

## **Report on the Conference ‘Immigrant Literature - Writing in Adopted Languages’**

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### **0. Introduction**

The basic theme of the Brussels conference was the implications of literary writing in a second language, from a linguistic, literary, and intercultural perspective. The following fundamental questions were to be discussed at the conference: Why do writers choose a second language for writing? And does this phenomenon constitute an added value for multilingualism and intercultural dialogue? The aim of this report is thus to offer a summary of the conference and a concentrated bundling of the discussions on the main topics, which the invited experts – literary scholars, writers, linguists, sociologists, scholars of culture, as well as mediators of literature from mainly European countries (Belgium, Germany, Austria, Italy, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Denmark, Romania, as well as Russia and the US) – addressed on that day. As part of the various time modules of the conference, in the greetings and talks, the panel discussions and readings focussed on various thematic areas, some of which were discussed quite controversially. This report concentrates on the main lines of discussion and the points made by conference participants, and in so doing adheres to the chronology of the conference day.

### **1. Welcome Speeches and Keynote Speech**

In their greetings, Anne-Marie Sigmund (EESC member), Margareta Hauschild (President, EUNIC Brussels), and Leonard Orban (EU Commissioner for Multilingualism) emphasised the increasing relevance of the phenomenon of multilingualism especially in and for Europe. Political aims conjoin with sociological and cultural ones if, as Leonard Orban explained, multilingualism is not just reflected in literature, but also the linguistic and cultural potential

of immigrants in reference to intercultural concerns would be recognised and taken into account. Orban stressed the significance of a literature by authors who adopted the language of their country of immigration as their literary language for connecting different cultures. Such texts, he continued, allow for the 'exchange of experience' and strengthen mutual understanding by leaving the 'culture of their origin between the lines', or the texts 'cast a light on the host country' from a special perspective. In their intermediate position, the authors are forced to give up a part of their own culture in order to better understand a new country. They live, he said, in a 'divided self' and have to become part of the foreign culture, thus both cultures enter a reciprocal relationship that could become a role model for a prudent interculturalism. According to Leonard Orban, such multilingualism can also create a more politically open Europe, which the European Union strives for.

After the welcome speeches, the writer Jaques de Decker (Permanent Secretary of the Académie Royale de Langue et de Littérature françaises de Belgique) presented the proposals of the group of intellectuals for intercultural dialogue, which had been established by the European Commission. These proposals had been developed over several months between June and December 2007, and were then published in the final report 'A Rewarding Challenge: How the Multiplicity of Languages Could Strengthen Europe' (Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 2007). Members of this group were, in addition to Jaques de Decker, the writer Amin Maalouf (chair), Jutta Limbach, (President, Goethe-Institut), the communications expert Sandra Pralong, the writer Simonetta Agnello Hornby, David Green (President of EUNIC and former director of the British Council), the philosophers Eduardo Lourenço and Jan Sokol (the latter is a former Education minister of the Czech Republic), as well as the writers Jens Christian Grøndahl und Tahar Ben Jelloun. This group of ten intellectuals was appointed at the instigation of José Manuel Durão Barroso, the president of the European Commission, and Leonard Orban, to advise the European Commission 'on the role that multilingualism could play in regard to the intercultural dialogue and the mutual comprehension of the citizens of the European Union', as we can read in the beginning of the above-mentioned publication.

In his talk, Jaques de Decker presented the basic tenor and working methods of the group and the central ideas behind those proposals. Considerations about a 'practical use' were in the foreground of the paper 'A Rewarding Challenge'; the path to a solution, as de Decker called it, is 'both ambitious and realistic'. Taking Amin Maalouf's idea of a personal 'adoptive language passport' for everybody as a point of departure, the group's ten members – writers, philosophers, and people working in cultural and literary organisations – developed the

concept of a ‘personal adoptive language’: every European is to be encouraged to learn a second language, which for him, on the basis of subjective and/or social criteria (based on personal inclinations, intellectual curiosity, or even family situation), takes on the role of an adoptive language. The basic attitude of the group, with its concept of increasing multilingualism in a globalised world, tries to stress the positive sides by underlining that multilingualism is to be used as a ‘tool for integration and harmonisation’ (de Decker), a ‘model for an identity based on diversity’, and an ‘antidote’ against cultural conflicts. Additionally, there is the hope that with the choice of a personal adoptive language the rivalry between English as the dominant international lingua franca and other languages can be overcome; also, the principle of a personal adoptive language is to act as a preventive measure against the narrowing of opportunities for linguistic expression that goes hand in hand with the loss or the neglect of a language.

In his speech that closed the first thematic bloc in the morning, the translator and literary historian Jan Rubeš from the Free University of Brussels spoke about the reasons why writers write in a foreign language, and what role they play regarding intercultural dialogue. Based on an examination of exile literatures, which (to give but one example) because of the Second World War are essential for German literary history, Rubeš demonstrated how especially literary texts written outside of a certain country or linguistic area are remarkable cultural phenomena, but could not be grasped in terms of nationally defined concepts of literature. Then Rubeš focussed on the example of the Czech writer Milan Kundera, who has been living in France since 1975 and who in the early 1990s started to write in French. Rubeš explained that through this other language, Kundera’s themes and language, as well as his inspiration, had changed.

In the following short discussion, taking the case of Kundera as a point of departure, the often difficult economic situation of émigré authors was addressed. Because of their relatively great independence and the lack of an actual employer, these authors live and write under very precarious financial conditions. Also addressed was the question of institutional or state support for such writers, the research and conservation of their text documents, as well as the question of translating their works.

## **2. Readings**

Three writers, Adil Erdem, Kristina Goikoetxea Langarika, and Saviana Stanescu, then read for 45 minutes from their works; introduced by Constantino Maeder (literary scholar, Catholic

University of Leuven), they presented texts that, in terms of their themes, were exemplary for the ability of the literature of emigrated and immigrated writers to mediate between cultures. The author and translator Adil Erdem, who was born in 1964 in Ankara (Turkey) and has been living in Denmark, writes short stories, texts for cartoons, and poems. At the conference he read a few of his poems in which different cultural influences, Mediterranean and northern European sounds and smells are mixed. The Spanish-Basque writer Kristina Goikoetxea Langarika (born in 1971 in Basque country, since 1995 residing in the Netherlands) read from her novel *Evamar*, which is set in her country of origin and tells the story of three generations of women between tradition and modernity. Saviana Stanescu finally, born in 1967 in Romania and living in New York since 2001, who writes both in Romanian and English, read from her collection of poems *Google Me!* (2006) and from the play *Waxing West* (2007); the latter, in an ironic tone, is the monologue of a Romanian woman who emigrated to the US and about how she tries to become a real American.

### **3. Topic I: The Process of Writing in a Second Language**

In the afternoon of the conference day, there were two panels, the first on the topic 'The Process of Writing in a Second Language'. Three questions were to be addressed during the discussion: How does writing in a second language influence the literary process? What value does it have for multilingualism in Europe? And does adopting a language also mean adopting a culture? Panel members were Klaus Hübner (secretary of the Adelbert-von-Chamisso-Prize of the Robert-Bosch-Foundation), Francesco Micieli (writer, born in 1956 in Italy, since 1965 living in German-speaking Switzerland), Marius Daniel Popescu (writer, born in 1963 in Romania, since 1990 living in French-speaking Switzerland), Kristina Goikoetxea Langarika, and Giorgio Pressburger (writer, born in 1937 in Hungary, living in Italy since 1956). The panel was chaired by Hubert Spiegel, head of the newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung's* section 'Literature and Literary Life'. In his introduction, Spiegel stressed the complexity of the writing process which he said could never be fully investigated. He nevertheless raised the question of whether the acquisition of a second or even third language and writing literary texts in that language means not just a pragmatic and therefore incidental change, but also influences the writing as such, indeed affects it decisively.

The description by the four writers on the panel of when and under what circumstances they left their countries of origin and how they started to write in their second or even third language, made it clear how difficult it is to generalise here, since their individual writer-biographies were very different. But the statements by Kristina Goikoetxea Langarika,

Francesco Micieli, Marius Daniel Popescu, and Giorgio Pressburger showed that they also had a few things in common. Kristina Goikoetxea Langarika explained that in addition to the practical reasons for her writing in Dutch – the language of the country where she lives and wants to find her audience as an author – there were also psychological reasons for her choice of language. For example, she explained, she writes in the second language ‘with a certain distance’, especially when she writes about her home country. But the internalisation of this ‘objectivity’ also leads to a change of perspective on the conditions and positions from which the author tells her stories or has a character tell a story. Picking up on this, Hubert Spiegel raised the question of whether there is a kind of ‘division of labour between languages’ for these authors: one is for writing, and one for everyday life. Francesco Micieli, who as a member of an Albanian minority in Italy spoke Italo-Albanian until the age of five, however he had to speak Italian in kindergarten, and after emigrating to German-speaking Switzerland had to learn Swiss-German and German, in his response he confirmed that for him the sense of distance also plays a role, even though German, his adopted written language, had become ‘like a third mother tongue’ to him. He said he chose this language for writing, German is his ‘literary language’, and in this language he noticed a hidden multilingualism ‘which starts something new, but in the end articulates itself in German’. For Marius Daniel Popescu, language is rather ‘like an accessory’; he went to Switzerland because he had fallen in love with a Swiss woman (‘I am an exile in love’), and then decided to write his literary texts in the language of his loved one. For Giorgio Pressburger, on the other hand, who had to leave his home country because of persecution by the National Socialists and today lives in Italy, Italian, the language he ‘adopted’, provides him with a protective distance from his traumatic experiences as a child in Budapest. In retrospective, his first language, the language of his childhood, for him can effect a stimulating linguistic enrichment for his writing in Italian.

The literary scholar Klaus Hübner confirmed in his talk the authors’ self-observations about their writing. Since 2003, he has been secretary of the Adelbert-von-Chamisso-Prize for writers who write in German even though it is not their first language. Themes, content, characters and also the places where these texts are set, are all influenced by their special linguistic situation. However, these authors today position themselves differently in the literature business, and we can observe a change in the themes of their works. Whereas the so-called immigration literature negotiated until well into the 1980s to a special degree autobiographical material and the experiences of migration and alienation in the new country, today the themes of the books are much broader, they relate to the world, with more References to traditional genres, especially in German literature. In this context, the function

of the Chamisso-Prize plays an important role. It was established to support writers with a migration background and to reward 'outstanding literary achievements'. Insofar as this literature was perceived as a special case, it met with an ambivalent reaction from the writers for whom it was conceived: on the one hand, they saw the prize as a form of support in their special minority situation, but on the other hand, they feared a stigmatisation which would stand in the way of being recognised as serious German writers. But these fears of a marginalising effect of the prize have dwindled over recent years. Thus in the discussion, Francesco Micieli pointed to the great prestige of the prize, based on its recipients in the past. However, he stated that would prefer a situation similar to the US, where 'immigrated writers' neither are nor perceived as such, but first and foremost as authors writing in the language of the country.

#### **4. Topic II: Immigration Literature – Effects on Intercultural Dialogue Inside and Outside of Europe**

The second area addressed at the conference 'Immigrant Literature – Writing in Adopted Languages' concerned the ambivalence of the term 'immigrant literature' and the cultural effects of writing in a foreign language. The panel was chaired by Norbert Mecklenburg (literary scholar, Cologne University), participants included two writers, one social scientist, and one literary scholar. Dimitré Dinev (a German-speaking writer from Austria, originally from Bulgaria), Martina Kamm, (social scientist, University Neuchâtel), Tatiana Viktorovna Korenkova (literary scholar, Russian State University of People's Friendship, Moscow), and Saviana Stanescu (writer, for detailed information about her, see above), each gave an input talk or read a statement on the term 'immigrant literature' and its effects. In his introduction, Norbert Mecklenburg raised the question whether other terms might not be more precise or less limiting, such as 'minority literature' or 'intercultural literature'. Tatiana Viktorovna Korenkova presented a general conceptual model in which she attempted to describe the different relationships between the different 'local languages' and 'world languages', depending on context; however, the grid of her scheme did not address the special position of authors with a migration background. The social scientist Martina Kamm presented a brief overview of the research project 'generational change' organised by the Swiss Forum on Migration and Population Studies at the University Neuchâtel on writers with a migration background in Switzerland; the results will be published later this year. Although the writers regarded their biographical experiences of migration as enrichment for their literary work, they do not want to be subsumed under a special term. The term 'immigrant literature' – this

became increasingly clear in the subsequent discussion of the panel members – locates those literary texts in the contested field between integration and exclusion: on the one hand, the term tries to do justice to the special situation of authors with a migration background and pay special attention to their literary output, on the other hand there is the danger of underestimating the literary quality of ‘immigration literature’ and the tendency to be tied down to a role as cultural mediators. Especially for the authors themselves, as the Bulgarian-Austrian writer Dimitré Dinev stressed in his pointed and very sceptical statements – a firm and pronounced attitude, shared without exception by all writers interviewed as part of the Swiss research project ‘generational change’, like, among others, Christina Viragh, Catalin Dorian Florescu, Rafik Ben Salah, and Ilma Rakusa – that the term is to be rejected because it sees migration as the exception rather than the rule, and marks immigrants as foreigners and therefore as a threat to the indigenous population. Migration is, as Dinév put it rather straightforward, ‘the condition for all culture’. One strategy of writers to counter this dominant discourse and to address it critically is an explicit reflection of the mechanisms of attribution. The writer Saviana Stanescu pointed explicitly to discussions of these labels and how she plays with them in her literary works.

The general discussion after the panel diverged in several directions. The fact that the conference seemed to be dominated by German speaking experts and German-writing authors, as well as those from post-communist countries, was criticised – an impression that was repeatedly denied with reference to the panel members and the active participants. Other voices reacted to the sceptical attitude of authors with a migration background towards the term immigrant literature and pointed to phenomena of the literary market and the media: the label ‘immigrant literature’, the argument went, is helps writers be successful if they position themselves in a strategically clever way and develop it as a distinguishing mark, a brand. Others pointed to the increasing globalisation and deterritorialisation of writing in – and caused by – the Internet. After all, one might have reasons other than migration for writing in another language – and the concept of a personal ‘adoptive language’ offers some guidance here. In his closing remarks, Norbert Mecklenburg once again returned to the problem that is immanent to the term ‘immigrant literature’ and suggested, with reference to Erich Auerbach’s standard work, to study the work of writers with a migration background in terms of the aesthetic principle of mimesis.

The conference closed with further readings at the Czech Cultural Centre by Kristina Goikoetxea Langarika, Giorgio Pressburger and Dimitré Dinev

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the panels, papers, and discussion revealed the following points: writers are much stronger affected by moving into another linguistic region than other artists who work in the fields of, say, the fine arts, music, and dance, to give but a few examples. For the majority of these writers, the choice of a second language was involuntary; the reasons for writing in a foreign language are often political persecution and flight, sometimes it was because the parents moved, much more rarely is the choice of a second (or third) language the result of purely personal preferences and a voluntary decision – in contrast to the concept of a personal ‘adoptive language’ as it was developed by the group of intellectuals chaired by Amin Maalouf. Writers with a migration background represent without a doubt an added value for multilingual and intercultural dialogue, but above all their texts are – and this is very much stressed by the writers themselves – a literary added value, because this literature introduces new perspectives, specific settings, characters, and narrative techniques to a literature defined by national or linguistic borders. Even if they profit to a certain degree as representatives of the social group of ‘migrants’, writers with a migration background don’t like their texts to be primarily or even solely read under the aspect of ‘immigrant literature’, which is limiting from a literary perspective and, in this context, also pejorative. They, and with them many experts of literature, instead stress the increasing universality of experiences of migration and being foreign, also due to new electronic technologies of virtuality (the Internet) as well as increasing global mobility.

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