinds of translation activity. We have grouped the resulting

articles into three thematic sections that reflect different though overlapping and intertwined perspectives on the study of relations between literary translation and multilingualism. **The first section** (Strikha, Eidukevičienė and Aurylaitė, Verschik and Saagpakk, Nurmi) of the special issue is primarily focused on textual analysis. The articles discuss the functions of multilingualism in literary texts, and how multilingualism and its functions are preserved or lost in translation. The functional approach clearly implies a strong emphasis on the relations between textual evidence and its cultural and social context in all the articles of this section. The cultural context and the reception of multilingual literature in translation represent the specific focus of the articles in **the second section** (Bertacco, Ekberg). These articles focus on Caribbean literature, which has been described as “translational” (Morejón 2005, 973), and how hybrid multilingual voices in literature can and should be acknowledged, and translated. The articles included in **the third section** (Ivancic, Vlasta, Pellegrino, Boguna, Hansen) consider the cultural agents involved, that is, multilingual authors and translators, focusing on their linguistic trajectories and self-reflections. The order of the sections roughly coincides with the shift of attention in translation studies from the texts of the translations to their cultural context and eventually to the translators and other cultural agents involved in the translation process (see Snell-Hornby 2018; Chesterman 2009). We are convinced these three perspectives should not be understood as mutually exclusive, but on the contrary as complementary: only a combination of textual and contextual analysis with translator-focused studies can offer us a sufficiently complex understanding of the relations between multilingualism and translation.

The articulation of the material of this special issue in the three sections described above is of course only one of the possible ways of grouping the articles published here. Like every attempt at classification, this has some elements of the arbitrary, highlighting certain thematic aspects, overlooking others. The special issue is rather crossed by a series of thematic threads, which together advance a multi-layered view of literary multilingualism in translation. In what follows, we wish to unravel some of these threads and their interconnectedness, at the same time offering brief summaries of the articles published in this special issue.

The most direct approach to the issue of literary multilingualism in translation goes through a comparison of the multilingual passages of the originals with the equivalent passages in translation. In the articles of this volume, this kind of analysis is never just aimed at identifying and categorising **the strategies used in the translation of multilingualism**, this is rather a preliminary step to addressing more general textual and cultural issues. In their article, **Maris Saagpakk and Anna Verschik** propose a typology of the various techniques used to address multilingual usage in Baltic-German historical fiction and its translations into Estonian. This analysis does not represent an objective

*per se* and the article contextualises Baltic-German literary production in the rich multilingual setting of 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century Estonia. This leads Saagpakk and Verschik to emphasise the colonial aspects of language use by Baltic-German authors, which often downplayed or caricatured the linguistic difference of their Estonian others, thus affirming the hierarchical relations between the cultural elite of German-speaking aristocrats and the Estonian peasantry. Analysis of cases of manifest or latent multilingualism in Baltic-German literature and its translation in contemporary Estonia thus allows Saagpakk and Verschik to address a whole series of linguistic, cultural and social issues from a postcolonial perspective. **Iaroslava Strikha** similarly shows how an analysis of Ukrainian–Russian bilingualism in Ukrainian literature helps tackle the nation’s colonial history and its impact on contemporary culture. On the basis of a sample of contemporary English translations of Ukrainian literature, the article identifies five different strategies in the translation into English of passages in Russian, which range from the preservation of Russian in the translation to the complete erasure of the linguistic heterogeneity of the original. Strikha interestingly highlights the way in which, willingly or not, the strategies adopted by English translators resonate with the current discourse on postcolonial experience and decolonisation.

Traces of **colonial language hierarchies** and attitudes in literature and translation are at the centre of **Simona Bertacco’s** article on multilingualism and translation in postcolonial literature. An analysis of works by Canada’s First Nations writer Garry Thomas Morse and Jamaican writer Velma Pollard, leads Bertacco to conclude that in postcolonial contexts, multilingualism and translation should be seen as complementary rather than opposing phenomena. While so far multilingualism studies have focused on writing that uses multiple languages simultaneously and translation studies on the transfer from one language to another, the article shows how the two practices are intimately linked in the creative process of postcolonial literatures. Bertacco eventually proposes a translational model of reading for heterolingual texts. **Laura Ekberg** also describes the Caribbean context as a place in which multilingualism has become the unmarked form of language use, and how it is often impossible to draw borders between different languages. Her article investigates the most recent Caribbean literature, which is characterised by a shift of attention from the global to the local, mixing languages in a fluid way and thus differing from classical cases of heterolingualism, where languages are rather juxtaposed. This makes the task of the translator even more difficult than when there is standard code-switching. Ekberg’s analysis of the Finnish translations of contemporary Caribbean authors shows that the adopted strategies depend on whether the translator approaches texts as monolingual or heterolingual.

While in the articles mentioned so far the focus is on a (post)colonial setting, **Rūta Eidukevičienė** and **Kristina Aurylaitė** analyse literary multilingualism and its translation in **the context of migration**, which brings about the necessity to navigate a different linguistic and cultural space. The article studies the novels by two Lithuanian migrant writers of different generations, Antanas Škėma and Gabija Grušaitė, and the way in which foreign languages (mainly English) intrude into the Lithuanian text to produce various effects. Multilingualism indicates in these novels ways the characters (re)define themselves in the circumstances of displacement and discomfort, but also rootlessness and nomadism. Analysis of the English translations of the novels in question brings Eidukevičienė and Aurylaitė to the conclusion that in the case of migrant literature different translation strategies can inflame or pacify interlingual and intercultural tension. **Barbara Ivancic** does not study the texts of the translations, but rather the testimonies of multilingual emigre translators of different origin, living in Italy and Switzerland and translating into a language which is not their first language. An analysis of their biographies and self-reflection shows the intimate relationship between linguistic choices and the constitution of experiences and subjectivities. This allows Ivancic to develop a thorough critique of the notion of directionality in translation studies and more generally of binary dichotomies such as first language vs second language or mother tongue vs foreign language, which are highly questionable in the context of migration in our contemporary world. **Migration and exile** are discussed from the historical perspective by **Julija Boguna**, who analyses the layers and concepts of multilingualism in German exile magazines during the Nazi period, considering the statements on translation by translators, publishers, and authors. Boguna asks how translation was used to respond to multilingual contexts of exile, and what identitarian demands were met in this way. She concludes that translation developed different strategies of dealing with multilingualism and that these strategies could be used both for segregation from, and integration into the existing multilingual conditions faced by exiles.

While the study of multilingual translators is relatively new and has only recently attracted the attention of scholars within the so-called 'translator's turn' in translation studies, multilingual authors' translatorial activities have long been studied from the perspective of **self-translation**. However, as Ramona Pellegrino stresses in this special issue, the definition of self-translation is far from univocal, and analysis of multilingual authors and literature contributes to problematising it further. In her article, **Sandra Vlasta** examines the internationally acclaimed writer Jhumpa Lahiri's linguistic journey through English, Bengali and Italian. Lahiri is an interesting case because she not only changed, like Ivancic's translators, the language of her writings from English (her first language) to Italian (an adopted language), but also later switched languages



in the opposite direction as a translator of her own Italian work, as well as the works of other Italian writers, into English. The article traces Lahiri's trajectory from monolingual to multilingual writer and (self-)translator with particular attention to the tensions between Lahiri's self-fashioning as a multilingual writer and translator and the way in which she is perceived by publishers and critics. **Ramona Pellegrino's** article introduces the concept of literary translanguaging, focusing on authors who write in German as a second language and engage in self-translation into languages such as Japanese, Russian, Italian or Czech. The reasons and functions of self-translation in the literary activity of these authors are a good example of the complexity of the notion of self-translation and the diversity of its concrete realisations. While some of the cases fit a narrower definition of self-translation, others require a broader one. Some of the authors considered do not really fit any existing definition, possibly pointing to the need to rethink the concept of self-translation from the perspective of literary translanguaging. An interesting case in this respect is presented by **Julie Hansen** in her article about the translanguaging Greek-Swedish writer Theodor Kallifatides. Like Vlasta and Ivancic, Hansen bases her analysis on the author's language memoir and relates Kallifatides' reflection on languages and self-translation with his self-positioning as, at the same time, an insider and an outsider in Swedish society, which allows him a critical view on societal crises and rising xenophobia. The article also shows how the knowledge, revealed progressively in the book, that the Swedish text of the language memoir is actually a self-translation from Greek prompts a "readerly recalibration" that involves the Swedish reader in the author's act of translation.

Saagpakk and Verschik consider the issue of **historical distance** in the translation of literary multilingualism, examining the preservation of the multilingualism of older texts in modern translations. **Arja Nurmi** addresses similar issues, discussing in her article three 19th century French and German translations of Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*. While the use of passages from Latin, French, Greek and Italian in Sterne's book is explained by the educated background of the author and his readership as well as the playfulness and somewhat 'disjointed' nature of the narrative, the different patterns followed by translators in dealing with the novel's multilingualism are explained in the article in terms of the assumed linguistic skills of potential readers and publication norms in the target culture. While German translators mainly preserved the non-English passages, the French translator left out much of the Greek and Italian, providing at times intratextual translations for the Latin passages.

We have made an effort to keep the **geographical horizon** of this special issue as open and wide as possible, but entire continents (Asia and Africa) remain unfortunately out of the scope of the articles published here. Two articles analyse the post-Soviet region and period: Strihka discusses Ukrainian literature from the perspective of the

asymmetrical bilingualism that is the result of Soviet-era colonial policies, while Eidukevičienė and Aurylaitė showcase stories of Lithuanian immigrants in New York in the 1950s and 2010s (two notable waves of Lithuanian emigration to the West). Caribbean literature is the focus of two articles (Ekberg, Bertacco). German is added to the picture by Boguna, Pellegrino, Verschik & Saagpakk, and Italian by Ivancic, Pellegrino, and Vlasta, Swedish and Greek in Hansen's article and Estonian in Verschik's and Saagpakk's article. The **dominance of English** as the strongest power on the literary market makes itself visible in the current volume as well. Although other language combinations are presented, almost half of the articles include English as the target language of the considered translations (Eidukevičienė and Aurylaitė, Vlasta, Strikha, Ekberg, Bertacco).

The Special Issue closes with Marko Pajević's review of the first number of the *Journal of Literary Multilingualism* in order to underline the connections between research on literary multilingualism and translation practices.

Multilingualism as a research topic is currently being targeted from many angles: translation studies, literature and culture studies, contact linguistics, foreign and second language didactics, digital humanities. This widespread interest can be seen as a sign of cultural acceptance and tolerance, as well as curiosity about phenomena lying beyond the national and/or monolingual paradigm, which has recently become an object of critique and revision in many fields of the humanities and social sciences. We can therefore state that multilingualism as a literary practice has come to symbolise the globalisation and superdiversity of our societies.

As is often the case, the lens of translation sharpens the contours of the translation object. In order to translate literary multilingualism, translators have a choice of either smoothing out difference and heterogeneity, or engaging with and understanding the functions and effects, as well as personal and societal dimensions, of literary multilingualism. The study of multilingualism in the context of translation and translation in the context of multilingualism thus offers insights into how particular languages (and their speakers) have been and are perceived and treated in different cultures and societies, as well as how languages can be used to challenge such perceptions and treatments alongside the power relations on which they are grounded.

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## Kirjanduslik mitmekeelsus tõlkes: tekstid, kontekstid, agendid. Sissejuhatus

**Võtmesõnad:** kirjanduslik mitmekeelsus, tõlkimine, tõlkijad, enesetõlkimine, postkolonialism

**Daniele Monticelli** – Tallinna Ülikooli semiootika ja tõlkeuuringute professor. Ta uurib tõlkimist radikaalsete kultuuriliste ja sotsiaalsete muutuste kontekstis, keskendudes eelkõige tõlkimise rollile rahvusliku identiteedi (de)konstrueerimisel 19. ja 20. sajandil ning tõlkimisele kommunismi ajal NSV Liidus ja Ida-Euroopas. Ta on raamatute „Between Cultures and Texts: Itineraries in Translation History“ (2011), „Translation under Communism“ (2022) ja peagi ilmuva Routledge'i tõlkeuuringute ajaloo käsiraamatu (2024) kaastoiimetaja. Ta on tõlkinud mitmeid ilukirjandusteoseid eesti keelest itaalia keelde.

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