

Multiculturalism and Multilingualism are not passé!

PASE 2016 International Conference

The 2016 PASE conference, organized jointly by the Institute of English and the Institute of English Cultures and Literatures of the University of Silesia, had a clearly specified focus on “Multilingualism, Multiculturalism and the Self”. Still, the organisers invited papers from linguists, applied linguists, literary scholars and e cultural scholars alike to confront a broad range of perspectives on the eponymous issues. The event was held in the “Meta” hotel in Szczyrk, where the mountainous setting offered the participants ample opportunities to reflect on the sublimity of nature vis a vis the volatility and fragility of human culture. The conference lasted three days – between 31st March and 2nd April 2016, definitely too little for an annual meeting of the Polish enthusiasts of English studies.

The event’s significance was additionally emphasised by the presence of the ESSE President, Prof. Liliane Louvel, whose active participation throughout clearly demonstrated that ESSE, our parent association, appreciates what we do here in Poland. What Professor Louvel certainly appreciated during her stay in Szczyrk was the high academic standard of the conference and the professional level of its organization. She was one of the many guests of the conference who expressed their sincere thanks to the Organising Committee of PASE 2016 (Prof. Danuta Gabryś-Barker, Prof. Adam Wojtaszek, Dr Dagmara Gałajda and Dr Paweł Zakrajewski from the Institute of English and Prof. Jacek Mydla, Prof. Leszek Drong, Dr Małgorzata Poks and Dr Julia Szoltysek from the Institute of English Cultures and Literatures) and to a number of their colleagues from the English department at the University of Silesia who contributed enormously to the overall success of the event.

Over the three days of the conference its participants enjoyed as many as five plenary presentations by distinguished guests from several European universities. Professor Rafał Molencki, Dean of the Faculty of Philology, University of Silesia (*Multiculturalism, Multilingualism and the Self in Medieval English*), spoke about the early ethnic history of Britain as the story of successive waves of immigrants from the continent. Furthermore, he pointed out that medieval Britain had been a truly multicultural and multilingual

society. And yet he also emphasised that despite the overwhelming internationalisation of the English language in late Middle Ages, on the social level one could notice the growing sense of national identity and self-pride of the new English nation.

Professor Jean-Marc Dewaele from the University of London (*Why Multiculturalism and Multilingualism Enrich the Self?*), in his plenary lecture made a very convincing claim about the effect of learning languages and absorbing new cultures, which extends beyond the purely cognitive level. Namely, he insisted that learning languages can enrich the self in unexpected ways, expanding identity options and sharpening communication skills. Professor Dewaele's conclusion was that multiculturalism and multilingualism can make one a better person, and a better citizen: more creative, more open-minded, more empathic, more emotionally stable, more sociable, more tolerant, better equipped to learn new languages, more confident and less anxious in communication.

Professor Anthony Barker from the University of Aveiro (*Finessing the Multilingual World in Commercial English Cinema*), in turn, introduced us to the complexities and conventions of commercial English cinema, especially those to do with sound and language. His plenary talk started with the period 1927-1930 and the ground rules established for representing the world. Then Professor Barker enlarged on the conventions of the Hollywood studio era in such classic movies as *Casablanca* (1942) and *Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957), before turning to the emergence of a tentative self-aware internationalist cinema in the 1960s and 1970s. Finally, he reviewed some recent developments in cinema and considered what a truly multilingual cinema might look like, what commercial realities would still be brought to bear, but also what possibilities might exist for its wider dissemination.

Professor Claus Schatz-Jakobsen from the University of Southern Denmark (*On the Uses and Abuses of Literature for Culture and Life*) offered the participants of the PASE 2016 conference a wide-ranging presentation concerned with literary theory, culture and multiculturalism as well as uses and abuses of literature. In his plenary talk he paid particular attention to the modes of contemporary criticism which may serve our culture in training our moral imagination, and may be used for the enlarging of our sympathies – as examples of such critics he mentioned Martha Nussbaum, Wayne Booth and Rita Felski.

Last but not least, Professor Frank Ferguson from Ulster University (*Beyond the Hamely Tongue: Ulster-Scots Literature and Multiculturalism*) delivered a lively and informative presentation on Ulster-Scots culture in Northern Ireland. He pointed out that Ulster-Scots, as a minority language, has received much community and government interest and has been recognised as a significant constituent of Ulster's cultural vibrancy. Alongside this, there has been a scholarly recovery of the literature associated with this language. He argued that Ulster-Scots writing's grand focus on the interplay between vernacular and received or classic literary registers provided a means not merely to comprehend the unique cultural mix of the north of Ireland but the ability of this literature to move beyond the boundaries of Irishness and Scottishness in order to engage with a broad range of constructions of the self and to recognise intuitively varieties of otherness.

The rich culture and literature section of conference programme comprised as many as eighteen panels, each of which contained two or three presentations. The thematic range of the presentations was very wide, as might be expected in a conference of this type, that is one which reflects the current research conducted by English scholars across the country.

Literary presentations covered specific historical and theoretical issues: from medieval studies (e.g. Andrzej Wicher's paper on multi-cultural motifs in Chaucer) to contemporary fiction (e.g. Anna Walczuk's paper on transformations of selfhood in Muriel Spark, papers on Doris Lessing's fiction by Mira Czarnecka and Angelika Szopa, and Michał Palmowski's on post-utopianism in Michel Houellebecq's *Submission*).

The literary papers may have reflected the common generic distinctions (fantasy, children's literature, contemporary realistic and non-realistic fiction, British and American), but the focus was often on how literary traditions has been inflected in recent reworkings. For example, Ewa Wiśniewska-Steciuk gave a presentation on anthropological interests in the works of Ursula K. Le Guin, while Joanna Bukowska spoke about the quest motif in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Buried Giant*.

American studies were represented by a number of scholars, who addressed such topics as ethnicity and identity in native American narratives and self-narrative (papers by Monika Kocot and Edyta Wood) and the dilemmas raised by multiculturalism (a paper by Małgorzata Poks on Ana Castillo 1993 novel *So Far from God*). Finally, poetry was present (e.g. in Ewa Borkow-

ska's paper, which mounted its defence as culture's mainstay), as was Shakespeare, and appropriately so, this being the year of the great anniversary.

Many non-literary presentations addressed multi-cultural issues in areas specific to particular and local cultural contexts; however, there were presentations in the fields of film studies (e.g. Stankomir Nicieja's paper on multicultural America in Clint Eastwood's film *Gran Torino*) and beyond; and so conference participants were also updated on the current research trends in interactive entertainment studies (in papers by Agnieszka Kliś-Brodowska and Tomasz Gnat, on recent developments in videogame studies and artificial societies/cultures, respectively).

Geographically speaking, the range of the papers was multicontinental, as well as multi-ethnic: the Canadian context was discussed by Eugenia Sojka (in a presentation on intercultural drama and theatre and performance), while the Australian by Ryszard Wolny (in a talk on narratives of conflict and of reconciliation) and the British by Katarzyna Molek-Kozakowska (who spoke on multiculturalism in the public sphere). Irish studies were represented by a separate panel of the conference. All the three speakers on the panel took up recent writings by Irish authors (Dermot Bolger and Edna O'Brien) and placed them in a broad historical, social and cultural context, which shed much light upon the literary works. Presentations by Aleksandra Kędzierska, Beata Piątek and Izabela-Curyłło-Klag proved that Irish culture is fraught with political tensions, and contemporary multicultural issues are also political through and through.

Given the focus of the conference on identity and multiculturalism, these themes were present in most of the talks; however, some delegates addressed head-on the theoretical issues raised by multiculturalism. For instance, David Schauflier discussed in his paper the idea of the spectacle and liberal imaginary in the context of French thought as represented by "the generation of '68" (Guy Debord, Cornelius Castoriadis, and Claude Lefort).

The conference organizers are planning to publish a selection of the proceedings in two reviewed volumes of conference papers. One volume will be devoted to *Multiculturalism, Multilingualism and the Self: Literature and Culture Studies* and the other to *Multiculturalism, Multilingualism and the Self: Studies in Linguistics and Language Learning*. Both monographs will be published by Springer. Those papers which do not focus strictly on the conference theme

may still be submitted to the PASE journal *Polish Journal of English Studies* (PJES) or to the University of Silesia journals. We hope that the publications will reflect the high quality of the presentations and the lively intellectual atmosphere of the entire conference.

Leszek Drong & Jacek Mydla
University of Silesia