



Introduction

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This special issue of *VTU Review: Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences* explores some of the dynamic relations between *language* and *identity* in different contexts. Over the years, both concepts have been subjected to numerous definitions and redefinitions and have drifted in and out of a wide variety of research settings. By virtue of its critique of essentialism and the naturalization of historical cultural products, poststructuralism has undoubtedly been a major influence on present-day perceptions of language and identity. For poststructuralists, “language is the place where our sense of self and our identity or ‘subjectivity’ is constructed and performed” (Baxter 36). Besides, individuals are never “outside cultural forces or discursive practices but [are] always ‘subject’ to them,” and their identities are “governed by a range of ‘subject positions’... approved by their community or culture and made available to them by means of the particular discourses operating within a given social context” (Baxter 37). People, who do not comply with socially prescribed discourses, risk stigmatization and exclusion (see Baxter 37).

Aspects of the poststructuralist position have been contested by later theorists who have nevertheless accepted most of the movement’s basic premises. Thus, writing from the standpoint of critical discourse analysis (CDA), Karin Zotzmann and John P. O’Rigan accept in principle the poststructuralist view of the discursive character of human identity but also emphasize its *materiality*: in their view, identity is not only a discursive entity but is likewise “a *material* phenomenon in being enacted in time and space, ... as a consequence of actual events [my emphasis]” (113). Zotzmann and O’Rigan further maintain that “identity constructions are imbued with power relations and ideology” (113) insofar as individuals occupy different social positions, do not have equal access to linguistic, cultural, or economic resources, and are “granted different degrees of recognition” (113).

Identities can be classified in various ways. For instance, they can be personal and social, with language playing a major role in the construction of both categories. Social identities have to do with membership in groups that may be based on gender, age, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, social class, place of origin, and other distinctive characteristics (see De Fina 163). It is also useful to distinguish between individual and collective identities; in the latter case, language is used “to create images of groups and communities” (De Fina 163). Even though some of the above categories may overlap in practice, they are nevertheless useful in highlighting “different dimensions of identities” (De Fina 163).

In contemporary contexts, interactions between language and identity are increasingly linked to mobility and migration as vast numbers of people have experienced or are currently experiencing different kinds of voluntary or involuntary displacement. From a historical perspective, migration and

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mobility are by no means novel phenomena. On the other hand, “the speed of the current flow of capital, commodities, people, and ideas is [immeasurably] faster” than it was in the past (Behdad 63). The construction of *transnational identities* is perceived as one of the outcomes of the linkages forged in that flow. As the bearers of such identities *transnational individuals* have been defined as people who are positioned between cultures and actively “build social fields that link together their country of origin and their country of settlement” (Glick Schiller et al., qtd. in De Fina 163; see also Thomsen 61). Among the “social fields” built by transnational individuals, literature has long occupied pride of place. As the output of (mostly) migrant writers originating in the “non-west” but living and writing in “First World” metropolitan centres, transnational literature has fuelled fears of the hegemony of traditionally dominant languages such as English, French, and German to the detriment of historically marginalized tongues. Similar fears have been expressed about the identities of transnational individuals.

In a perceptive commentary on transnationalism, Michael Cronin, who is one of the contributors to this special issue, draws attention to the fact that in our present “transnational age” migrants can indeed keep in touch with their cultures of origin either through physical travel or through the symbolic use of “native” cultural products, such as TV shows, radio broadcasts, coverage of “home” events on the Internet, and so forth (61–62). Their situation is thus radically different from the situation of most migrants in earlier times who were by far more likely to lose contact with their homelands for financial and logistical reasons. According to Cronin, present-day migrants are living in the kind of *translation* in which “it is ... possible, but less easy [for them] to *lose themselves* [my emphasis]” (62). In the wake of Salman Rushdie’s essay “Imaginary Homelands” (1982), translation has frequently been used as a metaphor for the transnational condition. However, Cronin’s use of it goes beyond the merely metaphorical and reflects his own experience as a specialist in translation studies, the cross-disciplinary area in which the relationship between translational strategies of “domestication” (“nativizing”) and “foreignization” has long been debated (see Venuti 49). The kind of “translation” that Cronin favours for transnationals is “a form of accommodation” to the host culture without complete assimilation to it (62). Given the ample means of achieving this balance either through direct physical contact with the culture of origin (travel) or through the symbolic consumption of its cultural products, there is no need to “bemoan or deplore” “the permanent state of translation” that characterizes the identities of present-day transnationals (63).

This very brief overview of the different ways in which language, identity, and transfer phenomena such as translation can be conceptualized should provide a background to the four papers on the issue’s special topic. Nadezhda Georgieva-Stankova’s contribution, entitled “The New Political Discourse of Roma Activism: The International Romani Movement and the Language of National Self-Determination,” addresses one of the key problems that Europe’s Roma minority faces today: that of nation-building. Significantly, the prospective all-European Romani nation that is to be forged in the future challenges traditional forms of nationalism insofar as it is imagined as cosmopolitan, non-territorial, and transnational. The process of nation-building also involves the utilization of language and other semiotic resources for the purposes of rehabilitating a stigmatized pariah identity, constructing a more respectable Romani self-image, achieving better social standing, and ensuring access to certain material and symbolic resources. Georgieva-Stankova’s article discusses discourse as a form of social action in the processes of the politicization of Romani ethnogenesis. The author is aware of the widespread tendency of viewing the idea of Romani nationhood as a utopian dream. To counter this tendency, she devotes space to some of the extant pragmatic instruments protecting citizenship rights and convincingly argues that apart from contributing to the scheme of Romani nation-building, they would also benefit all living in a cosmopolitan community.

Michael Cronin’s article focuses on the issue of loss in translation and translation studies. Perceived as the betrayal of the “true” meaning of a privileged source text, loss in translation is usually deplored as inevitable. Whenever possible, attention is drawn to instances of gain as a means of making amends for whatever meaning(s) may have been lost. The emphasis on gain has indeed played a positive role in changing the traditional image of translation as a subservient activity and highlighting translators’ creativity. Rather than attempting an analysis of loss and compensatory gain, Cronin approaches the

former from the dual perspectives of mobility and mortality, employing the notion of “secular faith” as developed by the Swedish theorist Martin Hägglund. From the perspective of “secular faith,” “continued fidelity to someone or something is inseparable from the apprehension of loss.” Like everyone else, translators work in finite time and for this reason must try “to capture each nuance and scruple” in what they do. Given the finitude of time, loss is indeed inevitable, but it is also necessary. As Cronin remarks, “it is precisely the necessity of loss that drives the struggle against [it].” This is why reflecting on it within the context of translation studies is of fundamental importance to our understanding of an activity that is, unfortunately, still frequently undervalued.

Joanna Skolik’s paper explores Joseph Conrad’s Anglophone linguistic identity as well as his complex relationship with his adopted country (Britain) and his homeland (Poland). The author reflects on the significance of Conrad’s choice of English as a working language rather than French in which he was proficient from his early childhood. Overall, the article sheds much-needed light on the conflicted identity of an early modernist, who spent much of his life in exile, but unlike other exiled writers (most notably, Joyce), rarely included Polish characters in his work (see McLean 170–172). Conrad was in many ways the precursor of present-day transnational writers and a focus on his “adventure with English” provides a basis for comparisons with later “adventurers.”

This special issue is dedicated to the memory of Christoph Houswitschka (1961–2022), a versatile scholar whose research interests ranged from medieval literature to texts produced by transnational writers in our own time. His article compares the predicaments of older writers from eastern and central Europe, who chose English as their creative medium, and more recent migrants out of those regions, who made a similar choice. Houswitschka’s reading of texts by Miroslav Penkov and Kapka Kassabova, two Bulgarian-born writers, who are currently living in the United States and Scotland respectively, alerts us to the complexities of their attitudes to “Big Bad” entities such as “east” and “west.” The article also analyses nostalgia as “an incurable modern condition,” which is still part of the texts of transnational writers, despite the disappearance of travel restrictions and their adoption of a decidedly cosmopolitan stance in their work.

Taken together, the four essays elucidate significant aspects of the diverse uses of language in the forging and reinvention of identities. They call into question pre-existing ideas about nation-building, translation, and migrant writing.

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