

Major versus Minor?
Languages and Literatures in a Globalized World



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Volume 1

Major versus Minor? – Languages and Literatures in a Globalized World

Edited by Theo D'haen, Iannis Goerlandt and Roger D. Sell

Major versus Minor? Languages and Literatures in a Globalized World

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Series editor's preface

The *Fédération Internationale des Langues et Littératures Modernes* (FILLM) is UNESCO's ceiling organization for scholarship in the field of languages and literatures. The Federation's main aim is to encourage linguists and literary scholars from all over the world to enter into dialogue with each other.

During the twentieth century, linguistic and literary studies became steadily more professional and specialized, a development which significantly raised the overall standard of research, but which also tended to divide scholars into many separate and often smallish groupings between which communication could be rather sporadic. Over the years this became something of a handicap. New ideas and findings were often slow to cross-fertilize.

Given the rapidly globalizing world of the early twenty-first century, the relative lack of contact between scholars in different subject-areas became a more glaring anomaly than ever. Against this background, FILLM decided to set up its own book series, in the hope of fostering a truly international community of scholars within which a rich diversity of interests would be upheld by a common sense of human relevance.

Books appearing under the label of *FILLM Studies in Languages and Literatures* deal with languages and literatures world-wide, and are written in a jargon-light English that will be immediately understandable and attractive to any likely reader. Every book presents original findings – including new theoretical, methodological and pedagogical developments – which will be of prime interest to those who are experts in its particular field of discussion, but also seeks to engage readers whose concerns have hitherto lain elsewhere.

Roger D. Sell

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Magdi Youssef has taught Comparative Literature at German and Egyptian universities and is currently President of the International Association of Intercultural Studies (IAIS). His work, published in Arabic and six European languages, has influenced trends in several Western universities such as in the *Decolonizzazione* movement at Università La Sapienza in Rome.

Introduction

Theo D'haen, Iannis Goerlandt and Roger D. Sell

Although the term “globalization” did not become a household word until the early 1990s, the phenomenon it describes goes back several centuries. It is at least as old as the European voyages of discovery and the subsequent emergence of what Immanuel Wallerstein (1974, 1980, 1989) has called “the modern world system,” which linked together all of the world’s major economies round about the beginning of the sixteenth century. More recent prefigurations of present-day globalization were to be seen in the period leading up to the First World War, when new free trade arrangements encouraged a steady growth of international economic relations, marked by the increasingly global reach of particular brands. Nor had globalizing trends escaped the notice of nineteenth-century intellectuals. Economic consequences were examined by Marx and Engels in their *Communist Manifesto* of 1848, and two decades earlier Goethe, thinking more in terms of cultural manifestations, had already spoken of *Weltliteratur*.

Yet during the past twenty or thirty years the pace of globalization has certainly become much more rapid. Now, then, is probably a good time to weigh up the benefits it may offer against the possible risks. In scholarly work on languages and literatures, this line of enquiry is likely to focus on certain particular issues: on language spread, language hegemony, and language conservation; on literary canons, literature and identity, and literary anthologies; and on the bearing of the new communication technologies on languages and literatures alike. And in any such explorations, the most frequently examined opposition is bound to be between languages and literatures perceived as “major” and others perceived as “minor”, two terms which are sometimes qualitative in connotation, sometimes quantitative, and sometimes both at once, depending on who is using them and with reference to what.

These were the main themes discussed at the 26th International Congress of the UNESCO-affiliated *Fédération Internationale des Langues et Littératures Modernes* (FILLM), from which most of the chapters in the present volume originated. As its editors, we have selected contributions from scholars based many in different parts of the world – in Africa, Asia, Europe, North America, and Oceania.

As a result, the book brings together a range of different viewpoints which not only reflects FILLM's goals as a democratically international federation, but which also promises to cover the topic of globalization in due complexity and depth.

The book falls into three parts, the first of which is about the world's languages, the relative positions of some languages *vis à vis* others, and especially the question of whether the status of English as lingua franca is detrimental to other languages – a worry expressed by the renowned German philologist Erich Auerbach as long ago as 1952 in his seminal article “Philology and *Weltliteratur*”. There are also chapters which discuss these issues specifically from the point of view of language teaching, while other chapters necessarily touch on the function of various languages as vehicles for literary activity.

Östen Dahl's opening chapter, for instance, notes that writers who use “minor” languages receive no recognition beyond their immediate linguistic environment. To the world at large, the literature they create remains more or less invisible. Nor do the complications stop there. Dahl also points out that some languages have no written form at all, or have a written form that has virtually no practical use. The culture associated with such languages may well include something we could call a literature, but in that case it will be an oral one – an orature – which is not produced by “writers”, and which is that much less likely to attract attention in the wider world. In an age of sometimes roughshod globalization, the fate of cultures associated with minor languages is becoming a focus of urgent scholarly, but also political and public concern. That is why Dahl examines the position of minor languages in considerable detail: their number, their geographical distribution, their specifics, and their ongoing disappearance.

In the next chapter Johanna Jansson, too, partly dwells on the disappearance of languages. She notes that, unless something is done about it, by the end of the twenty-first century anywhere between 50% and 95% of the world's present tally of 7,000 languages are likely to be extinct. The pressures on minority speakers to shift to a dominant language can be all too strong; intergenerational language transmission can easily falter; and attitudes towards a minority language can be very negative, not only among speakers of some more dominant language, but among speakers of the minority language itself. The main purpose of Jansson's chapter, however, is to examine an example which bucks the general trend: the language of Old Order Amish communities, who even though they have lived in North America for almost three centuries still speak Pennsylvania Deitsch – a minority language – as their mother tongue. Today, Pennsylvania Deitsch is regularly spoken by some 280,000 people, and its use is actually spreading. At the present rate of growth, by the year 2100 its speakers could well number over a million. This is all

the more surprising in that Pennsylvania Deitsch has no standardized written form or official status, is not the medium of instruction in Old Order Amish schools, and in its speakers' daily life frequently alternates with English, which they use for most literate practices. Most remarkable of all, speakers of Pennsylvania Deitsch are not significantly concentrated in one specific area, but live in what amount to language islands dotted about on the majority's Anglophone sea. What, then, is the explanation? Jansson's answer draws attention to a combination of factors: home and family, community, traditions, beliefs and religion, domain allocation, and questions of attitude.

With Nicholas Ostler's chapter, the book moves from minor languages to English, the present time's *lingua franca*. Ostler compares it with its predecessors in the *lingua franca* role, pointing out that a language can rise to this status for reasons of empire and politics, of commerce, or of religion. In general, however, a *lingua franca* lasts only as long as some such original *raison d'être* still applies. True, a *lingua franca* can also regenerate by being adopted for some new purpose, or by being taken up as a mother tongue. But otherwise it will inevitably decline through a process of either ruin, relegation, or resignation: it will either (1) die away in step with the activities and accumulated resources on which its use was based, or (2) be formally abolished, often in favour of some other official medium of communication, or (3) see its population of speakers lose prestige, so that it ceases to be widely used, quite regardless of whether or not some other language replaces it. All these paths to decline have been instantiated in the past, and it so happens that English, even if its global reach will hardly be matched by any other major language in the foreseeable future, has already ceased to be borne up by new reasons for growth. Yet instead of English being replaced by some other language, the very need for a *lingua franca* is in Ostler's view now likely to diminish, not least because of the new language technologies, most notably machine translation based on quantitative analysis.

Turning to an earlier *lingua franca*, Lav Subaric's chapter looks at changing attitudes to Latin as an official language in the eastern half of the Habsburg empire during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The catalyst here was the new language-based national identities which were gradually replacing the older legal concept of nationhood. The net result was that Latin now came to hold different kinds of significance, and to involve different practices, for different ethnic, social and even generational groupings. For some people, it was an integral part of what they wanted to preserve as their identity. For others, it was an obstacle to the development of nationhood.

The practical usefulness and political significance of a *lingua franca* are again at issue in David Huddart's chapter, which returns to English as the prime exhibit. More particularly, Huddart is concerned with the *teaching* of English as a *lingua*

franca, and with the claim that there is actually more than one “World English”, in that English can be coloured by the environment within which it is being used – can undergo a process of “cultural translation”, to use the terminology of post-colonial theoreticians. When postcolonialism’s liberatory drive gains headway within the field of language pedagogy, it encourages what its champions refer to as “creativity”, as a way of resisting the alleged tendency of a lingua franca towards cultural imperialism. Having examined the implications of such postcolonialist thinking for composition studies in North America, Huddart then asks whether an analogous approach would be suitable in English courses offered by universities in Hong Kong, where he himself is based. One of his points here is that his students want to be taught, not Hong Kong English, but an English that is more widely viable. Among other things, therefore, they positively welcome the example set by an English native speaker. Huddart’s more general claim is that the fruitfulness of postcolonial teaching theory most probably varies from one postcolonial context to another. But at least on this showing, postcolonialism’s celebration of innovatory difference can sometimes collide head-on with practical demands for an intelligible sameness.

Amporn Srisermbhok’s chapter is also about teaching lingua franca English in the Far East, more specifically in a university in Thailand. Drawing not only on her own personal resources as a teacher but on several task- and content-based approaches to teaching, Srisermbhok wanted to find out whether, and if so how, reading activities could significantly help students improve their English-language writing skills. Her experiment involved a group of twenty participants in an intensive 30-hour workshop, and she collected data from participants’ writing assignments, from a questionnaire, and from open-ended questions intended to elicit suggestions and recommendations. Putting everything together, Srisermbhok came to the conclusion that both intensive and extensive reading did help participants improve their writing skills, but also their listening and speaking skills as well, and that there were notable improvements in the areas of vocabulary and communicational flow – the use of discourse markers, for instance. Participants were pleased with the progress they had made, and felt encouraged to apply what they had learned to their own work as teachers, and to continue with their own private reading.

Part II of the book begins to engage in some detailed literary discussion, but in ways which particularly emphasize the controversial theoretical issues raised by globalization for the study of language, culture and literature more generally.

The transition from Part I’s explorations of major and minor languages is achieved by Kathleen Gyssels’s chapter on the influential Martiniquan man of

letters Édouard Glissant, whose view of language/s was, she argues, distinctively complicated and even self-contradictory. His response to the fragmentation of Caribbean literature, and indeed to what he described as the Balkanization of the entire African diaspora's cultural production, actually varied from one phase of his intellectual development to another. Early on, he opposed the dominance of French as a lingua franca by championing creolization, apparently in the belief that communities expressing themselves in different languages, dialects and creoles would be able to enter into meaningful relationships with each other through a world literature that was *not* carried by some single shared linguistic medium. Later, he seemed to change his mind about this, and to seek recognition for Caribbean literatures by choosing a publisher at the very heart of the Parisian literary establishment. Nor was this the only paradox. From Gyssels's critique, Glissant emerges as a thinker whose idiosyncratic blind spots were directly at odds with his professedly democratic goals. In compiling *La Terre, le feu, l'air et le vent: Une Anthologie de la poésie du Tout-monde* (2010), for instance, he left out many representative poets merely because they did not appeal to his own long-established personal preferences, and he also completely ignored, as throughout his career, Caribbean writing in Dutch. All in all, his case offers the clearest possible illustration of just how necessary, but also just how difficult it is to balance between major and minor languages and literatures in what is now a globalized world.

That globalized world is one in which literatures themselves sometimes seem to call for discussion not only as "literatures" (plural) but in terms of "World Literature" (singular). Any text nowadays, after all, can go viral overnight. Yet the concept of World Literature, linked as it is to Goethe's discussion of *Weltliteratur* nearly two hundred years ago, is as much of a target for postcolonialist deconstruction as is the argument for a single English lingua franca discussed by David Huddart. And Magdi Youssef, in his chapter here, argues that as things stand at present World Literature is certainly fair game – that it needs to be "decolonized" and rendered far less Eurocentric in its ideological assumptions. One of his chief claims is that the Nobel Prize for Literature basically mystify literary phenomena, by still assigning them to a lofty Kantian perspective. Youssef himself embraces a more down-to-earth account, in which the politico-economic and socio-economic conditions under which literary processes take place are not seen as entirely exterior to literary phenomena, but as intrinsically affecting literary techniques, structures and preoccupations. As for a World Literature of the future, in Youssef's view this could involve an endless variety of literary and cultural inventions, all of them reflecting objective distinctions between different socio-cultures that would finally open themselves to each other. There would no longer be a drive towards either identifying with the Other or rejecting the Other. Instead, "[t]he sense of being different, if coupled with self-confident openness towards the Other, would make

for a truly sound and rewarding cultural encounter worldwide, which would be greatly preferable to the present way of making literature internationally acceptable by dressing it up in a certain ideological uniform."

A similarly historicizing argument is offered by Lotta Strandberg in her chapter, which analyses the influence exerted on canon formation and literary interpretation by different reading positions. Strandberg raises the question of whether, just as there are definably major and minor languages and literatures, there are also definably major and minor reading positions. And if there are, on what criteria can the definitions be based? By way of answer, she explores some of the reading positions which have been adopted, or which could be adopted, in interpretations of South Asian women's writing, and more particularly of Githa Hariharan's novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992). She comes to the conclusion that in the world of today some strongly dominant reading positions certainly are at work. Readings of the kind put forward by Fredric Jameson, for instance, are representative of Western Anglophone academia in general, and some typically Western feminist readings have also been extremely influential. Strandberg herself occupies what might seem to be a somewhat peripheral reading position, in that she is a Finnish reader, who is most "naturally" conversant with Finnish, Finland-Swedish and Swedish literature. This not only makes her hesitant only to pass judgement on Hariharan, but prevents her from endorsing either Jamesonian or conventionally Western feminist readings. So placed, and by carefully and undogmatically trying to penetrate Hariharan's own socio-cultural context, she finds herself empathizing with concerns to which the dominant readings have been totally oblivious. On the one hand, she rejects the Jamesonian compulsion to view all third-world texts as merely political allegories. On the other hand, she can see that Hariharan's own feminism, far from being a critique of heterosexual marriage, highlights certain culturally specific tensions and sympathies between one Indian woman and another.

Astrid Van Weyenberg's chapter, too, is sharply focused on contexts and their theoretical implications. Her topic is African adaptations of ancient Greek tragedy which are set in contemporary African contexts, so serving much the same function as did the Greek originals: they use materials from the distant past in order to comment on the present. Through their reworkings of the ancient plots and characters, Wole Soyinka, Fémi Ôsófisan, Yael Farber and others redirect attention, not only to the texts and contexts of ancient Greece, but to cultural traditions of which Greek tragedy has come to form a canonical part, traditions not only European but African as well. Careful to distance herself from postcolonialist interpretations of the more reductive and doctrinaire varieties, Van Weyenberg emphasizes the sheer energy and originality of the plays she is discussing. The African adaptors, unruffled by the civilization which Goethe found the most awe-inspiringly universal of all, raise perspectives in which that ancient Greek culture

was secondary and African cultures were primary, and in which African cultures are now once again leading the way, this time in the form of hybridities which could well have global significance.

As is clear from the demystifying historicism of the chapters by Youssef, Strandberg and Van Weyenburg, in a globalizing world literature can become a battle-ground for power politics, much of which has to do with contests of legitimation. Which individual, which grouping, which institution, *has the right* to say what texts deserve to be taken seriously, how they are to be interpreted, and what qualities are worthy of admiration? In Karen Ferreira-Meyers's chapter, the question of legitimacy has to do with genres, at which point the terms "major" and "minor" have nothing at all to do with quantity or size but are entirely, and strongly, evaluative: some genres are slightly referred to as minor, while others are valorized very positively as major. Ferreira-Meyers is particularly interested in the legitimation process by which, either within a single culture or more globally, a genre can actually graduate from minor to major. As her two case studies she takes Lusophone and Anglophone crime fiction in Africa, and African and Francophone European autofiction (a type of writing in which autobiographical fact is strongly interwoven with fiction). Her conclusion is that genre legitimation has five distinguishable stages: (1) authors writing in the new genre become more independent and less subject to popular commercial demand; (2) they begin to aspire to a higher aesthetic value; (3) their audience expands and diversifies; (4) the range of authors using the new genre becomes correspondingly more varied; and (5) there are specific instances of the genre's recognition – as when journals, awards and conferences are devoted to it – along with critical approaches which explicitly take it into account and theorize it.

The possibility that popular forms of entertainment may graduate to a high cultural status is also the theme of Sylvie André's chapter. High literature, as she points out, was a notion or phenomenon linked with the development of the Western middle class during the nineteenth century. In the globalized world of the future, literature will in André's view either vanish or fundamentally change. Present-day communication technology already provides forms of culture which are in effect world-wide: in particular, television series and video games, whose huge popular success may at first seem to be determined solely by the law of the marketplace. But this is where André raises some searching questions. Could it not be that these new forms of narrative have some specific features of their own? And in cases where the creation of new narratives is collaborative or even collective, might we not learn something from earlier scholars' discussions of oral traditions? Might not digital culture even be able to produce works that are major, not only in terms of global spread, but in terms of quality as well? – a new World Literature, as it were.

Part III of the book continues the literary discussions of Part II, taking up the same theoretical considerations, but with a more pronounced emphasis on their relevance to particular practices, traditions and writers. As a necessary focus of attention here, some chapters return to differences between major and minor languages.

Manuel Brito's chapter is a natural bridge from the one by Sylvie André in that he, too, is concerned with technologies and markets for the dissemination of cultural products. He offers a salutary reminder that, when a writer or a literary fashion achieves a global popularity, this is not just a matter of the quality of writing. Much really does depend on the available means of distribution and promotion. Brito is particularly interested in the role of small presses specializing in innovative poetry, previously considered as the most elitist kind of writing of all, but now in increasingly wide international circulation. Brito shows, in fact, that the small poetry presses have completely revolutionized both the university system and the market for books, reaching ever larger communities in North America, Europe, and Australasia (including New Zealand). And "communities", he emphasizes, is exactly the right word here. Innovative poetry is no longer the preserve of particular "nations". Its linguistic flexibility and formal experimentalism have deterritorialized national pride within an all-embracing cultural pluralism.

Marta A. Skwara's chapter, by contrast, is about a literature which has perhaps been unduly held back: Polish literature, which is so often regarded as a minor literature belonging to a larger literary region. More specifically, Skwara takes up cases in which Polish literature has been considered as one of the "Slavic Literatures" or one of the "East-Central European Literatures." As she sees these groupings, they lack real substance, and are ideologically charged, viewing the literatures so grouped together as exponents of some "common mechanism" which is actually far less "common" than claimed. In Skwara's view, the most fruitful approach is not to present particular European literatures from particular vantage points, but to study European literature as a whole, to which all European literatures can be said to contribute.

One way for a literature to extend its reach is for its writers themselves to cross geographical boundaries. This is the topic of Leena Eilittä's chapter. She begins, though, by going back to Goethe's notion of *Weltliteratur* as expressed in his journals, letters and essays. What emerges very clearly is Goethe's hope that literary works would become less rooted in some single place, more cosmopolitan, more intercultural. Eilittä's main suggestion is that this aspect of Goethe's dream is now coming true in intercultural developments within the field of migrant literature. Writers such as Mikhail Pavlovich Shishkin, Catalin Dorian Florescu and Radka

Donnell, all of whom have moved from elsewhere to Switzerland, have brought with them unfamiliar social, psychological and literary perspectives in very much the way Goethe had desiderated. On the other hand, Eilittä also points out that the deracination which can make migrant writers so fascinating in their new homelands can be very painful and problematic. For the individual writer, globalization sometimes comes with a high personal price tag.

If Goethe, longing for order and peace after all the violent chaos of the Napoleonic wars, failed to predict all the complexities and possible downsides of a global future, was he any more accurate in his view of the past, and in particular of the ancient civilization of China? According to Edward Said (1978), the answer must be negative here. Said portrayed Goethe as a prime example of a European “orientalism” which viewed the east through its own ideological spectacles. And although some scholars have found Said’s accusation less than fair, Yi Chen’s chapter here argues that Goethe, despite some good intentions, was guilty as charged. Through a detailed comparison of Goethe’s *Chinesisches* (his translations-cum-compositions of Chinese poems) with both the Chinese originals and the English translations that were his immediate source, Chen shows that his interest in “the East” and “the other” did not prevent him from writing a poetry firmly based on his own Enlightenment ideals and on classical Western models. Published in 1827, at the time when he was just beginning to formulate his concept of *Weltliteratur*, the *Chinesisches* suggest how hard it was often going to be for European champions of World Literature to neutralize their own authoritarianism.

The penultimate chapter takes up many languages and literatures in a way that is representative of this volume as a whole. Without offering any premature answers, it also begins to redefine the question of major-ness and minor-ness in a rapidly globalizing world. Here Meenakshi Bharat is discussing some of the many languages and literatures of India. Her suggestion is that the terms “minor” and “major” can scarcely do justice to the Indian situation, unless they are allowed to carry several different senses. Echoing the point made by Magdi Youssef, she shows that, in addition to the difference between quantitative and qualitative considerations, a crucial role can also be played by factors which at first seem extra-literary. A literature may be major or minor partly because of geography, history, politics or economics, and a literature which in one location or scenario is major or minor may, in some other location or scenario, be the reverse. Multilingual, multicultural and multi-ethnic India is a veritable confluence of literatures, and in ways, we might add, which can attune us to complexities in the present-day world as a whole. So having placed Bharat’s account in relation to earlier chapters in this book, we may find ourselves wondering – like Glissant in his later years – whether a single but multilingual World Literature will ever be really possible. And

if not, will there ever be a World Literature that is *not* the result of some kind of violent and/or ideological imposition? Not to mince words here, do the notions of “World Literature” and “World Lingua Franca” now need to be firmly relegated to an imperialist-cum-colonialist past? Or can they be rehabilitated in a practical and equitable way that fully endorses a politics of recognition? Read in this perspective, Bharat is especially suggestive in her comments on India’s multi-lingual Dalit literature, a literature of the underprivileged and marginalized which nevertheless inserts its own minor-ness within the field of major-nesses, very much in the manner theorized by Guattari and Deleuze (1986). In effect, Dalit literature engages dominant major literature in a dialogue that is critical but also creative, so lending further support to Youssef’s vision of a World Literature arising from numerous historically different Others.

A somewhat similar way forward is hinted by the poetry of Seamus Heaney, as analysed in the book’s final chapter by Micéala Symington. Symington pinpoints cases where a dominant language and its culture and a minor language and its culture do indeed enter into rewarding synergies. She is interested in what happens when words and phrases in a minor language such as the Irish language are used in the middle of literary texts written in the lingua franca English. Discussing her examples from Heaney, she argues that, partly by cueing in a colonial-postcolonial dialectic, his bilingual practice redefines the context of writing, staking out an identity which, within the broad field of literature in English, has its own separate-ness, and which refuses more monolithic, homogenous identities by opening up a plurality of histories, not least the historical experience of being a “minority”. In Symington’s view, this vertical descent of Heaney’s poetry into the pre-history of Ireland actually frees it from the horizontal limitations of place. As a result, an Irish literary work predominantly written in English can be perceived, not only in terms of, or in relation to, English or British literature, or indeed in relation to European literature, but as part of a wider endeavour to be understood in a more fully human context. The references to “minorness”, by converting a monolithic vision into a plurality of divergent, sensuously relished pasts and presents, *expand* the literary paradigm. Here, then, as in some of this volume’s earlier chapters, minor can be seen as transmuting into major.

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PART I

Languages

