

Julie Hansen
*Reading Novels Translingually:
 Twenty-First-Century Case Studies*

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In the introduction to *Reading Novels Translingually: Twenty-First-Century Case Studies*, Julie Hansen claims that literature has never been as multilingual as it is in the twenty-first century, despite the fact that literary multilingualism was common even in the Middle Ages. However, the establishment and spread of what Yasemin Yildiz terms the *monolingual paradigm* in her pivotal book *Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition* (2012), along with the persistent belief that the finest literature is written in a single language—the mother tongue—have contributed to the marginalization of literary works that exhibited multilingual practices. Nonetheless, in the last decades, literary multilingualism has gained prominence among scholars, given that «in the age of globalization, multilingual literature increasingly challenges traditional national and linguistic categories» (2). In this sense, Hansen’s monograph is positioned within an exceptionally interesting and topical branch of literary studies. The book consists of nine chapters, in which the author shows how literary multilingualism is employed within nine novels in different ways: through plot, thematization and illustration of different language practices. One of the innovative aspects of the monograph is the focus on the *translingual reader*, i.e. a reader who, according to Hansen, partakes in the meaning-making process and doesn’t have to necessarily possess knowledge of all the languages employed in the literary texts. Hansen writes:

When words on the page impede comprehension, language itself appears strange to us, prompting us to read translingually. In

reading translingually, we attend closely to the visual and aural qualities of language, becoming more aware of what we do with it, as well as of what language does with us. (180)

In order to read her selected case studies, the author employs a multidisciplinary approach, bringing together fields of study such as «multilingual literary studies, as well as reader-response criticism, Formalism, New Formalism, translation studies, transfiction studies, cognitive literary studies, and postcritique» (4).

In the Introduction (Chapter 1), Hansen draws on definitions formulated by Rainer Guldin, declaring her inclination to use the term *literary translingualism* when treating multilingual literature, since «translingualism emphasizes process and literary interaction between different languages» (“Metaphors of Literary Translingualism” in *The Routledge Handbook of Literary Translingualism*, ed. Steven G. Kellman and Natasha Lvovich, New York, Routledge, 2022: 382), meanwhile *literary multilingualism* would «indicate the presence of several languages without specifying relations between them» (4). Furthermore, Hansen broadens the concept of *translingualism*, shifting the focus from the author to the reader, thereby underlining the way in which the reader interacts with the multilingual text, participating in its co-creation.

It is, in fact, with a reader-oriented approach that Hansen starts her second chapter, by deploying Wolfgang Iser’s reader model in her analysis of Olga Grushin’s *The dream life of Sukhanov* (2005). Since the text contains numerous Russian terms and references to the Russian culture and society, Hansen assumes that there are two kinds of readers that are implicit in the novel: the monolingual English-speaking reader, and the bilingual reader possessing knowledge of Russian, thus able to understand the different cultural allusions to Russia as well as to the Soviet culture and literature. Drawing on Formalism, Hansen claims that these references would be less recognizable by monolingual readers, leading to what Viktor Shklovsky called *ostranenie* (defamiliarization).

Consequently, reading translingually means constantly orienting oneself within the text.

The influence of an author's language choices on a novel's circulation is shown in the third chapter. Starting from what Pascale Casanova has identified as the *literary inequality of languages* (*The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2004: 133), the author observes how Russian literary works have acquired prestige in the Western literary market only after their translation into English and French. Hansen associates this phenomenon with Rebecca Walkowitz's concept of *preemptive translation* (*Born Translated: The contemporary novel in an Age of World Literature*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2015: 11), a practice employed by authors who decide to write their work in a dominant language, anticipating thus its translation, as is the case with Michael Idov's novel *Ground Up* (2009) and Andrei Makine's *French Testament* (1995). Translation is also central in Olga Grjasnowa's *All Russians Love Birch Trees: Citizens of Nowhere* (2012), in which the narrator-protagonist works as an interpreter in Frankfurt and later in Tel Aviv. Hansen shows how the narrative often draws the reader's attention to the qualities of words and the multiple languages in the narrator's environment, since the reader is continuously informed about which language is spoken and how.

Multilingualism may appear not only in form of single foreign words or expressions, but in a subtler and latent form as well, as demonstrated by Zinaida Lindén's novel *Many Countries Ago* (2013) and Rabih Alameddine's *An Unnecessary Woman* (2013). Peculiar to the novels is the *discrepancy* between the languages spoken in the fictional world and the languages present on the surface of the text. Hansen observes how both narrations exhibit at least two of Thomas Beebee's categories of *transmesis* (*Transmesis: Inside Translation's Black Box*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012: 6), given that the narrative languages differ from the dominant languages in the fictional world: respectively Russian and Arabic. Moreover, both novels depict the activities of writing, translation and its products – such processes making the readers reflect on the language itself and on the language gaps.

In the sixth chapter, Hansen demonstrates how literary multilingualism is also a part of popular culture – a genre that is usually

less examined within the field of literary multilingualism. The Swedish thriller *Into a Raging Blaze* (2014) by Andreas Norman employs an extensive *repertoire* of English words and phrases, along with the presence of other various languages, which not only mark the *milieus* in which the action takes place – Stockholm, Brussels and Cairo, but also contributes to the creation of *suspense* – one of the main features of the thriller genre.

In the seventh chapter, Hansen re-reads Leo Tolstoy's famous novel *War and Peace* (1867), devoting attention to the extensive use of French, employed in the novel to convey both oral and written communication. Here, Hansen highlights how multilingualism conveys moments of failed communication and incomprehensibility.

Focusing on Eugene Vodolazkin's medieval setting novel, *Laurus* (2012), chapter Eight analyzes moments of diglossia alongside medieval writing and practices. Hansen observes how translation is incorporated into the reading process, since readers are confronted with Church Slavonic letters. Furthermore, the absence of space between words—typical of certain Medieval writing—disorients the modern reader, confronting him with a somewhat disturbing effect, showing how modern readers' expectations don't fit into the medieval *modus operandi*.

The book closes with an exhaustive conclusion, an up-to-date bibliography and an index.

In summary, Hansen's multidisciplinary approach is broad and rigorous. However, the final critical analysis must ask whether such methodological breadth leaves some gaps. One question that arises is how adequate Wolfgang Iser's *implicit reader* model adopted by Hansen in the second chapter of the monograph may be. Since Iser's paradigm is phenomenological, focusing primarily on the reader's cognitive response, which is strictly intrinsic to the text, it neglects such crucial elements as historical contexts, cultural affiliation, social position, forms of literacy, and reading practices, which undoubtedly have an impact on how we read texts, and therefore cannot be overlooked.

However, this does not detract from the valuable quality of the monograph, particularly its innovative focus on the *translingual reader*. This perspective contributes to dismantling the idea that only readers

possessing specific language skills can read multilingual texts, demonstrating that all readers can participate in co-creating meaning by the very act of recognizing code and language-switching, along with untranslated words or expressions, and by engaging with them in different ways. Another remarkable aspect of the monograph is that Hansen analyses not only novels written by bilingual Russian-speaking authors in predominant languages such as English, French or German, but also two novels written in a less common language—Swedish, going further the pioneering monograph *Out of Russia: Fictions of a New Translingual Diaspora* by Adrian Wanner (2011). The rigorous and vast methodological frames employed by Hansen together with a multidisciplinary approach combined with an in-depth analysis of individual case studies, provides new and stimulating perspectives on the debate in the field of literary multilingualism. Language is considered here not only a communicative device but also a crucial tool for opening a *metalevel* of textual analysis and shaping a sense of *identity*. These texts, along with reflections on translation processes, reception, and interpretation, ultimately show that *literary works are never neutral* and can radically modify the translingual experience.

Reading novels translingually is certainly of great interest for scholars and comparatists interested in literary multilingualism, reader-response and postcritique theories, as well as transnational literature.

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