

Literary Multilingualism: Representation, Form, Interpretation

Introduction

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“COME PLAY BILINGUAL GAMES WITH ME,” writes Doris Sommer in the introduction (suitably titled “Invitation”) to her 2004 book *Bilingual Aesthetics*.¹ Sommer’s groundbreaking book, which revolves around the creative potential of multilingualism, was also intended to convince her readers of the benefits of living in more than one language for public, private, and intellectual life. In the years following its publication, Sommer’s book has become one of the milestones in literary studies’ increasing occupation with multilingual literature and questions of multilingual creation. Following a growing focus on issues of multiculturalism, mass migration, and globalization, literary studies have become more attuned to writers who “play bilingual games” and to the potential and possibilities found in multilingual writing. But, as Yasemin Yildiz points out, multilingualism is by no means an exclusively contemporary phenomenon: in fact, it is the idea of the monolingual society which is a relatively young one, closely tied to modernity and to the idea of the nation-state. Multilingual practices are much older than the monolingual paradigm. Yildiz characterizes our current condition as “the postmonolingual condition”—a term she uses to convey the tensions between the still dominant monolingual paradigm and reemerging multilingual practices.² Across the globe we can find writers who negotiate this paradigm and engage in different kinds of literary multilingual practices, whether it is writing in more than one language, transitioning from writing in one language to another, self-translating, or creating literary works that are themselves, to varying degrees, multilingual texts. And indeed, the past

¹ Doris Sommer, *Bilingual Aesthetics: A New Sentimental Education* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004). See also Sommer’s edited collection of essays, which explicitly aspired to create a new research field aimed at the aesthetic production of bilingual diasporic communities: Doris Sommer, ed., *Bilingual Games: Some Literary Investigations* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

² Yasemin Yildiz, *Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012).

decade has seen a proliferation of studies on literary multilingualism: from collaborative volumes exploring literary multilingualism from a comparative, critically informed perspective³ to studies focusing on specific historical periods, including those not traditionally examined through the lens of multilingualism;⁴ from studies theorizing specific practices of multilingualism such as code-switching⁵ to examinations of broader literary phenomena such as translanguaging⁶ or the relations between multilingualism and translation.⁷ Even the study of national literatures, which traditionally focused on literature written in the national language, has become increasingly interested in questions of literary multilingualism, as the field of Hebrew literature can demonstrate.⁸

The concept of literary multilingualism and the idea of a multilingual literature raise three central sets of questions, related to representation, form, and interpretation. These concern the political, aesthetic, and creative aspects of multilingual texts.

On the representational level, we can ask how literary texts reflect and embody the reality of a multilingual society, with its multilingual soundscapes of the everyday and the variety of linguistic encounters it offers. What kinds of interlingual relations can be found in such literary works? Do the different languages represented in the text remain as simultaneous parallel conversations, or do they create the effect of a translational literature? The representations of linguistic plurality and encounter, the aesthetics and politics of linguistic border zones, contact zones, or translation zones, and the role of translation—successful, partial, or failed—all have political implications in multilingual texts. Multilingualism can be employed in literature to challenge the national sphere (represented by the national language), to contest existing linguistic and cultural

³ E.g., Axel Englund and Anders Olsson, eds., *Languages of Exile: Migration and Multilingualism in Twentieth Century Literature* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2013); Liesbeth Minnaard and Till Dembeck, eds., *Challenging the Myth of Monolingualism* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2014); Rachael Gilmour and Tamar Steinitz, eds., *Multilingual Currents in Literature, Translation and Culture* (London: Routledge, 2018).

⁴ E.g., Juliette Taylor-Batty, *Multilingualism in Modernist Fiction* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Jonathan Hsy, *Trading Tongues: Merchants, Multilingualism, and Medieval Literature* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2013).

⁵ E.g., Jahan Ramazani, "Code-Switching, Code-Stitching: A Macaronic Poetics?," *Dibur Literary Journal* 1 (Fall 2015): 29–41.

⁶ Following Steven Kellman's foundational book on this subject: Steven G. Kellman, *The Translingual Imagination* (Omaha: University of Nebraska Press, 2000). For more recent examples see: Natasha Lvovich and Steven G. Kellman, eds., "Literary Translingualism: Multilingual Identity and Creativity," special issue, *L2* 7, no. 1 (2015); Michael Boyden and Eugenia Kelbert, eds., "Literary Translingualism," special issue, *Journal of World Literature* 3, no. 2 (2018).

⁷ See also the special issue of *Target* dedicated to this topic: Reine Meylaerts, ed., "Heterolingualism in/and Translation," special issue, *Target* 18, no. 1 (2006). For a study examining the intersection of multilingualism, translation, and space, see Sherry Simon, *Cities in Translation: Intersections of Language and Memory* (London: Routledge, 2012).

⁸ Given the multilingual roots of modern Hebrew literature, whose founding fathers were all bilingual or multilingual, and the close ties between modern writing in Hebrew and processes of nation building, this field is a particularly revealing example of Yildiz's main argument. And indeed, the past few years have brought a similar focus on multilingualism in the field, which can be seen in recent studies such as the following: Amir Eshel and Na'ama Rokem, eds., "German and Hebrew: Histories of a Conversation," special issue, *Prooftexts* 33, no. 1 (Winter 2013); Lital Levy, *Poetic Trespass: Writing between Hebrew and Arabic in Israel/Palestine* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014); Naomi Brenner, *Lingering Bilingualism: Modern Hebrew and Yiddish Literatures in Contact* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2016); Joshua Miller and Anita Norich, eds., *Languages of Modern Jewish Cultures* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016); Adriana X. Jacobs, *Strange Cocktail: Translation and the Making of Modern Hebrew Poetry* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018).

hierarchies (i.e., majority language vs. minority or immigrant languages), or to complicate traditional, rigid categories of identity. Writing multilingually opens up new, more nuanced possibilities of literary representation and of “poetic thinking”⁹ about human lives in their ever-changing social contexts, about movement across and within different social spaces, or about the always-existing mediation between selves and others.

But multilingual literature also raises a different set of questions, regarding its **forms**: How can multilingualism function as a creative force? Does multilingual literature lean toward specific artistic forms or create new, experimental, or hybrid forms? And, finally, what is the innovative potential of a multilingual aesthetics? To illustrate these questions about the forms of multilingualism, let us examine a bilingual poem by Israeli poet Almog Behar, which illustrates the unique traits of literary multilingualism from the formal aspect:

נסית לسانی, אל הנשיה הטלחיה
 ולא اعرف איך נערפה ממני
 بدون صوته שוב לעצמי לא צותחי
 ומע قلبي גם רוחי הלכה אחריה
 وبالحقوق كلام לא נותר לי ממנה
 لكن الخوف ان اخرج כבן חורג לה
 על כן, אחרי ש שמעת قلبي الاجوف
 צייתי כי יתقلب قلبي
 וקט ואقف עם לבי במהפכתו
 ימים ארוכים, ایام طويلة,
 ושנינו משננים: كيف نسیت لسانی,
 איך כך אל הנשיה הטלחיה.¹⁰

This poem demonstrates the creative potential of multilingual literature with regard to form. Written in Hebrew and in Arabic, the poem deals with the loss of the Arabic language, the language of the poet’s cultural background that was not passed on to him because of Israel’s attempts at linguistic unification, as part of its nation-building processes. The poem begins in Arabic, with the phrase “I have forgotten my language” (*nasitu lisani*)—while writing that very phrase in Arabic is a performance of regaining and remastering the forgotten language. Every line of the poem is divided in two—one half in Arabic and one in Hebrew, the two languages continuing one another in perfect harmony—a union which symbolizes the bicultural identity of the speaker and the possibility of Arabic and Hebrew coexisting within cultural creation and beyond. But the form of this poem, the ties between the two languages that compose it, is even more complex: the Hebrew part and the Arabic part of the line contain similar words, which are derived from the same roots but whose meanings are different in each language. This link between the words creates an innovative form that highlights the aesthetic possibilities of multilingual poetry in conveying political meaning: by emphasizing the proximity between the two languages the poem brings forth their common Semitic origin and highlights their cultural proximity, while also hinting at the places where they grew apart (“*nasitu*” and “*neshiya*” have a similar meaning related to forgetting in both languages, while “*a’rifu*” and “*ne’erfa*” are very far apart, and the effect of each of the lines containing these words stems from the proximity and the distances between these

⁹ Amir Eshel, *Poetic Thinking Today* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019).

¹⁰ Almog Behar, *Shirim la-asirei batei ha-sohar* [Poems for prisoners] (Israel: Indiebook, 2016), 54.

two interlinked words in the two languages). This demonstrates the unique innovative potential of multilingual forms and some of the “bilingual games” that can be played when writing in more than one language.

But Behar’s poem also raises another set of questions that we should ask about multilingual literature—concerning its **interpretation** by its readers. Every multilingual work has an “ideal reader,” who understands all the different languages and can therefore access the text in its entirety, and other readers, for whom one or more of the languages of the text remain illegible. In this sense, the multilingual text generates different levels of meaning and has different effects on different kinds of readers. The ideal reader of Behar’s poem, one who reads both Hebrew and Arabic, will be able to appreciate the meaning of every bilingual line, the harmonious flow between languages, and the wordplay between words with similar roots. This ideal reader will be able to extract different meanings from this multilingual form—meanings related to hybrid identities and the literary, cultural, and political potential of contact and interaction between the Hebrew and Arabic languages and the people who speak them. But the majority of Behar’s readers will not be that imagined ideal reader, and in this case, we should ask: What is the effect of this poem on readers who can read only one of its languages? What does it mean to read a text that is only partly legible to the reader, as multilingual texts are to a significant number of their readers? And how do multilingual texts “play” with this illegibility? In the case of this poem, its effect on the monolingual reader is different from its effect on the ideal reader: the monolingual reader is reminded, in every line, of something that is beyond their reach. When we consider that this poem concerns the forgetting of a language (the Arabic language, which was “forgotten” by children of immigrants from Arabic-speaking countries, because of the state’s efforts to create a monolingual national identity), the constant reminder to the monolingual reader of the existence of a language and a culture that remain beyond their reach is another way of conveying the poem’s political stance, another way of conveying what is lost with the loss of a language, and also a way of performing exclusion: the monolingual reader is partly excluded from this poem in the same way that the Arabic language and culture were excluded from the new Hebrew-speaking society. In this manner, this poem speaks differently to different readers, conveying through different means the message of what has been lost with the loss of a language—and what can be regained with learning it anew—and demonstrating the different kinds of readings that a multilingual text generates.

These three sets of questions about literary multilingualism—concerning the literary representation of a multilingual social existence or self, the creative forms of multilingualism, and the effect of the multilingual text on different kinds of readers—accompanied us as we set out to work on this special issue of *Dibur Literary Journal*. Each of the contributors to this issue deals with one or more of these aspects of literary multilingualism and examines them in literary writings from different cultural contexts and in different languages.

In her article “On the Frontier: Eugene Jolas and Multilingual Modernism,” Juliette Taylor-Batty explores the multilingual poetry of modernist writer, editor, and translator Eugene Jolas. Taylor-Batty demonstrates the experimental qualities of his multilingual poetry, which interweaves French, English, and German, and the ways it employs complex multilingual forms to transcend borders of language and national identity. Jolas’s multilingual poetics, she argues, centers on interlingual and intercultural difference and, through its unique stylistic multilingual

elements, involves its readers in an unsettling process of movement, migration, and transition which pushes them to challenge their own linguistic frontiers.

A similar challenge can be found in the literature discussed by Lital Levy in her article “Accent and Silence in Literary Multilingualism: On Postarabic Poetics,” which addresses an important and often overlooked aspect of multilingual existence—the accent. Levy theorizes the poetics of the accent and the role of accent and silence within the broader literary and cultural study of multilingualism through an analysis of what she calls “postarabic writing.” Her article examines accent and silence in postarabic texts through the lenses of affect, temporality, and language politics and demonstrates the challenges they pose to conceptions of nation, language, and identity.

Sherry Simon examines multilingualism and translation from a spatial point of view, by focusing on their embodiment in space. In “The Hotel as a Translation Site: Place and Non-place, Difference and Indifference,” she examines the hotel as a multilingual site of translation, which argues against the perception of multilingualism as a simple juxtaposition of languages. Through an examination of films (*The Grand Budapest Hotel*, *Lost in Translation*) and literature (*Between*), she demonstrates how the space of the hotel, as a translation site, highlights the complex interaction that exists between languages in a multilingual setting and their rival claims.

Sites of translation can also be found in Danny Luzon’s article “With the Loss of a Master-Signifier: Modernism and Translation in Lamed Shapiro’s American Yiddish Stories”—but in this case it is narration itself that becomes a translation site. Luzon explores the multilingual encounter between a Yiddish-inflected perception and the American locale in Lamed Shapiro’s stories. He argues that Shapiro’s mode of narration is translational, and as such, it puts an emphasis on the act of linguistic mediation itself. This is done in a manner that destabilizes the national language (in line with modernist aesthetics) but without giving up linguistic particularity. This translational style, Luzon argues, creates a new aesthetic language that can rearrange a fragmented social reality by creating encounters between the languages of self and other.

In “Multilingual Anxiety and the Invention of the Hebrew Native: A Reading of a Hebrew Feuilleton by S. Ben Zion,” Roni Henig writes about the anxieties of multilingualism within Hebrew’s revival discourse and the relationship between multilingualism, muteness, nation building, and the formation of Hebrew subjectivity in early twentieth-century Hebrew literature. Her close reading of a 1907 satirical feuilleton by S. Ben Zion, which features characters trying to maintain a Hebrew-speaking household within a multilingual environment, demonstrates how Ben Zion satirically narrates Hebrew revival as a chaotic Babel and exposes the multilingual anxieties underlying it.

Zooming out from the individual text to a multilingual social reality, Naomi Brenner’s article, “The Many Lives of *Sabina*: ‘Trashy’ Fiction and Multilingualism,” examines the circulation and translation of popular literature in a multilingual environment. Focusing on the circulation of Yiddish and Hebrew romance-adventure novels in Mandatory Palestine and the early statehood days of Israel, Brenner argues that these mass-produced novels, condemned at the time for being foreign and corrupt, became a site of multilingualism, creating an alternative cultural space with linguistic dynamics that differed from the “high” literary culture of the time.

Finally, in “Does Literary Translingualism Matter? Reflections on the Translingual and Isolinguual Text,” Steven G. Kellman reflects on translingual literature (literature written in a language different from the author’s mother tongue) and asks whether there are certain defining

characteristics that distinguish it from isolingual literature (written in the author's native language). Through an exploration of a broad array of texts, Kellman concludes that translanguaging texts are often metalingual, turning attention to language itself, and as such they are more attuned to ambiguity and demonstrate a greater awareness of relativity.

The articles in this issue are accompanied by an artistic contribution: a literary essay by Ronit Matalon, one of the most important voices in contemporary Israeli fiction,¹¹ translated from Hebrew by Jessica Cohen. The daughter of immigrants from Egypt, with family dispersed across three continents, Matalon wrote novels infused with multilingualism. Her Hebrew makes space for different languages and, through them, for more open and fluid conceptions of identity. In the essay we present here, "The Ramshackle House: Who Does Arabic Belong to When It Is Present in Literature? Thoughts about Literature, Arabic, and Hebrew," Matalon reflects on the changing role of Arabic in her own writing throughout her literary career and within the broader context of Mizrahi women writers of her generation. Matalon is occupied with the question of ownership over the language ("who does Arabic belong to when it is present in [Hebrew] literature? Who owns it, how, and for what purpose?"). "The presence of Arabic," she writes, reflecting on her own literary career, "demanded an opening. . . . The Arabic that was the language of the image turned into the language of the characters, who became people. It turned into the natural language of those human beings. More importantly, it turned into the language of the author. Not in the sense that I began to write in Arabic, but rather in the way I came to see, over and over again, how the syntax and the cadence, as well as some of the vocabulary and concepts of my childhood Arabic, seeped into my Hebrew and changed it."

As Matalon writes, the presence of "other" languages in literary texts "demand[s] an opening." The articles included in this volume respond to this call and offer diverse perspectives on literary multilingualism in different cultural contexts, providing new insights into its representational, formal, and interpretational aspects. A

¹¹ On Matalon's fiction, see, for example, two journal special issues dedicated to her work: Tamar Hess, ed., special issue, *Prooftexts* 31, no. 3 (Fall 2010); Yaron Peleg, Michal Ben-Naftali, and Yigal Schwartz, eds., "Zot 'im ha-panim eleinu: 'al yetzirata shel Ronit Matalon" [The woman facing us: On Ronit Matalon's oeuvre], special issue, *Mikan* 18 (Fall 2018).