



Sherry Simon

Concordia University, Montreal

 **Krzysztof Majer**

University of Lodz

Always in Motion: Cities, Languages, Histories

The Canadian city of Winnipeg is known for its glacial winters and its quirky arts scene. Both are on display in the recent film *Universal Language* (2024), directed by Matthew Rankin. The premise is outlandish: the mainly English-speaking city of Winnipeg is portrayed as Farsi-speaking. Everyone in Winnipeg communicates in Farsi (Persian), and all the shop signs are exclusively in the Perso-Arabic script. The only exception is a street named after Zamenhof, the inventor of Esperanto—a would-be universal language.

To show the city of Winnipeg, with its endless stretches of snow and brutalist architecture, literally covered in a language which does not match its historical reality is to see the fantasy of a city translated. Viewers experience a shocking incongruity between word and image. Familiarity is replaced by disorientation, which in this case echoes the feelings of the character who has returned “home” only to find his reality altered.

Winnipeg’s oral and visual makeover is inspired by Matthew Rankin’s fascination with Iranian cinema. The film is an homage to the giants of the Iranian screen who have made their cinema a powerhouse of innovation and sensitivity over the last decades. The mood is playful. But while the accents of a Farsi-speaking Winnipeg have a parodic tonality on the plains of the Canadian west, such a reimagining of the urban linguistic landscape will certainly resonate differently elsewhere, particularly in contexts of historical violence. Beyond the unlikely alteration of Winnipeg, the transformed city evokes the many places where language has been forcibly changed through conquest and occupation. Such changeovers,



© by the author, licensee University of Lodz – Lodz University Press, Lodz, Poland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>)

Funding Information: Not applicable. **Conflicts of interests:** None. **Ethical Considerations:** The Authors assure of no violations of publication ethics and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Received: 26 May 2025. Verified: 15 July 2025. Accepted: 20 July 2025.

consequences of shifts in power, are a prominent feature of modern history. The downfall of empires, following World War I, the shifting of borders after World War II, and the seesaw dominations of successive regime changes have resulted in the re-linguaging of many multilingual and cosmopolitan cities, or rather a reduction to the monolingualism of regional capitals. Shop signs were changed, street names were changed, and the soundscape was changed, too, as the population adapted to the language of the new rulers.

Makeovers and takeovers, forms of forced translation, are always partial, however—leaving behind traces that are reminders of the past. These often appear in the form of “ghost-signs”—physical remnants that emerge unexpectedly from the bricks of a crumbling storefront or the punctures of a wrecker’s ball—shop signs or painted advertisements on walls, for instance. They might be names inscribed on a building left untended in a climate of general neglect after a violent exchange of populations. Cities—as Rafael Schögler reminds us in his review of *The Routledge Handbook of Translation and the City*—are “living spaces” that “continue to host memories of violent transformations” (474).

Episodes of conflict involving language takeovers are the most dramatic illustrations of the translated city. But the city is translational in myriad aspects of its daily life. Indeed, urban language is always in motion. Traffic, circulation, exchange: these are the guiding figures for the translational city. Activities of exchange occur in public and private spaces, both through institutions and in individual conversation. To use translation as a tracking tool is to be attentive to the *direction* of cultural flows (*from* one language *into* another), through changing volumes of *intensity* (when a language becomes culturally and politically relevant), to *spatiality* (the meeting places, the scenes, the symbolic sites where languages come together) and to the *affects* that sustain interactions (whether translation is cool or warm: pure protocol, or an expression of urgency). Translation tracks connections between variously entitled communities—those that have historic claims to the territory of the city and those who seek to establish claims as migrants, refugees, or exiles.

Every city will have its own map of such zones and sites, resulting from the interactions among its various home and migrant languages, and from its spatial organisation—the neighbourhoods, divisions, and contact zones, where languages come together or are kept apart. While some contact zones become inscribed in the mythology of the city (areas where immigrants settle, the cosmopolitan zones around train stations, markets, symbolic public spaces), others exist in a state of tension, their meaning in flux. One of our contributors, Shehr Bano Zaidi, proposes the idea of “semiotic un/belonging” to describe the uncertainty of the meaning

and duration of linguistic ownership of public space. This term could be fruitfully applied to the many cases of tension and indeterminacy which occur in situations of multilingualism.

The articles in this collection constitute a rich contribution to ongoing debates on language and city space. They enlarge the map of reflection—at once the physical map of city sites (from Yaoundé to Calcutta, from Brussels to Chicago, from Venice to Palma) and the array of language practices (from community theatres to airports, from religious and devotional practices to multilingual poetics). They enlarge the definition of translation to include the implicit or intersemiotic variety, modes of connectivity that are not necessarily the recognisable model of page-to-page language transfer. What is more, they show the power of translation to test and reveal the fault lines of urban space.

While each of the contributors adopts a slightly different angle on the relation between language and urban space, these relations can be divided into three broad categories: 1. reading the linguistic landscape of the city as text (e.g., Palma, Yaoundé, Rawalpindi), 2. analysing linguistic practices that arise in connection with the specific language configurations of the city (e.g., Gurugram, Brussels, Calcutta, Edinburgh, Montréal) 3. studying literary texts inspired by the languages of a specific city (Chicago, Glasgow, Venice) or modelled on urban space more generally (Bergvall's soundworks, Rybicki's poems).

In recent years, translation studies scholars interested in language interventions in urban space have turned to the notion of the linguistic landscape. Its mandate is to produce detailed descriptive accounts of written language and how it is featured in the city, i.e. on what kinds of material support (billboards, logos, etc.) and in which neighbourhoods. However, a purely descriptive approach is not sufficient. More than simply creating a repertory of the language that figures on store fronts, office buildings, and other signage, the researcher must ask what the inscriptions on the city's surfaces reveal; to what forces they respond. In some cases the mere presence of a particular language can be a message in favour of a political position; in others, it can be the result of a deliberate effacement and replacing of previous signs. These motivating factors reveal signage to be the result of processes of translation, undertaken for various ends. Consequently, what looks like a simple declarative action turns out to be a more dynamic translational act.

The first three articles in this issue focus on the visual aspects of urban text. How is one to read the proliferation of signs in any urban space—particularly where there is a history of conflict? In his article on Majorca, Richard Mansell shows how important it is to have a deep knowledge of historical memory in order to understand the vestiges of yesterday and the

messages of today. Interpretation is an ongoing process, and must mobilise various levels of interpretation—linguistic, political, ideological. The troubled legacy of the Spanish Civil War and of the subsequent Francoist suppression of the Catalan language continue to have effects on the streets of Palma, interacting now with contemporary issues such as the anti-tourism movement. Mansell convincingly argues that the cultural identity of Majorca is the result of a continuous process of “layering, replacement, addition, and effacement of cultural forms . . . evident throughout the island” (21). Its identity has always been in a state of tension across multiple languages—and this tension becomes the essence of an enduring island consciousness.

In his analysis of Cameroon’s capital, Yaoundé, Theodore Dassé similarly addresses an uneasy relationship between two languages. This study of signage in the city is buttressed by extensive data concerning the situation of official bilingualism in Cameroon and specifically Yaoundé—which puts paid to the illusion of any symmetry between French and English. In fact, Dassé suggests that the extensive presence of unilingual signage points to the siloisation of the two language communities and a lack of desire to translate. His conclusion engages polemically with the idea that their extensive physical presence in proximate spaces suggests translation of sorts. Again, only an insider’s knowledge of this interlingual commerce can determine how the notion of translation is to be applied to the city.

Shehr Bano Zaidi’s presentation of inscriptions in the city of Rawalpindi comes with a different set of questions. These bits of script carved or painted onto historical buildings are not deliberate markings, conveying a need or demand, like street names or advertisements. Rather, they are signs of indifference: they have not been effaced, but left to linger. Zaidi’s ethnographic approach allows her to ask: what do the current owners or users of these buildings make of such writing? As in a few other contributions to this volume (e.g. Dhandhi and Sigroha; Liao, Strani, and Johnstone), ethnography allows the researcher to illuminate practices of meaning-making and translation: informants—“semiotic actants”—offer access to local knowledge about signage left undisturbed since pre-Partition times. Meanings, as Zaidi notes, change over time and are constantly being renewed in the context of political and memorial developments.

The second subsection is devoted to urban practices of language, activities that are linked to specific places in the city. Thus, the focus shifts from a practice of reading what we might call “found” scripts to the analysis of processes of translation. These are framed, promoted, or elicited by places such as neighbourhoods, community centres, theatres, or airports.

The phenomenon of Battala, studied by Pratim Das and Sushmita Pareek, offers something of an overdetermined example—principally

because the name refers both to a specific area in Calcutta and to the kind of literature produced there, often in translation. Battala is important in the cultural history of that colonial city for the role it is now understood to have played: as a counter-model to the relations between Bengali, Sanskrit, and English, which were dominant in the Bengali Renaissance. “[A] vital crossroads for language, culture, and urban identity” (106), it was also—as Das and Pareek show with their analysis of specific literary works—a crucial locus for the work of translation.

In their article, Min-Hsiu Liao, Katerina Strani, and Eilidh Johnstone study a purpose-made space designed as an experimental translation site. Their ethnographic project consists in devising workshops in community centres which will elicit forms of translation. In bringing together groups of immigrants to discuss their relation to translation (through language or drawings), the authors’ activist hope is not only to observe translational attitudes among migrants, but to use the opportunity to challenge the dominant directions of language flow. To speak of the translational city then is to look beyond language practices to the forces that drive them—the political and ideological pressures that determine the boundaries of belonging.

The decision to use ethnographic methods in order to situate and interpret language activities is also what unites a study of multilingual theatre in Brussels (by Elise Denolf) and an article focusing on religious practices in the city of Gurugram (by Muskan Dhandhi and Suman Sigroha). Denolf unravels the strands of history, policy, and personality that explain the current multilingual practices of the Brussels municipal theatre. She shows how the theatre is closely imbricated with the language realities of this exceptionally multilingual city, and how it can contribute, through its language practices, to reinforcing this very multilingualism. Dhandhi and Sigroha’s study of an increasingly forgotten ritual in the cosmopolitan city of Gurugram includes translation as an important player. Beginning with a municipality in India that is remarkable for its rapid industrial growth and residual pre-modern practices, the authors study a ritual which bridges the gap between the rural and the urban, just as it mobilises a variety of languages. It positions women in a paradoxical space between tradition and modernity, at the same time emphasising their creativity in adapting the ritual to modern spaces and idioms. Translation refers both to the languages spoken and the multimodal practices that characterise the ritual.

Our contributors are also interested in the workings of cultural institutions related to translation in a narrower, more traditional sense. Myriam Legault-Beauregard devotes her attention to the Governor General’s Literary Awards, among a handful of distinctions available to translators in Canada, alongside the John Glassco Prize and the Cole Foundation Prize. Probing the dynamics of the publishing sector, Legault-Beauregard

analyses the concentration of translation activity in metropolises such as Toronto, Montréal, and Vancouver. While it is still a common practice for French translations of Canadian literature to originate abroad (with Paris as a pivotal “centre of consecration”), Montréal takes pride of place as the main city where translators, in both language combinations, live and work.

Interest in spatial practices motivates Marcin Michalski's analysis of Naguib Mahfouz's use of the Arabic term *ḥāra*. This term emerges out of the very particular cityscape of Cairo, and its transfer into a variety of other languages reflects the dilemma of translating space-specific terms. Without a real urban layout to work from and a familiarity with the ways in which this urban space is used, narrated, and choreographed, the translation of this aspect of Mahfouz's *Awlād ḥāratinā* risks becoming abstract and conjectural. Michalski's analysis focuses on the extent to which English, Polish, and Spanish translations are able to conjure up the topography of an Egyptian city.

Some of the contributors venture into entirely contemporary spaces. What kind of language is spoken by the airport, asks Marek Wojtaszek, and how does it influence the behaviour of those within it? In his philosophical inquiry into “order-words,” Wojtaszek contrasts the idioms of airport space with the transgressive language of art, using the example of Eve Fowler's *A Universal Shudder* in the Los Angeles airport. Translation is studied here not so much as a link across vernacular tongues, but as a possibility of replying to an overwhelming architecture of control.

And what about the city soundscape—or, more specifically, the neighbourhood soundscape? Such questions, among others, are asked by the authors in the third section. Izabella Kimak offers a study of the Polish-American writer Stuart Dybek's treatment of his Chicago neighbourhood. In focus here is the mix of languages (the mainstream English, the dominant Spanish, and the disappearing Polish), and its evolution as “palimpsestic images of the neighborhood, whereby the past, present, and future orders do not neatly follow one another but rather coexist” (288). A related issue is addressed by Dominika Lewandowska-Rodak in her overview of Glasgow novels translated into Polish. What fuels the fiction of such authors as Douglas Stuart and Alasdair Gray is a language of the city, language which has emerged from a particular urban context. Naturally, translation of such material is not without its very real challenges. The article addresses the double complexity of identifying literary features of the “contemporary Scottish national self” (291) as imagined in Glasgow writing and the relative successes of Polish translational responses to this literature.

Parallels between travel writing and processes of translation are explored in the contributions of Cristina Marinetti and Halise Gülmüş Sirkintı. As Marinetti reminds us, Venice is as much a city of words as it is

a spectacular visual space. Recalling that it has attracted foreign admiration for centuries, she introduces the important category of the “denizen” as creator of words about the city. Contrasting the poet Joseph Brodsky’s classic *Watermark* with interventions by Venice’s contemporary residents, Marinetti shows how the sensory portrait of Venice that emerges from a more aural, language-based community perspective differs from that of a primarily visual commentary. Meanwhile, revisiting Istanbul, that major hub of East/West communication, Sirkintı perceives the city as a dynamic Barthesian “discourse.” Attuned to what she conceives of as the “translator’s voice” in three Istanbul travelogues, she queries the varying degree to which they can be considered examples of *traduction en filigrane*, i.e. narratives in which the interweaving of foreign linguistic, cultural, historical, and social elements produces a resemblance to a translated text.

Spatiality may also be an implied aspect of translation processes. In her translational study of Caroline Bergvall’s experimental soundworks and installations, Sofía Lacasta Millera theorises space as “a semiotic landscape that communicates beyond linguistic boundaries” (263), an environment in which a convergence of voices, representing a heterogeneous world, is made possible. Positioned in closed as well as open settings (e.g., museum spaces and natural landscapes), Bergvall’s works are shown to offer avenues for a creative, decidedly non-prescriptivist approach to translation, dissolving interpretive limits. Translation itself, Lacasta Millera argues, must be reconceived as “an art form with extralinguistic value” (273), underlying communication in more general terms.

Mark Tardi’s contribution stands out in this issue as the only one by a translator assessing his own work. And this is no conventional work: Tardi’s commentary on the peripatetic, multilingual, and irreverent poetry of the Polish “one-person cosmopolis” Robert Rybicki echoes the poet’s own “creative mischief” (315, 327). Wide-ranging and ebullient, the analysis allows us to understand the translator’s close engagement with the energies of the text and its sources of inspiration.

A coda to the issue’s main section is an interview with Jerzy Jarniewicz, renowned Polish poet, translator, and translation scholar. Kaja Gucio, an established practitioner of the craft in her own right, questions him on the new, post-Venuti visibility of translators and on limits to the creative encounter which the practice implies. Jarniewicz—who has rendered into Polish the likes of James Joyce, Adrienne Rich, Ann Quin, and Craig Raine—argues that translation successfully evades definitions, especially those founded on outdated notions of faithfulness and essence. The illusory essence can only pertain to the most banal aspects of the work; it is difference that translation celebrates and that becomes its *raison d’être*. “We translate in order to differ,” argues Jarniewicz, for whom translation becomes an

extension of his poetry: “I discover the potentialities of the target language, I shift its limits. . . . If it isn’t what the so-called original authors are doing when they work on their own texts, then what is it?” (333, 337).

Language traffic—across texts, across avenues, across cities—has much to tell us about the limits and possibilities of communication. The range of sites, texts, and vocabularies invoked in this issue are exciting signs of the fruitful connections between translation and the city—and of the ways in which these connections can create new identities and tell new stories.

*

16

Sherry would like to thank Krzysztof for an enriching collaborative experience—and for the good humour, generosity, and efficiency he showed in organising/editing the articles for the issue. Krzysztof thanks Sherry for graciously agreeing to co-edit the issue, attracting a host of brilliant authors, and watching over the contributions’ theoretical consistency with her inimitable kindness.

Sherry Simon is Distinguished Professor Emerita in the French Department at Concordia University. Born in Montreal, she has made this city the inspiration for her writings on translation, cultural history, and multilingual cities. Among her publications are *Translating Montreal: Episodes in the Life of a Divided City* (2006), *Cities in Translation: Intersections of Language and Memory* (2012), and *Translation Sites: A Field Guide* (2019). She has edited or co-edited several collections, including *Translation Effects: The Shaping of Modern Canadian Culture* (2014) (with Kathy Mezei and Luise von Flotow) and *Speaking Memory: How Translation Shapes City Life* (2016). Her most recent essay, in French, is “Promenades polyglottes,” a reflection on Montreal’s Mount Royal Park. She is a fellow of the Royal Society of Canada and a member of the Académie des lettres du Québec. Her books have been translated into several languages, including Polish, and most recently Turkish.

sherry.simon@concordia.ca

Krzysztof Majer is Assistant Professor in the Department of North American Literature and Culture at the University of Lodz, Poland. His research interests include contemporary American and Canadian fiction, musico-literary intermediality, and translation studies.

He has edited *Beirut to Carnival City: Reading Rawi Hage* and co-edited, among others, a special issue of the *European Journal of American Studies* (“Obsessions in Melville and Hawthorne,” with Justyna Fruzińska). He serves as editor at *Text Matters* and *Literatura na Świecie*. A literary translator into Polish (e.g., of David Markson, John Barth, Herman Melville, Amy Hempel, Deborah Eisenberg, Abdulrazak Gurnah, the Kerouac-Ginsberg letters), he was a resident at the Banff International Literary Translation Centre. Recently, he has co-translated into English (with Sylvia Söderlind) the post-Holocaust correspondence of Chava Rosenfarb and Zenia Larsson (*Letters from the Afterlife*, edited by Goldie Morgentaler, McGill-Queen’s UP, 2025).

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9660-1465>

krzysztof.majer@uni.lodz.pl