Lingua Franca: Towards a Philology of the Sea

Introduction

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In recent years, a wealth of scholarship has attempted to reframe the geographical grounds of literary analysis. Where previously the nation-state was the category through which texts would be contextualized, scholars have begun focusing transnationally on literary geography, shifting from national territories to consider maritime regions, trade routes, and intersecting zones of cultural interaction. The Mediterranean world literalizes many of the concepts now integral to literary study, especially as it overlaps with transnationalism, trans-regionalism and ocean studies. By emphasizing the shifting relations of the Mediterranean and placing translation, transformation and transculturation in the foreground of textual analysis, this special issue aims to supplement strictly philological discussions of language and literature with considerations of the intercultural dynamics of textual encounters. How are texts not just linguistically but also culturally transformed during their travels? How have translations contributed to the standardization of certain key concepts, values and texts? How do literary discourses and debates inflect the intellectual history of the Mediterranean? The essays collected here all question specific texts in terms of what they tell us about the possibility of a Mediterranean context for philological and literary analysis.

The contributions draw together scholars from Europe, the Middle East, North Africa and the United States. This transnational forum was made possible as part of the research program “Zukunftsp hilologie: Revisiting the Canons of Textual Scholarship” program in Berlin, a research project dedicated to enriching and expanding textual scholarship beyond the classical humanist canon. In partnership with the Friedrich Schlegel Graduate School of Literary Studies at the Freie Universität and the Forum for Transregional Studies, Zukunftsp hilologie bridges together projects in Africa, the Middle East, South Asia and East Asia, to take seriously the potentials of philological inquiry and textual analysis in the global humanities. The international dimension of its program helped to actualize the vision of a textually-engaged, linguistically-attuned and historically-situated inquiry. As the essays attest, multilingualism undergirds each author’s analysis of diachronic and synchronic multiplicity of languages. The various contributions propose instances of language shifts, eclectic use of languages, and reflections on the variable use of codes, alphabets and means of communication across the Mediterranean region.

A key consideration of many of the essays included here is how to understand connections between lingua franca and literary modes of language. To acknowledge the permeation of registers, let us turn for a moment to October 14, 1670, when Molière’s *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* was performed before the court of Louis XIV.2 Of the many remarkable aspects of this play, there is a rather extravagant concluding scene (known as La Cérémonie Turque) in which a deceptive Cléonte falsely claims to be the son of the sultan in order to marry the daughter of Monsieur Jourdain. The jubilant atmosphere underscores a humorous and almost campy culmination to the play. In the context of a grandiose dance and lavish music, the Turkish imposters hoist Monsieur Jourdain above their heads as he dons Turkish clothing (vêtu à la turque) without turban or sword, but accompanied by all of the pageantry he expects of a courtly world.

For literary historians, the Ottoman references in the scene are by no means haphazard. In 1669, the Ottoman diplomat Suleiman Aga visited Louis XIV in France dressed in a plain wool garment. His dress and refusal to bow to the King marked a controversy that resulted in his eventual banishment from Paris. In the wake of this visit, Louis XIV requested a scene from Molière satirizing the whole event with a Turkish ballet. Molière obliged with this particular scene in his play, the significance of which defies any simple characterization.

More than a historical footnote to a scene of cultural fabulation performed on stage, it is worth noting that those speaking in the ceremony make recourse

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to lingua franca. It is known that Molière had an informant in the figure of Chevalier d’Arvieux, who served as a diplomat in Tunisia and Turkey. And it is telling that for the 17th century audience, the passages in lingua franca were in need of proper composition—whereas the Turkish was glossed in nonsense syllables. In the end, the scene ceremonializes a ruse of power in an extravagant spectacle—and in a curious twist, it also marks one of the most famous instances in which lingua franca permeates literary form.

This scene helps us to highlight the fact that lingua franca delimits far more than a category of speech of interest to linguists and comparative grammarians. The pioneering scholarship of Hugo Schuchardt and the studies by John Wansbrough, Guido Cifoletti, Laura Minervini or Joceyln Dakhlia all enrich our historical understanding of the implications of lingua franca, its relation to jargon or argot, and its positioning within and between languages. From these studies, we know of lingua franca as a key language that emerged throughout the Mediterranean region. It lacked proper grammatical form, and appropriated certain words primarily from Italian, French and Spanish, but also Arabic, Greek and Turkish. As the allusions in Molière’s *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* demonstrate, lingua franca emerges both as a historical phenomenon, one that permeates not only a class of merchants but also literary traditions, and as a rubric for understanding the dynamics of trafficking and translation in the Mediterranean region.

In the organization of the special issue, we have tried to highlight lingua franca across registers of literary form, translation, textual dissemination and cultural mobility. In the opening article, Karla Mallette takes the *Seven Sages of Rome* as a case in transmission history for pre-modern literature. Rather than insist on the close reading of one particular manuscript, Mallette proposes a model of analysis that takes seriously the travel and dispersion of the stories across traditions, translations and versions. Her essay explores the possibility of fuzzy sets and game theory as a frame for grappling more carefully with textual dissemination, adaptation and variation across the various regions and languages that this story permeates. She thus constructively confronts the

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challenge of scholarly analysis of dissemination with the possibilities engendered by alternate modes of literary inquiry—in this instance, game theory.

Where Mallette explores textual dissemination, other essays engage literary history through alternate linguistic genealogies of the pre-modern period. Each of these essays points to entwined linguistic and cultural traditions across the Mediterranean region—in the case of Pier Mattia Tommasino with Italian travel literature from the Ottoman Empire; and in the essay by Joana Gomes a dialogue between Muhammad ibn Musa al-Razi and Mouro Rasis. Together they take intercultural relationships as an occasion to question the determinacy of language and the valences of translation when confronted with the Mediterranean crossings of this period. Like Gomes, Dwight Reynolds also takes medieval Iberia as his starting point, and his essay traces three different examples that demonstrate the role of music within interreligious encounter. His essay spans 9th century Cordoba to 14th century Catalonia and Aragon in a story that demonstrates cultural contact that exceeds the categories of religion and language often at play in separating the groups in this region.

Extending the trans-Mediterranean connections, both Abdelkebir Cherkaoui and Elisabetta Benigni consider textual mediations across generations of readers. Cherkaoui’s essay investigates the translation practices of Arab scholars reading classic texts during the reign of Muhammad Ali in Egypt. His essay makes a claim for a sort of comparative translation theory, one which weighs philosophies of language, relations to source texts, and questions of appropriation in the process of analyzing al-Tahtawi’s translation school. Moving from translation, Benigni analyzes occasions of cultural interaction on the level of textual reception. In her essay, Benigni models not only debates around the reception of Dante, but also broader questions of the genealogical stakes of positioning Dante’s *Commedia* as an Italian or Mediterranean work. Beginning with debates between Cantor and Corti, her essay navigates a rich intellectual tradition throughout the early modern period in which scholars grapple with translations, adaptations and the place of Dante in and alongside the Italian and Arabic literary traditions.

In the essays of Shaden Tagledin and Maria Elena Paniconi, we encounter Mediterranean crossings that extend well beyond the particularities of language. In her analysis of al-Tahtawi’s translation of Fénelon’s *Les Aventures de Télémaque*, Tageldin explores the delicate navigation of mythology, history and the treatment of Greek gods in the Arabic rendering of the text. She notes how al-Tahtawi’s preface questions the translation of Greek polytheistic gods as Muslim *jinn*, and she offers a reading that points to the dynamics connecting Greek mythology to debates in Qur’anic exegesis over literal meaning (*al-ẓāhir*) and hidden meaning (*al-bāṭin*). Moving from the nineteenth to the early
twentieth century, Maria Elena Paniconi explores the history of the Italian futurists in Egypt, especially Filippo Marinetti, Valentine de Saint-Point and Nelson Morpurgo. She details in her essay the complex situation these figures have, negotiating their place in the cosmopolitan settings of early twentieth century Cairo and Alexandria, and she points to a story that unsettles the conventional understanding of modernism as a purely European phenomenon.

With many essays exploring translation and mobility across territories and languages, Michael Allan’s concluding essay looks at translation internal to textual form and the complexity of languages within a text. He weaves together critical writings on Assia Djebar’s *L’Amour, la Fantasia* with the problem of reading staged in the text itself in order to challenge a writer-centered model of textual analysis. He thus extends the sorts of claims opened up in Mallette’s article to explore the potentials of reception, dissemination and multilingualism at play in the internal translations of literary language. Here, far from asserting a lingua franca, literature becomes the vanishing point of a communicative function to language, putting in relief the dynamic interplay between writer, reader and textual interception in a global circuit of literary travels.

Although many of us were trained to think of textual study in terms of national traditions (as contested and yet territorially demarcated sites in world literature), we can see in the convergence of lingua franca and Mediterranean Studies some primary challenges to the reigning presumptions in regional analyses of language and literature. First and foremost is the observation that globalized circuits of exchange are not entirely new, but that different settings construct the terms of exchange differently. And secondly is the idea that maritime regions help destabilize the presumptions of coherent national literary, linguistic or cultural traditions. We can gesture to the scholarship gathered in this special issue as evidence of a shared concern with new trajectories in our work.

It is our hope that the various essays collected here in this special issue provide us collectively an opportunity to think through questions of cultural translation, textual trafficking and hybrid languages. And it is our hope that these contributions enrich and enliven methods for literary and historical inquiry, taking lingua franca and Mediterranean studies not solely as historical phenomena, but as instantiations to rethink the terms of our literary endeavors.

* The articles gathered in this issue were first presented at an international symposium in Berlin on “Lingua Franca”, 24-26 May 2012, within the Zukunftsforschung program. The editors wish to thank the Forum Transregionale Studien for its generous financial support and its organisational assistance.