

**CHALLENGING THE MYTH OF MONOLINGUALISM EDITED BY LIESBETH
MINNAARD AND TILL DEMBECK**

Challenging the Myth of Monolingualism, Liesbeth Minnaard and Till Dembeck (eds.).
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The enduring myth of monolingualism – the idea that one’s expression is limited to a single language – stems from the ideology of nineteenth-century Romanticism, which adopted ‘nation’ as the principal criterion in the processes of language standardisation and consequent formation of literary canons. The establishment of such norms has had a profound impact on linguistic policies of today’s West-European societies. To this effect, the interrogation of the validity of concepts such as ‘mother tongue’ and ‘nativity’ emerges as one of the major concerns of *Challenging the Myth of Monolingualism*. While acknowledging that the stigma surrounding multilingualism is a wider social issue, Liesbeth Minnaard and Till Dembeck, editors of the reviewed volume, decide to address primarily its cultural aspects, particularly those involving its artistic forms.

On the whole, the editors approach the subject from a modern perspective, underpinning it with sidelong glances to earlier practices, with a view to demonstrating that multilingualism – rather than monolingualism – is ‘the sign of our present time’ (9). Of particular interest in this respect is Till Dembeck and Georg Mein’s article ‘Philology’s Jargon: How Can We Write Post-Monolingually?’, which tackles the issues emanating from the so-called ‘post-monolingual condition’. The article’s theoretically informed assessment of the alternatives available to the monolingual paradigm suggests that the impossibility of reversing the current trend is due to the complexities of the newly formulated hybrid forms that escape the existing categorisations of languages.

What sets this volume apart from previous scholarship is that academic investigations of the topic are interspersed with chapters by creative writers. The volume is structured to link each of four texts by creative authors with a corresponding academic text that focuses on a complementary facet of the phenomenon under study. Ramsey Nasr’s poem ‘mi have een droom’ along with Chika Unigwe’s short story ‘Eèchtenteèchtig’, both printed in full here, masterfully combine the elements of two – or more – traditions with a view to destabilising the supposedly fixed interlingual relations. Furthermore, Fouad Laroui’s and Yoko Tawada’s self-reflective accounts of composing art in more than one language add a new – often neglected – dimension to the discussed matter. Finally, the six remaining chapters are either purely theoretical in nature or explore writers other than the ones represented here.

Chapters oriented towards specific cases deal, in broad terms, either with multilingualism resulting from a territorially intricate situation, or with that springing from writer-specific circumstances. Under scrutiny are a number of contemporary localities, including Morocco, various cities in Belgium, the European Union, as well as some historical ones such as early 20th-century Prague. Fouad Laroui’s examination of the literary choices arising from the linguistic discrepancy between Classical Arabic and its regional varieties in Morocco is a challenge to the understanding that presupposes an inextricable interrelation between one ‘national language’ and one ‘national literature’. In outlining viable patterns that contemporary Moroccan authors take outside their immediate context, Laroui points towards the increasing prominence of works published not only in French, ‘the language of the ex-colonizer’ but ‘even [in] languages with no local ties’, as is the case with English (43). In response to Laroui’s fairly pessimistic approach that overlooks the creative potential of a

polyglot society, Madeleine Kasten puts forward the idea of a transnational literature where multilingualism would become 'a strength rather than a curse' (51).

If we go a step further and juxtapose the present linguistic situation of Morocco with that of the early 20th-century Prague, the linguistic dualism of which is neatly outlined in David Gramling's article, many similarities can arise. There is nothing unusual about the fact that many writers caught in the 'double monolingualism' of the city experimented with code switching between Bohemian and German. What stands out, however, is Gramling's idea that in a multilingual context, the persistent use of one language can function as 'an aesthetic medium' (18). To Gramling, the choice of German in Kafka's oeuvre is actually a denunciation of the imposed hierarchy, aimed at revealing the weaknesses of literature restricted to a single language.

While it is difficult to draw a clear-cut distinction between experiments resulting from statal specificities and those inspired by a mixed personal background, a range of chapters place emphasis on the latter factor. Esther Kilchmann looks into the works of three contemporary German authors brought up bi- or multilingually: Herta Müller, José Oliver, and Yoko Tawada. Kilchmann suggests that, despite these writers' proficiency in their respective languages, heterolingual texts of theirs are artificial – or literary – constructs, intended to defamiliarise the content for a presumably monolingual reader. In another chapter, one of these writers Yoko Tawada reflects on the intimate process of her own literary production, shedding light on the unique experience provoked by the interaction with disparate writing systems (the German and the Japanese one, in her case). In lieu of translating individual words, Tawada attempts to render images, as she is of the opinion that the meaning inscribed in the very shape of a letter cannot be preserved in transliteration. Tawada's essay brings up the question of the role of translation in her own fiction, which is adequately addressed in the ensuing chapter. Written by Tawada's translator Bettina Brandt, this chapter provides a stylistic study of translation techniques, such as literal translation, computer translation, non-translation, and self-translation, which Tawada employs in her translingual fiction, therefore supporting Kilchmann's assertion that multilingual experimentation is a creative construct rather than a spontaneous byproduct of exposure to different tongues.

It should be noted that the book's attempt to counterbalance 'the dominance of Anglophone contexts in academic research' (11) by drawing examples from a variety of cultures different from the Anglophone ones is somewhat subverted by the fact that the authors use no other language but English (with the exception of primary texts) to reach a wider audience in their discussion of linguistic complexities induced by the growth of multiculturalism, thereby confirming rather than undermining English's dominance. Apart from this slight contradiction, the volume, indeed, encompasses a remarkable array of examples. Such an outcome is achieved through a careful selection on two levels: firstly, of artists – not just writers in the classic sense – as epitomised by Guillermo Gómez-Peña's multimedial performance; and, secondly, of works that shift between cultures with little or no geohistorical ties, for instance Japanese and German, Nigerian and Flemish, Palestinian and Dutch, to name but a few. What connects the most wide-ranging of chapters is a well-structured argumentation, based on the discrepancy between the perception and institutionalisation of multilingualism, on the one hand, and its real distribution, on the other hand, which gives the volume solid internal consistency.

Although the discussion on multilingualism has already gained some prominence – thanks to the scholarship of Reine Meylaerts, Rainier Grutman, Dirk Delabastita, and others – research into the artistic manifestations of multilingualism, as exemplified here, is still peripheral in comparison to that directed towards the cognitive or institutional grasp of the topic. To that end, Minnaard and Dembeck's *Challenging the Myth of Monolingualism* is a

valuable addition to the field. More importantly, the contribution of this joint endeavour lies in the attempt to refute the powerful myth of presumed equivalency between nation and its national language, the implications of which exceed the immediate scope of literature. The warning that the increasingly complex linguistic landscapes of today can no longer be reduced to fit the existing models is also a call for a more sophisticated methodological framework. Hopes remain that the intriguing cases of multilingual interventions examined in this volume will stimulate further discussion, ultimately deepening our understanding of linguistic plurality and heterogeneity.