

ICLA Research Committee on Language Contact in Literature (LCL): Europe

Additional Information and Objectives

Drawing from the core linguistic concept of language contact – the phenomenon wherein language forms used by individuals and communities interact, influencing one another – the Language Contact in Literature (LCL) project seeks to forge a novel theoretical and methodological framework within the realm of comparative literature. The goal of the project is to reconsider different fields such as translation, literary multilingualism, and several others as sites of language contact and change in literature.

The project stems from different needs. Until recently, the way national literatures/canons have been discussed has hindered an adequate understanding of the transnational and multilingual nature of literary processes. For a long time, the monolingual paradigm has indeed provided the perspective through which literary practices have been considered (Yildiz 2012, Gramling 2016). Recent approaches which have attempted to cope with the multiple challenges that emerge from the current global dynamics have also demonstrated some limitations. For instance, the notion of translation has been increasingly used by adjacent fields also in a metaphorical way, and there has been little discussion to account for the theoretical consequences of this shift (see Guldin 2016; Walkowitz 2015; Simon 2013; Apter 2006). Moreover, while the rapid growth of literary multilingualism as a field has provided new tools to investigate texts written in two or more languages, it has also disclosed a worrying and uncontrolled terminological ambiguity. This is mostly due to the fact that in many cases our understanding of translingual and multilingual writers and texts cannot be exhausted by a single factor/category but requires an adequate comprehension of multiple elements (practices, processes etc.). This terminological vagueness is exacerbated further by the fact that the very notion of language, and the very distinction between languages, has been questioned over the last decades (Pennycook 2014, Sakai 2009). The recent conceptualization of the notions of “linguaging” and “translinguaging” (Garcia and Wei 2014 etc.) has raised important concerns about the problematic legacies of the monolingual paradigm but also contributed to the process of language relativisation.

To understand this complexity, we propose to create an ontology that would identify and distinguish the different elements (linguistic and sociological factors, the techniques and processes, the aesthetic needs and motivations, just to mention a few) which come into play in literary language contact cases. A useful theoretical support will be provided by linguistics. Once we understand how many elements are involved and how these factors/practices relate to each other, we can appreciate how they come together and interact often within the same text.

Objectives:

- Start a more constructive dialogue between linguistics, literary multilingualism and translation (within the comparative literature framework more widely understood). In this light, we aim to reevaluate the productive but somewhat imprecise dialogue between multilingualism and translation studies.
- Structure a clear and carefully-tailored framework named “Language Contact in Literature” which will be broad enough to include multiple literary language contact cases but at the same time detailed enough to tackle the array of elements/factors involved in the framework and their modulations.
- Challenge the implicit assumption in the field that a writer’s linguistic background is irrelevant to literary analysis or secondary to considerations of biography or identity. In addition to that, we aim to give more relevance to the role played by the reader in the meaning-creating process. This aspect has been recently developed by scholars such as Grutman (2023), Hansen (2024) etc. but can be implemented further.
- Create a broad and interdisciplinary network and encourage the collaboration between well-established and early career researchers. Our aim is not just to put them in touch but also to create new opportunities for this conversation to happen in a fruitful way.
- Organize events (both in person and online) such as workshops, seminars, conferences devoted to the topic of Language Contact in Literature.