A New Babel: Multilingualism, Translingualism, and Translation in Contemporary Literature
Introduction to the Monographic Section

Let us begin with the title of the present section. The reference to the Tower of Babel comes, of course, from the biblical story; yet in today's context we read that story in a very different light. In the Bible, linguistic diversity is framed as a punishment and an obstacle – what we might now call a barrier to global communication. In contrast, if we look at European and non-European literatures of the past few decades, we clearly see what Yasemin Yildiz (2012) has called, in her now well-known book, the "*post-monolingual condition*": A condition in which literature moves beyond national and monolingual boundaries, shaped by the ongoing realities of migration and displacement. National literatures are increasingly permeated by different forms of multilingualism, ranging from the use of foreign words within a single language, to mixing multiple codes, registers, and idioms within a single text, or to writing simultaneously in two or more different languages. In a recent essay, Steven Kellmann (2020) argues that the monolingual paradigm, built around the notions of native speaker and national language, is rooted in a kind of linguistic family romance, one that defines the speaker's relationship to her/his mother tongue in terms of fidelity and betrayal. He clearly challenges the pervasive use of these metaphors: Translingualism rather than being an abnormality is becoming more and more a new norm.

Criticism that engages with translingual and transcultural writing often does so in celebratory terms, embracing diversity, difference, and plurality as signs of

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creative and cultural vitality. This is, of course, not a purely contemporary paradigm. Linguistic variety has long had its advocates. In his *Nouveaux essais sur l'entendement humain* (*New Essays on Human Understanding*), Leibniz spoke of the "marvellous variety" of the operations of the human mind, adding that even the origins of peoples might be illuminated through solid etymologies, best furnished by the comparison of languages –[1] a view that reinforced his positive evaluation of linguistic diversity. And with Wilhelm von Humboldt we arrive at a foundational idea: That language is the formative organ of thought.[2] Languages do not simply represent what we think – they produce thought itself. As Humboldt writes, languages are not merely tools for expressing truths already known, but rather instruments for discovering truths that are still unknown. Since there is no single language, but rather a plurality of languages, human thought is always shaped through multiple semantic worlds. The diversity of languages, then, is not only a matter of different sounds or signs – it is a diversity of worldviews.

To return to the paradigm of Babel: If we follow these defenders of linguistic variety, we can say that the point is this: Historical and social meanings, as shaped through language, are cultural creations. They are autonomous, and cannot be deduced from any prior, universal sense. If plurality is the very origin of language, then Babel is no longer a symbol of dispersion or guilt. It becomes a founding idea. The astonishing plurality of languages implies a corresponding plurality of cultural creations – creations that are not united by a single, shared reference point. Each language and each culture shapes its own unique relationship with the world and with reality. And it does so through a process that is, by its very nature, aporetic and uncertain: A kind of creation that carves out its own path as it moves forward. And it is precisely because linguistic and cultural plurality is

[1] "[…] la connaissance de notre esprit et de la merveilleuse variété de ses opérations. Sans parler de l'origine des peuples, qu'on connaîtra par le moyen des étymologies solides que la comparaison des langues fournira le mieux" (Leibniz 1966, 293).

[2] "Die Sprache ist das bildende Organ des Gedanken" (Humboldt 1963, 191).

original and foundational that translation emerges as the emblematic state of culture. Translation, while always risky and imperfect, is both possible and necessary. It is the space where difference is not only acknowledged, but also negotiated and sustained.

But what about the untranslatable? From this perspective, the untranslatable simply bears witness – when faced with the incommensurability of linguistic and cultural systems – to the absence of a neutral, objective middle ground that would allow for automatic or universal transposition. It reminds us that there are no easy hermeneutic shortcuts. Yet, this limit also carries a renewed premise for dialogue. The fact that another language or culture cannot be fully aligned with our own, that it remains in some way foreign to us, calls for an additional effort of understanding. It requires a constant widening of interpretive categories, and it becomes, at the same time, a vital source of new creativity.

And yet, we only need to look at our everyday lives to realize how untimely this vision is and how few defenders language has today in its diversity, ambiguity, and obscurity – just as it had few in the past. From the very beginning of philosophy and scientific thought in ancient Greece, language was seen as a poor image of the world and an obstacle to true knowledge. Plato – and with him a large part of the European philosophical tradition – dreamed of the absence of language as a condition for true knowledge.

Today, we find ourselves in a peculiar situation. Modern media have triggered an explosion of linguistic activity, both spoken and written. Silence and moments without linguistic expression have almost disappeared from our lives. It seems, at first glance, that there is no danger for the future of language.

And yet, language is endangered – both in terms of *langues* and in terms of language itself, that is, the very linguistic nature of the human species. Yes, people still speak and write, but in fewer and fewer, and increasingly impoverished, languages. According to the linguist Jürgen Trabant, modernization reduces the number of languages, and globalization lowers the status of those that remain (Trabant 2016, 135-140). Political interests – or the internal policies of nation-

states – often lead to the marginalization, or even outright discrimination, of minority languages. The abandonment of many languages seems inevitable. According to serious projections, only about 600 of the nearly 6,000 languages spoken today will survive by the end of this century. The “big” languages – that is the national languages – will not disappear. But they will be degraded into vernaculars within the global order. What we are witnessing is the return of a language regime comparable to the medieval diglossic system in Europe. In the Middle Ages, Latin functioned as the language of high discourse and long-distance communication, while the vernaculars were used for everyday, local speech. In a process that lasted from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century this structure was overturned: The European vernaculars gradually rose to the status of high languages. Nations took pride in this elevation, adapting their languages structurally and lexically to meet all discursive, intellectual and artistic needs. The enthusiastic appropriation of their languages was at the same time an explosion of unprecedented scientific and cultural creativity.

According to Trabant, we are now at a new turning point: Global English has become the new high language, while all other languages are being reduced to low languages, suitable only for everyday communication. The status of these languages is declining; their potential for growth is increasingly limited. At the same time, a new English-speaking aristocracy is emerging, deepening the social divide across European societies and condemning many older cultures to either oblivion or, at best, to a folkloric form of survival – we have already seen that in former colonial contexts.

Trabant significantly highlights another dimension of change in our societies that is shaping the way we use language: Its rationalization. We are witnessing an increasing demand for precise, scientific, or practically motivated designations of objects – designations that lie, so to say, beyond language, at its outer limit: In the direction of its scientific refinement. The need of objective designation in the scientific, technological and commercial fields tends to eliminate both the expressive and the appellative functions of language. Language gets reduced to a

system of signs, stripped of nuance, emotion, and ambiguity. Technological sophistication, far from enriching language, actually puts its very nature at risk. What is endangered is language as a human synthesis of expression, appeal, and representation.

Even if some of these scenarios may seem exaggerated, the reality that we have to keep in mind is that – just as in the past – very few of us today still view linguistic diversity as a form of richness. Even fewer recognize that the vagueness and opacity of language are not faults, but rather necessary conditions for non-scientific, creative speech, and, as such, preconditions for truth and for scientific discovery itself. This positive view of linguistic diversity and of language's "vague" semantics remains a minority position, the more as it is contrary to the rational and standardizing tendencies of the globalized world.

It is in the field of literature and the arts that the richness, diversity, and interplay of languages still retain their value. Here, as we noted at the outset, we are witnessing a fertile reappropriation of languages, which are able to display the creative and innovative power inherent in them (see the phenomenon of "codemeshing"; Canagarajah 2011). With Canagarajah, translingualism shows that language does not develop in a linear manner and that "parts of a language can influence different competencies in a different language" (Canagarajah 2009, 22). According to Sara Vogel and Ofelia García, translingualism helps to demonstrate that "rather than possessing two or more autonomous language systems, as has been traditionally thought, bilinguals, multilinguals, and indeed all users of language, select and deploy particular features from a unitary linguistic repertoire to make meaning and to negotiate particular communicative contexts" (Vogel & García 2017, 1). Translingualism thus calls into question the concepts of "correctness" or "mistake" with respect to the standard norm and, in doing so, reveals the limits of taxonomic categories that for decades have been treated as immutable and fixed – such as the "prestige" accorded to a majority language over one spoken by a minority, or the clear-cut distinction between "language," "dialect," and "linguistic variety."

It is in this respect that the Martinican writer Édouard Glissant discusses the relationships between different languages, distinguishing among domination, fascination, multiplicity or contagion, polite subservience or mockery, tangency, subversion, and intolerance. He emphasises that defending languages is a way of safeguarding diversity and thereby making possible a rebalancing of relations between communities. For Glissant, the vertigo produced by multiplicity constitutes a reversal of the apocalyptic myth of Babel, and he observes that in every language it is possible to build the Tower.[3] In his *Traité du tout-monde* (*Treatise of the Whole-World*), he defines multilingualism as one of the modes of imagination, and declares that its task is maintaining languages, helping to save them from wearing out and disappearing. What is at stake here is not simply the need to safeguard linguistic plurality, but rather the determination to listen to the different voices of the world and the recognition that we live and express ourselves in a situation that is not – and must not be – monolingual. It is no coincidence that Glissant repeatedly underscores that he writes in the presence of all the world's languages. Universality, generalisation, and simplification appear not only as means of facilitating exchange but also as forms of distortion: The Other has the right to be heard in its specificity, even when such heterogeneity entails an unavoidable degree of non-understanding. The "right to opacity" thus affirms that every person, culture, or identity may remain partially incomprehensible and that they don't have to be reduced to a single, transparent truth.

The contributions gathered in this monographic issue of *NuBE* represent a selection of the papers presented at the conference *A New Babel: Multilingualism, Translingualism, and Translation in Contemporary Literature* (26-28 May 2025), here published in their revised versions. The conference, held at the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures of the University of Verona, took place within the framework of the research project *Representations of Otherness,*

[3] "Il est donné, dans toutes les langues, de bâtir la Tour" (Glissant 1990, 123).

Diversity, and Marginality in Contemporary Literatures, which is part of the Department's Excellence Project. This project aims to investigate the most significant developments in contemporary literature as a means of interrogating the cultural structures that shape our societies. Particular attention is devoted to the plural constitution of these structures, as well as to the mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion that emerge in relation to the ways in which we perceive and narrate an increasingly interconnected and globalised world. From this perspective, the conference sought to create a space in which to explore various forms of multilingualism and translingualism (acquired, learned, practiced, lost, or abandoned), which have become increasingly prominent phenomena in contemporary literature – especially among authors who do not write in their first language but, rather, in the dominant language of the country to which they have migrated either out of necessity or personal choice, or in which they live, experiencing their condition as either one of exile or of belonging.

Over the last few years, research in this field has gained strength and significance, particularly in light of theories on cultural translation and of concepts developed in the field of postcolonial studies, such as hybridization, *métissage*, transculturation, and the creolization of cultures, languages and identities. Studies on the subject are now broad and diverse, yet the topic cannot be considered exhausted. Moreover, the current historical-political context calls for new interpretations and shifts in emphasis. While it is clear that the phenomenon cannot be confined to an exclusively linguistic or literary analysis, it also seems necessary to move beyond the tendency, from various scholarly quarters, to celebrate and idealize self-translation and hybridity. The inherent risk here lies in overlooking the cultural and linguistic alienation tied to self-translation. Far from representing merely an act of free border-crossing, multilingual and translingual literature invite reflection on power dynamics and relationships between dominant and marginalized languages. Furthermore, they invite to explore the role played by factors such as linguistic culture as related to the mindset of the intended readers, the structure of public opinion, or the characteristics of the literary market.

In this sense, the contributions gathered here all focus on literary production from the early 2000s onward, with some essays devoted to multilingualism and translingualism as they unfold between literature and other media (comics, graphic poetry, theatre, video installations, etc.). They examine the themes and forms of the inner dialogue with one's mother tongue in the writing process, particularly in relation to the distinction between latent multilingualism and manifest multilingualism. Other essays explore the dynamics of language change as a prerequisite for literary writing that confronts the urgency of testimony and the use of a foreign language as a filter through which to communicate what was or is otherwise inexpressible. Still others engage with the paradigm of "self-translation", understood both as the translation of one's own text into another language and as a "translation of the self", that is, the transposition of one's identity into another linguistic-cultural context, or into a self that inhabits another language. Another theme explored is multilingualism and translingualism among minorities, at the "margins", in the context of new exiles and new diasporas.

The languages used during the conference were English and Italian. The contributions published here reflect this linguistic diversity.

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