

Ramona Pellegrino (Genoa)
Michaela Bürger-Koftis (Genoa)

Polyphonie. Multilingualism_Creativity_Writing:

Project, web portal and research centre

1. Introduction

Polyphonie. Multilingualism_Creativity_Writing – originally in German: *Polyphonie. Mehrsprachigkeit_Kreativität_Schreiben* – is a permanent international project that had its origin in a workshop attended by Italian and Austrian researchers that took place in 2009. The project investigates the multifaceted connections between multilingualism and creativity in writing systematically and from an interdisciplinary perspective. It aims to explore the more or less close relationship between individual/social multilingualism and creativity in general, and in particular literary creativity. The first results of this research project are to be found in the volume *Polyphonie. Mehrsprachigkeit und literarische Kreativität*.¹ The contributions presented in this book formed the starting point for a larger scientific project, namely a web portal in which the connection between multilingualism and literary creativity could be investigated on an ongoing basis. This led to the creation of the web portal *Polyphonie. Mehrsprachigkeit_Kreativität_Schreiben* (www.polyphonie.at) and, more recently, the inter-university research centre POLYPHONIE. The web portal and the research centre will be presented in more detail in the following sections.

2. The web portal www.polyphonie.at

The web portal *Polyphonie. Mehrsprachigkeit_Kreativität_Schreiben* (www.polyphonie.at) linked to the eponymous project was launched in 2012. Not only is it a platform that offers an opportunity for publishing articles and providing information, but it is also a multilingual portal which offers the support of “collective intelligence”² by bringing together both primary and secondary material on the subject, as well as an online magazine which is updated twice yearly.

The very fact that we are dealing here with a “web portal” and not a “website” or a “web page” (see <https://www.techopedia.com/definition/5411/website>) indicates that the initiators had in mind a

¹ Michaela Bürger-Koftis, Hannes Schweiger, Sandra Vlasta (eds): *Polyphonie. Mehrsprachigkeit und literarische Kreativität*. Wien: Praesens 2010.

² See Thomas W. Malone, Michael S. Bernstein (eds): *Handbook of Collective Intelligence*. Stanford: MIT Press 2015.

format designed to be more communicative and interactive, and that it should be more than just an online journal dedicated to the publication of essays.

The web portal is available in five languages: German, Italian, English, French and Slovak. Multilingualism plays such an important role in the research project, the founders and the editors wanted to implement this concept in the platform as well, and therefore all functional terms, portal texts and abstracts are available not only in German (the working language of the majority of the founders, and the one in which most texts are written) and English (the most common lingua franca in the world today), but also in Italian (chosen to represent the Romance languages because of its proximity to the scientific language Latin) and Slovak (a Slavic language that is not written in Cyrillic script). As of 2019, French has been added, and is gaining more and more importance in the project. The three-part division of the homepage into “Project”, “Portal” and “Community” is meant to reflect the shift in the users’ involvement, from a more passive role in the “Project” to a more active participation in the “Community”. Each section is in turn divided into three parts. Starting from the first, the “Project”-page (<http://www.polyphonie.at/index.php?op=page&page=8>) contains the description of *Polyphonie. Mehrsprachigkeit_Kreativität_Schreiben*. “Team” (<http://www.polyphonie.at/index.php?op=page&page=9>) gives more detailed information about the participants in the research project, namely the founders, the scientific board, the editors in charge of individual fields of research – which will be discussed in more detail later – and the translators and editors of the online journal associated with the platform. “Partners” (<http://www.polyphonie.at/index.php?op=page&page=10>) shows which international universities, institutions and sponsors are collaborating on the project.

The second section, “Portal”, provides users with more active access to the project, starting with the “Publication Platform” (<http://www.polyphonie.at/index.php?op=publicationplatform>). The publication platform is an online magazine with an ISSN-number (2304-7607) that has been classified by ANVUR (the Italian National Agency for the Evaluation of the University System and Research) as a scientific journal. Contributions are published twice a year (June and December) in German, Italian, English or French. The publication platform offers scholars the opportunity to publish – and thus make available for discussion among the international scientific community – contributions on plurilingualism, creativity and writing from different research perspectives. Each contribution is preceded by abstracts in all five languages of the web portal (German, English, Italian, Slovak and French). The abstracts are freely accessible to all interested parties, while the texts themselves can be accessed after free registration.

As already mentioned, the central goal of the project is to investigate the multiple connections between multilingualism and creativity in writing in a systematic way, and above all from an interdisciplinary perspective, in order to analyze the more or less organic relationship between individual and collective multilingualism and creativity in writing in general, specifically in literary writing. The publication platform offers scholars the opportunity to publish contributions on this topic from different perspectives, namely the following nine research areas: Biography, Research on Multilingualism, Neurolinguistics, Applied Linguistics, Translation Studies, Literature, Comparative Literature, Media and Communication Studies, Foreign and Second Language Didactics. Although the contribution of collective intelligence is desirable, it should be noted that the publication platform is not a wiki, i.e. it is not a website or database managed by users where any user is able to add, remove or edit content (see <https://www.britannica.com/topic/wiki>). Since the project aims to produce citable online publications, it is not possible to have an unlimited and uncontrolled feed. Our practice is for manuscript proposals to be submitted to the *Polyphonie* editorial board and then reviewed by those in charge of the individual departments in consultation with the editors.

The following page is titled “Specialist Bibliography” (<http://www.polyphonie.at/index.php?op=areabibliography>) and here the works cited in the published contributions are listed. The specialist bibliography has been divided into sections according to the above-mentioned nine research areas of the publication platform, and it is updated regularly. This section enables users to gain an overview of the most important works dealing with multilingualism in writing.

The next page, the “Interview Database” (<http://www.polyphonie.at/index.php?op=interviewdatabase>) forms the very heart of the web portal. The aim of the interview database is to make available – in the form of audio files, sometimes even video files – language biography interviews with writers coming from literature, the media and science who have a multilingual background. This project involves a special kind of biographical work, the requirements for which need to be defined in minute detail in advance. It is important to clarify whether the need is for narrative interviews or segmented interviews, or both (on the different types of qualitative interviews, see <https://methodenzentrum.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/e-learning/qualitative-erhebungsmethoden/qualitative-interviewforschung/unterschiedliche-formen-qualitativer-interviews/>). At all events, the list or lists of questions to be worked out must be structured in such a way that the linguistic-cultural biographies are actually “language learning biographies”.³

³ On the relationship between language and biography, see Rita Franceschini (ed.): *Sprache und Biographie*. Stuttgart: Metzler.

This should produce an overall picture of the language socialization of writers, starting from “motherese” (*Mutterisch*; see <https://dorsch.hogrefe.com/stichwort/motherese>), the acquisition of the first language through caregivers, as against the acquisition of one or more first languages by means of social contact or education, passing through the later learning of second or foreign languages, right up to the writer’s ongoing learning processes in the foreign language in its written form. To ensure the comparability of the data, every effort is made to standardize the segmented interviews. In this way those who then wish to draw on the data for comparative studies will be able to find writers’ statements on specific issues rapidly using the search feature. With the interview database, the editors also want to exploit the productive potential of “collective intelligence”, which means that anyone can send them audio or video files of interviews conducted with multilingual writers.

To make this language biography work meaningful, the interviews must also be transcribed. This too can be done with the help of the community. Interviews can be freely downloaded and then the transcript of the database made available, so that it can be published as a research contribution. As part of the work being carried out by the POLYPHONIE research centre, as will be explained below, a number of master’s theses have already been assigned to students who, within the context of their research, also transcribed some of the interviews on the database. Of course, the interviews can serve as a corpus for further linguistic studies in the fields of phonetics, morphology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics, while also being used to explore questions in the field of language variety research and applied linguistics as well as for literary and cultural studies research.

The interviews focus on the language biographies⁴ of the interviewees and the meaning of multilingualism in their life stories and especially in their writing, thus providing an overall picture of the language socialization of those writers. The database is made up mostly of recorded interviews with German-writing authors, but one of the future goals is to expand this database to include authors writing in English, French and Italian. The aim is to build up a collection of language biographical interviews that can be used by scholars around the world for their research purposes.

Let us now move on to the third and final section of the portal, called “Community”. It starts with the “New Publications” page (<http://www.polyphonie.at/index.php?op=newpublications>): here new publications dealing with multilingualism and writing are listed. The following page, “news” (<http://www.polyphonie.at/index.php?op=news>), lists events taking place in the field of research on multilingualism, creativity and writing. Finally, the last page “Links” (<http://www.polyphonie.at/index.php?op=links>), contains links to associations and cultural events *Polyphonie* is in close contact with. These include the German literary festival *Globale. Festival für*

⁴ Ibid. See also Brigitta Busch: *Mehrsprachigkeit*. Wien: Facultas (UTB).

grenzüberschreitende Literatur (<https://globale-literaturfestival.de/>), the Austrian intercultural playwriting-project WIENER WORTSTAETTEN (<https://www.wortstaetten.at/>), the Austrian literary prize Hohenemser Literaturpreis (<https://www.hohenems.at/services/kultur-in-hohenems/literatur/hohenemser-literaturpreis/>), the Bulgarian online scholarly journal *Colloquia Comparativa Litterarum* (<https://ejournal.uni-sofia.bg/index.php/Colloquia/index>), the multiethnic cultural centre LA TENDA based in Milan (Italy) (http://www.latenda.eu/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=11&Itemid=101) and its online journal of “Migration Literature” *El Ghibli* (http://www.latenda.eu/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=19&Itemid=249), as well as the Italian literary contest *Lingua Madre* (<https://concorsolinguamadre.it/>) and the international association of women poets *Compagnia delle Poete* (<http://www.compagniadellepoete.com/>).

3. The inter-university research center POLYPHONIE

Over the years, the *Polyphonie* project has been developed continuously and systematically, and it currently operates on a closely interconnected double track: aside from the web portal *Polyphonie. Mehrsprachigkeit_Kreativität_Schreiben* (www.polyphonie.at) outlined in the previous section, in 2018 the Inter-university Research Centre POLYPHONIE (<http://www.lcm.unige.it/polyphonie/index.php?op=home&lang=en>), established between the Universities of Genoa and Catania, was founded.

The principles that led to the creation of the web portal also form the starting point for the inter-university research centre, which promotes and coordinates research activities in the field of multilingualism, creativity and writing in an institutionalized context. Its specific aims are:

- the institutionalization of research activities, also with a view to a possible participation in European projects;
- the promotion, development and coordination of studies and research activities in the research areas of the *Polyphonie*-project, namely: Biography, Research on Multilingualism, Neurolinguistics, Applied Linguistics, Translation Studies, Literature, Comparative Literature, Media and Communication Studies, Foreign and Second Language Didactics;
- the promotion of scientific debate and related publications, as well as support in the didactic field;
- the stimulation of initiatives involving interdisciplinary cooperation with other university departments, Italian and international research institutes and research centres within public and private institutions;

- the organization of courses, seminars and in-service training courses, conferences and scientific exchanges in the disciplinary fields indicated above;
- the expansion of the activities carried through so far and the consolidation of the interdisciplinary scientific journal of the publication platform;
- the further expansion of the database with new interviews, for example through discussions with authors abroad or through corresponding presentations in Genoa and Catania;
- the involvement of students and doctoral candidates (for example, in transcribing the interviews);
- the expansion of the network of contacts with other public and private institutions;
- the establishment of a prize or scholarship to achieve the Centre's objectives, for example through a prize dedicated to Rosanna Vitale (1961-2012, co-initiator of the project) to reward outstanding student theses on the Centre's specific research areas.

Research fellows, doctoral students, researchers, lecturers and members of public and private research institutions can participate in the activities of the research centre, subject to prior approval by the respective home institution and the scientific advisory board.

Between June 2018 – when the research centre was founded – and the end of 2022, numerous activities were carried out, namely: nineteen seminars, three conferences (the proceedings of the last conference will be published on TRANS – Internet Journal for Cultural Studies), five meetings with authors (including the Austrian writer of Russian-Jewish origin Vladimir Vertlib and the German-Iranian writer Nava Ebrahimi), five book presentations, one workshop, numerous publications on the topic of multilingualism_creativity_writing, and four master's theses centred on the interviews in the interview database on the web portal. As part of the work on these theses, interviews from the interview database were also transcribed.

The POLYPHONIE Inter-University Research Center has also availed itself of external collaborations with partners such as the Italian-Austrian Cultural Centre in Genoa, the Austrian Cultural Forum in Milan and the Austrian Cultural Forum in Rome: for example, with the Italian-Austrian Cultural Center Genoa it was possible to organize an online reading with eleven transcultural authors. Other institutions the Centre collaborates with are *Parole Spalancate - Festival Internazionale di Poesia di Genova* (Genoa International Poetry Festival; <https://www.parolespalancate.it/>), the *Bundesministerium für europäische und internationale Angelegenheiten* (the Austrian Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs; <https://www.bmeia.gv.at/>), the Goethe Institut (<https://www.goethe.de/ins/it/it/index.html>), the *Associazione Culturale Italo-Tedesca* (Italian-German Cultural Association) in Catania

(<https://www.facebook.com/acitcatania/>), as well as the already mentioned literary competition *Lingua Madre* (<https://concorsolinguamadre.it/>), a permanent project promoted by the Piedmont Region and the Turin International Book Fair. Numerous female students have participated since 2018 with short stories published in the *Lingua Madre* anthologies, and/or have been awarded prizes (for example the Italian Women Special Section Prize in 2022).

4. Short concluding remarks

After this description of the development and the activities of the web portal *Polyphonie. Mehrsprachigkeit und literarische Kreativität* and the inter-university research centre POLYPHONIE, we would like to conclude by outlining some of the future goals the *Polyphonie* project has set for itself.

One of the objectives most closely linked to the research centre is the desire to strengthen interaction and collaboration between the two poles (Genoa and Catania) in a more systematic and synergic manner, for example, through regular meetings between the two scientific committees in order to inform and update each other on their respective activities, but also to identify activities to be planned together. With regard to the web portal, a key aspect is the contribution, on a scientific level, to the online journal, involving more colleagues from the research fields of each member of the *Polyphonie* team. Moreover, the database containing language interviews will be expanded by opening it up to other linguistic fields, given that to date most of the interviews are with German-speaking authors.

Through the centre's activities, it is intended to provide more opportunities for students and young scholars to contribute to the scientific debate, by writing theses based on the material made available in the web portal, publishing scientific articles, updating the specialist bibliography, etc.

Starting from the thematic affinity that arises out of the interweaving of multilingualism_creativity_writing as a common denominator, the aim is to create a broader basis for reflection on the planning of joint projects, at a disciplinary and/or interdisciplinary level, in a national and/or international context. In this sense, adding perspectives from Asia and Africa through contributions from people who live and work there would certainly be desirable.