

Nevena Stamenković, Ksenia Maksimovtsova, Tom Clucas (eds.)

Multilingualism as a Concept for the Study of Culture

Interdisciplinary and Transnational Approaches

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Berlin, St. Petersburg, London, October 2021

Nevena Stamenković, Ksenia Maksimovtsova and Tom Clucas

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INTRODUCTION

TOM CLUCAS, KSENIA MAKSIMOVTSOVA AND NEVENA STAMENKOVIĆ

1. Multilingualism: Concept, Method, or Condition?

The American poet and essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote that “[l]anguage is a city to the building of which every human being brought a stone” (Emerson 1909: 190). In an increasingly globalised world, the recognition of this fact is essential for our understanding of the interactions between people and cultures. However, multilingualism is not only an inherent part of our experience and a fundamental part of our linguistic condition. It also brings with it many challenges: challenges of integration and participation for ordinary language users, challenges of policy and strategy for politicians and educators and methodological challenges for the scholars who study it. The editors of a recent volume entitled *The Multilingual Challenge* recognise these complex issues, arguing that:

Today’s global rush to learn English as a Lingua Franca [...] has to do with the desire to escape the perceived nefarious effects of linguistic division and fragmentation and to construct instead the dream of a unified language, even though this monolingual dream is accompanied by the fear of losing one’s cultural soul and one’s unique historical identity (Jessner/Kramersch 2015: 6).

From its origins in applied and sociolinguistics, the concept of multilingualism has proliferated across disciplines, gaining traction throughout the humanities and social sciences. However, this process entails a great plurality of definitions and methods. The aim of this book is to explore and make sense of this diversity, in order to introduce multilingualism as an important concept for the study of culture.

Specifically, we argue that multilingualism is a travelling concept in the sense devised by Mieke Bal (2002). At first glance, this proposition might seem to be a contradictory one: how can a global phenomenon such as multilingualism be said to ‘travel’? Like all concepts, however, multilingualism has different meanings in its various national and disciplinary contexts. Bal (2002: 11) argues that “[e]ven those concepts that are tenuously established, suspended between questioning and certainty, hovering between ordinary word and theoretical tool, constitute the backbone of the interdisciplinary study of culture – primarily because of their potential intersubjectivity”. In this sense, multilingualism possesses a great capacity for travel, since it hovers between the status of concept, method, and condition, means different things when considered in different national and international contexts, and has accrued different definitions in fields as diverse as linguistics, education, literary studies, psychology, sociology, politics, international relations, and neuroscience, to name just a few. By opening up dialogues between these various fields and between different national perspectives, this book offers to de-

velop multilingualism as a travelling concept for the study of culture. Examining the ways in which individuals, groups, communities, and institutions deal with multilingualism provides important insights into how languages as meaning-making devices can be used to legitimise or challenge existing power patterns, and to enable the transnational circulation of knowledge, values, and identities.

With such contextual variety, the definition of multilingualism is of course open to debate, though in a broad sense it may be defined as “the capacity of societies, institutions, groups and individuals to engage on a regular basis in space and time with more than one language in everyday life” (Franceschini 2009: 33). The negotiation of language choices between individuals, minority and majority groups and institutions in multilingual contexts is very much linked to questions of language politics, relations of power, and language ideologies. A multilingual person can draw upon a greater variety of linguistic resources than a monolingual one, however the value and the function of these multilingual repertoires varies greatly according to the language politics of each specific communicative environment (Blommaert/Collins/Slembrouck 2005: 211). The heritage language of an immigrant, for instance, can be considered a valuable resource or a difficult obstacle that hinders successful integration into a monolingual society. It is thus crucial to see language not just as a communication vehicle, but also as a semiotic resource, which is invested with social and cultural interests (*ibid.*: 199) and at the same time offers semiotic potential and enables meaning-making processes which respond to and challenge the existing power relations.

The negotiation of language choice and language power becomes particularly relevant in today’s national and transnational contexts marked by globalisation, migration, postcolonial and post-communist nation building. The book addresses a number of these contexts including case studies on language ideology and language politics in various post-Soviet countries, as well as in Austria and Germany concentrating on debates on language politics and policies produced by political elites, educational institutions, or the mass media. These studies illustrate how questions of language choice and language attitudes are intrinsically linked to identity-positioning. Language policies can be seen as standardisation practices which legitimise the use of a particular language variety, often imposing national identities through educational policies (Blackledge 2005: 46). Collective or social multilingualism thus often stands against the idea of linguistic unity and purity which lies at heart of nation-building processes in Europe and beyond.

The chapters dealing with representations of multilingualism in literary fiction show how this kind of symbolic domination and political standardisation can be challenged through the diverse meaning-making potential multilingual authors have at their disposal. By employing techniques such as code-switching and code-mixing, and creatively engaging in language play, the authors of these works create alternative realities, inscribe alterity and challenge our abilities to decode symbolic systems. Hubert Zapf’s (2002) idea of literature as cultural ecology applies very well to the diverse works of fiction presented in this book. By writing multilingual fiction and dealing with issues of multilingualism and multiple identities in societies where national and linguistic unity