

# Introduction: Multilingualism and Children's Literature – New Perspectives

Welcome to a theme on multilingualism!

Literature and multilingualism are brought into contact in a number of distinct but related areas. Literary multilingualism helps us shed light on texts written in several languages or several kinds of languages (such as dialects and slang), texts that thematise multilingualism, authorships that include works in different languages, minority literature written in several languages, and multilingualism within the literary field. Literary multilingualism can encompass everything from individual word choices in a work of fiction to questions of a country's literary canon.

During the past decade, research on literary multilingualism has developed significantly. Conferences, research project networks, doctoral dissertations, and other academic publications have contributed to the creation of an infrastructure for Nordic literary multilingualism studies. This is, for instance, noticeable in the volume *The Aesthetics and Politics of Linguistic Borders: Multilingualism in Northern European Literature* (2020) edited by Heidi Grönstrand, Markus Huss, and Ralf Kauranen as well as the 2020 special issue "Flerspråkig litteratur och läsare i interaktion" (The interaction between multilingual literature and readers) of *Edda* edited by Julia Tidigs and Helena Bodin. As a research field, literary multilingualism has mainly developed through examinations of literature aimed at adults. Within the field of children's literature, multilingualism studies have mainly been conducted outside of the Nordic countries, and often with linguistic and didactic starting points. Bilingual or multilingual children's books constitute a long literary tradition that has given risen to a considerable number of studies (see e.g. Hadaway and Young). Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer's two pioneering publications *Mehrsprachigkeit und Kinderliteratur* (2013, with Ira Gawlitsek) and the special issue "Multilingualism and Children's Literature" in *Bookbird* (2013) present literary research zooming in on the interplay between text and image as well as a great number of articles focused on literary education and second-language learning.

New perspectives within literary multilingualism research include the multimodal and intermedial aspects of multilingualism, reader interactions with multilingual literature, and multilingualism in the literary public sphere. Within all these areas and more, children's literature can provide new perspectives and valuable insight, and with this theme we wanted to unite researchers from the field of children's literature and the field of literary multilingualism to further propel the research on children's literary multilingualism.

In the autumn of 2022, the editorial team of *Barnboken* asked us whether we would be interested in editing a theme on multilingualism, and we accepted the task with great enthusiasm. Imagining a meeting point for experts within literary multilingualism and children's literature was certainly tempting! The large number of abstract proposals revealed that researchers all over the world found the topic engaging. In the beginning of October 2023, the authors gathered at the Department of Culture and Aesthetics at Stockholm University for a workshop, and the editorial work on the articles followed in 2024. The result is the nine articles presented here.

The theme spans across two volumes and includes articles by researchers from Finland, Norway, Poland, and Sweden on literary examples that comprise Arabic, English, Finnish, Hebrew, Italian, Ladino, Norwegian, Persian, Sámi languages, Swedish, and Finland-Swedish, as well as pseudo-script. As theme editors we have each contributed an article, and in these instances the peer review and editing processes have been handled by *Barnboken's* editorial team. We would like to thank the *Barnboken* editors for their thorough support and extensive work, as well as our peers who have offered their expertise as anonymous reviewers. We are also grateful to Riksbankens Jubileumsfond (Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation) and Letterstedtska föreningen (the Letterstedtska foundation) for the generous contributions to the organising of the workshop and the production costs of this theme.

Some of the questions through which we have approached the theme are: How is the relationship between image and text complicated by and in multilingual picturebooks? How is the reader interaction with multilingual text influenced by whether the reader is learning to read or is participating in an event of reading aloud? What can multilingual reading situations look like and where do we find them – in what private or public spaces and settings? How can multilingual children's literature challenge established notions of linguistic and national borders? How do didactic and aesthetic aspects collaborate or compete when it comes to the publishing of multilingual literature

for children and youth? These are some of the many questions highlighted in the articles that we are pleased to announce within the theme “Multilingualism and Children’s Literature – New Perspectives.”

Anna Finozzi explores naming practices as a form of literary multilingualism where the child’s agency is central in the article [“Call Me By My Name: Naming Practices as Multilingual Devices in Italian Postcolonial Children’s Literature.”](#) Using examples from picture-books, children’s and YA novels, and graphic novels, Finozzi shows how postcolonial Italian children’s literary depictions of practices related to personal names expose power dynamics linked to race, gender, and class while also contributing to the portrayal of a multilingual society. For the children and youth in these literary works, claiming the right to be called by one’s own name becomes a way of resisting racism and other forms of oppression. By extension, this type of children’s literature challenges conceptions of national homogeneity.

The child’s agency and the right to their own language are also the focus of Nina Goga’s article [“Rap og multiethnolektisk myndiggjøring i Amina Sewalis dagbokroman \*Hør’a, dagbok!\*”](#) (Rap and multiethnolectal empowerment in Amina Sewali’s diary novel *Hør’a, dagbok!*). Applying a rights-oriented perspective based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Goga investigates how Amina Sewali in the Norwegian children’s book *Hør’a, dagbok!* (2020) employs the 12-year-old diarist Nansi’s literary multiethnolect as part of Nansi’s linguistic and cultural empowerment. Since Nansi dreams of becoming a rapper, this particular literary and musical form plays an important role in its Norwegian guise in the fictive diary. Sewali’s novel becomes an example that can give young readers the means to argue for their right to be accepted in all their languages, including musical forms of expression.

Ladino, the language of Sephardic Jews, is a language on the verge of extinction. In her article [“Multilingualism in Contemporary Sephardic Children’s Literature: Fostering Young Readers’ Engagement in Ladino Culture.”](#) Agnieszka August-Zarębska discusses Ladino as a post-vernacular phenomenon, where the essential point is to use the language. Through a selection of picturebooks from Israel and the United States published between 2010 and 2023, August-Zarębska firstly highlights the bilingual books, which convey rhymes, poems, and songs to children by combining Ladino with either Hebrew or English. Other selected picturebooks that recount longer stories, for example about the singer Flory Jagoda, include only traces of Ladino, with the main language being English or Hebrew. August-Zarębska demonstrates that the books, regardless

of the strategy chosen, create a ground for children's continued interest in Ladino, the language that forms their cultural and historical heritage.

Julia Tidigs examines the attitudes towards literary multilingualism in Finland-Swedish reviews of Annika Luther's and Marianne Backlen's social realist young adult novels in "[För finlandssvenska unga läsare, på deras språk: Värderingen av litterär flerspråkighet i recensioner av finlandssvenska ungdomsromaner under tidigt 2000-tal](#)" (For Finland-Swedish young readers, in their language: The evaluation of literary multilingualism in reviews of Finland-Swedish young adult novels from the early 2000s). Tidigs shows that questions of linguistic authenticity and the choice of target group, which have been central to the discussion of Finland-Swedish literary language, recur in the reception of young adult literature. However, new aspects are also added, such as the temporal durability of the language as well as the age gap between author and readers. Multilingualism is recognised as a valuable literary device, and the wish to protect young readers' right to see their reality depicted in a language that is recognisable to them is prominent in the evaluation of these novels.

Two of the articles within the theme address multilingualism and literature in child-centred settings: school libraries and preschools. In "[På vei mot et flerspråklig skolebibliotek](#)" (Towards a multilingual school library), Lene Anundsen and Ingeborg Eidsvåg Fredwall investigate the school library as a multilingual arena. Both the library room's physical design as well as the space assigned to different languages and the activities that take place there influence the school library as a multilingual *schoolscape*. The authors show a tension between, on the one hand, the Norwegian curriculum's emphasis on multilingualism as a resource and the general appreciation that multilingualism encounters and, on the other hand, a school reality where the different languages of students and teachers are not always fully recognised and where a lack of access to children's literature in different languages hinders the school librarians' attempts to develop the library as a multilingual space.

The second of the two articles takes on Norwegian preschools, where reading practices in languages other than Norwegian were found to be virtually non-existent. Instead, Katarzyna A. Tunkiel, Cecilie Dyrkorn Fodstad, and Trude Hoel examine preschool teachers' experiences of reading with multilingual children. In their article "[Reading Practices with Multilingual Children in Norwegian Kindergartens: Picturebooks, Tangible Objects, and Playful Bodies,](#)" they consider preschool reading as a multimodal practice, which can

inspire play involving the entire body. Amongst other things, the interviews made within the study reveal that reading with multilingual children is often converted into play and that the pictures in the books become especially important. The study underlines that it is through the preschool staff's curiosity and creativity that reading in Norwegian becomes meaningful to multilingual children.

The three concluding articles explore multilingualism in picturebooks. The complex interplay between illustrations and the combination of different languages is the focus of the article [“Intertwined Messages: Aesthetic and Didactic Aspects of Dual-Language Sámi Picturebooks”](#) by Annbritt Palo, Lena Manderstedt, and Åsa Bjuhr. The authors demonstrate how didactic and aesthetic aspects collaborate in the picturebooks *Lilli, áddjá, ja guovssahas/Lilli, farfar och norrskenet* (Lilly, Grandpa and the Northern Lights, 2020) by Elin Marakatt and Anita Midbjer and *Gájuoh muv! Gijrra Almien jah Enoken luvnnie/Rädda mig: Vår hos Almmie och Enok* (Save me: Spring at Almmie and Enok's, 2021) by Sophia Rehnfjell and Inga-Wiktoria Påve. The multilingualism and the illustrations make visible the Sámi peoples and introduce both Sámi and non-Sámi readers to Sámi culture, and through their multilingualism the picturebooks play an important role in the revitalisation of Sámi languages.

Maria Lassén-Seger and Mia Österlund take a closer look at Finnish baby books in their article [“Statligt sanktionerad flerspråkighet för bebisar och deras vuxna: Litterär flerspråkighet i finländska babylädeböcker”](#) (State-sanctioned multilingualism for babies and their adults: Literary multilingualism in Finnish baby box books). Since the 1980s, special picturebooks have been produced in Finland as part of the baby box that is offered as a gift to all families of newborn babies. They therefore become an expression of government policy and raise questions with disruptive force about language politics. Using the materiality and multimodality of these picturebooks as a starting point, Lassén-Seger and Österlund investigate their multilingual iconotext, where images and text in Finnish, Swedish, and in recent years also Sámi languages, are included. They find that the characteristics of the baby box books can best be described with the new term *visual literary multilingualism*. At the same time, their examination shows that the multilingualism of the baby box books becomes utopian as it disregards society's actual power hierarchies between majority and minority languages.

The third and last article on multilingualism in picturebooks is Helena Bodin's [“Heterografi och högläsning: Om olika alfabet och deras funktioner i svenska bilderböcker”](#) (Heterographics and

reading aloud: On different alphabets and their functions in Swedish picturebooks). Bodin explores the use of *heterographics* – that is, different alphabets – in a selection of Swedish picturebooks published between 2013 and 2023. These exemplify how Arabic, Hebrew, and Persian script as well as pseudo-script have been inserted in the verbal and visual texts of the picturebooks. Applying multimodal perspectives, Bodin demonstrates how the heterographic elements can gain aesthetic, thematic, and performative functions. The article sheds light on how the auditory-temporal dimension of the picturebooks can be realised during the event of reading aloud, as the readers get to experience some of the different emotions that the characters of the picturebooks feel when encountering unknown letters and languages.

As the summaries of the articles show, the new perspectives on multilingualism and children's literature that we wish to offer through this theme consist partly of children's literature research's gaze on multilingualism, partly of literary multilingualism research's gaze on children's literature. Sometimes these gazes meet at eye-level, and it is our hope that the mutual exchange between these two research fields will have much to offer readers from different academic but also more practice-based fields and, last but not least, inspire future research.

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