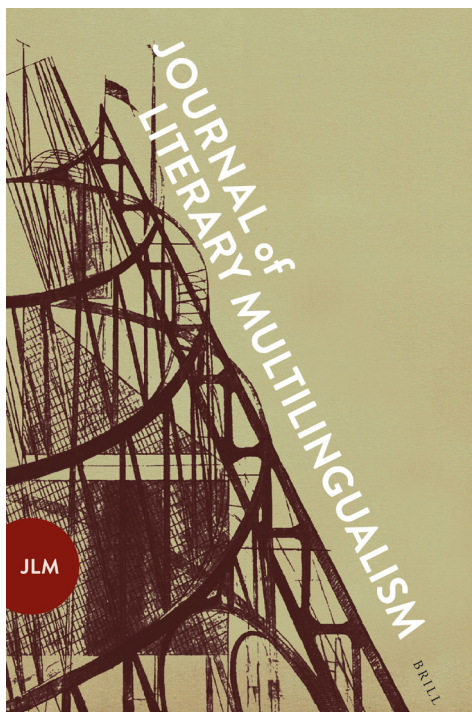


Under Review: *Journal of Literary Multilingualism*, Volume 1 (Brill, 2023)**Marko Pajević**DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7592/methis.v25i31-32.23325>

Literary multilingualism is nothing new. Writers have always adopted other languages, often more widespread or powerful languages, often simply the language of their new environment, to make themselves heard and read, and some famous 20th century writers were multilingual – Nabokov, Beckett and Conrad are prime examples. What is relatively new, however, is that the issue has gained traction as an academic field. That is the case because, in many countries and languages due to new intense forms of globalisation and migration, postcolonial and post-Cold War, we have a plethora of important writers who did not grow up, or only partly, with the language in which they write. Literary translanguaging (Kellman 2000) or exophonic literature (Arndt et al. 2007) has become a normality.

Starting with the new millennium, many publications on the topic have seen the light of day, in the last ten years particularly there has been a veritable explosion in scholarship on the matter with monographs, edited volumes, special issues, conference panels, symposia, articles and chapters, and now a journal devoted to questions



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of literary multilingualism. Natasha Lvovich, editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Literary Multilingualism* (JLM), sums this up as follows: “From diffused fragments located in distant corners of academia, we have come together to become a cohesive community of scholars, forged by a growing body of literature. Now it is time to establish a home” (p 4).

JLM published its first volume on 1 May 2023 and will appear online open access twice yearly with thematised issues reflecting the rich variety of literary multilingualism, as well as regular issues with mixed contributions. It is deliberately international and multidisciplinary, welcoming contributions from various fields dealing with the topic, be they comparative literature, linguistics, postcolonialism, multilingualism studies, history, psychology, cultural studies, or others. The journal is also open to multimodality and experimental formats and genres, and aims to transcend scholarly limits.

Many of the familiar names in the field are involved, with a strong contingent based in the USA. The editor-in-chief is Natasha Lvovich (City University of NY) and the reviews editor is Sandra Vlasta (University of Genua), who is also involved in the *Polyphonie Mehrsprachigkeit_Kreativität_Schreiben* multilingualism network based in Austria. Yasemin Yildiz (University of California, Los Angeles) is on the advisory board and Till Dembeck (University of Luxembourg), one of the editors of the series *Literarische Mehrsprachigkeit/Literary Multilingualism* with the German publisher Francke/Narr/attempto as well as of the German language handbook on the topic, is on the editorial board, together with Steven G. Kellman (University of Texas, San Antonio) and many more. Wideranging expertise and connections to relevant scholars in the field are guaranteed.

The editorial by Natasha Lvovich (pp 1–6) sketches the development of the field to give the rationale for this new journal, which wants to establish itself as the “flagship” (5) for the thriving scholarship, listing the reasons for the strong emergence of multilingual literature with an impressive geographical spread in recent times. Lvovich also mentions the *language memoirs* of those writers who went abroad to reinvent themselves in a new language, such as Jhumpa Lahiri or Jonathan Littell. She refers to numerous questions that have arisen in the field, for instance about the difference between exophonic writers who had to learn the language they write in at a later stage in life or writers who grew up bi- or trilingually, such as Nabokov. She also asks: how do we define a native language? And what effect do these things have on the reader?

JLM’s logo is Wladimir Tatlin’s constructivist Tower of Babel from the very early Soviet era. Tatlin’s tower was supposed to symbolise the overcoming of nationalism and xenophobia and to promote worldwide communication and holistic expression. It has never been built. The journal’s ambition is to work in this spirit, and so we should

wish it more luck than Tatlin. Literary multilingualism does indeed touch on so many relevant issues of contemporary societies and could and should have considerable impact on the pressing issues of our times.

Of course, the editors and contributors are aware of the fact that it is somehow contradictory to have a journal on literary multilingualism in the hegemonic language only, that is, English. But this is the *lingua franca* and these are the practicalities they encourage nevertheless code-switching and language-mixing and intend to keep all quotations in the original (with English translations). Additionally, they aim to have contributions from other languages (which will then be translated into English).

The inaugural issue discusses “key questions and debates” in the relatively young field of literary multilingualism studies. It is guest-edited by Juliette Taylor-Batty (Leeds Trinity University) and Till Dembeck, who are authorities in the field and who will also be in charge of an ongoing forum in each JLM issue titled “Reflections and Debates in Literary Multilingualism Studies”. This forum for debate will continue the questions and topics raised in this inaugural issue of JLM, in the form of short position papers, responses to earlier articles or round-table discussions.

Their introduction (7–14) to this themed issue also stresses the success story of the field, developing from a niche subject at the end of the twentieth century into a topic at the forefront of literary studies with wide ramifications in recent years. This success, they claim, also contains the risk of fragmentation, and so more dialogue is necessary to clarify and unify terminology and definitions worldwide. The issue is supposed to provide “a dynamic assessment of the field and its future” (9), to view and question existing practices and to open up new perspectives. It deals indeed with literary examples from all over the globe, even though the editors acknowledge that the contributing scholars are all based in the Global North. They are also acutely aware of the Anglocentric bias, in the topics, scholarly background and working language.

All contributions share a scepticism towards the “monolingual paradigm” (Yildiz 2012) and stress that multilingualism is much more than the mere multiplication of “monolingualisms”. The editors refer to the linguistic concept of “translanguaging” instead, which questions language hierarchies and ideologies and takes into account how language use cannot be fully grasped within the boundaries of one language, as well as how individuals communicate more fluidly and dynamically. It is indeed here that multilingual literary studies have a role to play to question the persisting institutional monolingual paradigm, including at universities. The concept of a national literary history is difficult to maintain today. The problem when we get rid of the national philologies, however, is also mentioned in the very aware and self-reflective introduction. It finally leads to the unified meta-language of English for scholarship and thus defeats what multilingual studies wants to promote, that is, an awareness

of the cognitive advantages of several worldviews (“Weltansichten”), as Humboldt put it. It is a difficult balancing act to avoid falling into that trap.

The issue contains two reviews and six articles.

Rainier Grutman (University of Ottawa), another authority in the field, intends to fill the gap in multilingual studies as it relates to the role of readers by referring to insights from reader-oriented criticism (15–36). His contribution demonstrates how many questions arise when looking closely at how readers deal with multilingual texts. Monolingual texts can be read multilingually and vice versa, nonsensical texts can be given meaning and vice versa. There is no control over a text’s multilingual potential.

Rachel Gilmour (Queen Mary University of London) challenges conceptions of “multilingualism” leaning on language practices of the Global South (37–54). She analyses the “unmooring” experienced by refugees using the example of the poet Yousif M. Qasmiyeh, who was born in a Lebanese refugee camp.

Espen Grønlie (Oslo International School of Philosophy, Rome) comments on Pound’s “collage-like” juxtaposition of languages which falsely suggests a celebration of multilingualism as a cultural fact, but parallels multilingualism with antisemitism, segregationist and racist beliefs, so multilingualism is not necessarily politically “progressive” or good as such (55–72). A multilingual poem does not necessarily promote a multilingual, diverse society.

Ena Selimović (Yale University) offers a reflection on what it means to know or not know a language, particularly when it is marked “foreign” (73–93). She starts from categorisations of people and languages to analyse the language memoirs of Jhumpa Lahiri and Dubravka Ugrešić in view of sociopolitical hierarchies and the hegemony of English.

Birgit Neumann (Heinrich-Heine-Universität Düsseldorf) examines recent Anglophone post-monolinguals novels, focusing on Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor’s *The Dragonfly Sea* (2019) and Karina Lickorish Quinn’s *The Dust Never Settles* (2021), which oppose the idea of a discrete and unitary idiom as well as related concepts of language possession (94–117). Neumann explores the complexities of post-monolingual novels with respect to the plurality of languages in the text and seemingly homogeneous spaces, as well as to the modes of reading and the logic of the market.

The last article, by Stefan Helgesson (Stockholm University/Rhodes University, Grahamstown), reads literary fiction as a negotiation of different regimes of comprehensibility, considering the story-world, the mediation of the book artefact and their interrelation (118–133). Literary multilingualism, Helgesson stresses in his analysis of works by Abdulrazak Gurnah and Zoë Wicomb, is not just context-sensitive but context-constituted and controlled by regimes of comprehensibility.

This first issue of this journal pays off wonderfully. It offers a rich mix of topics and cultural areas in the field of literary multilingualism and discusses and defines terminology, at the same time opening up the field to a variety of disciplines while questioning its own premises. If literary multilingualism continues in the spirit of this journal, it will continue to flourish and develop.

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