

INVISIBLE VOICES: PROMOTING MULTILINGUALISM IN AUSTRALIAN LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

Australia, with its rich and diverse multicultural society, is home to over 300 languages spoken across the country, yet much of its literary tradition has been shaped by English-language works. Despite the multilingual nature of Australian society, the representation of non-English voices in Australian literature remains limited, creating a gap in the national narrative. This article explores the cultivation of multilingual Australian literature, focusing on works written in languages other than English, including Indigenous languages, migrant languages, and regional dialects. These literatures reflect the lived experiences, histories, and cultural identities of communities often marginalized in mainstream literary discussions. However, the challenge lies in making these "invisible words" visible within the Australian literary canon.

This research aims to examine the underrepresentation of multilingual voices in Australian literature and understand the barriers that contribute to their marginalization. The article explores how Indigenous and migrant authors navigate the complexities of linguistic identity, cultural expression, and literary visibility. Indigenous authors, despite their deep connections to traditional languages, often face the dilemma of writing in English, or blending English with their native tongues, due to limited literary infrastructure for Indigenous languages. Similarly, migrant authors writing in languages such as Italian, Greek, Mandarin, and Arabic encounter challenges related to translation, cultural assimilation, and the preservation of linguistic authenticity.

Through an extensive literature review, case studies of multilingual authors, and interviews with authors and translators, this article uncovers the significance of multilingualism in enriching Australia's literary landscape and fostering a more inclusive cultural dialogue. It also highlights the pivotal role of translation in bridging linguistic gaps and making these works accessible to a broader audience, while questioning the fidelity of translation in maintaining the nuances of the original text.

KEYWORDS: multicultural society, English-language works, Indigenous languages, migrant languages, and regional dialects.



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INTRODUCTION

Australia, a nation with a rich multicultural heritage, is home to a diverse population with over 300 languages spoken across the country. Despite the multilingual nature of Australian society, much of its literary canon has traditionally been dominated by English-language works, with limited representation of non-English voices. This phenomenon raises important questions about the visibility of multilingualism in Australian literature, as well as the role literature plays in shaping cultural identity and understanding.

Multilingual Australian literature encompasses works written in languages other than English, including Indigenous languages, migrant languages, and regional dialects. These literatures reflect the experiences of diverse communities and contribute to the broader Australian narrative. However, many of these voices remain "invisible" within the larger literary landscape, often overshadowed by the dominance of English. This article explores the cultivation of multilingual Australian literature, examining how these voices are represented, the barriers they face, and the potential for expanding the scope of Australian literary tradition through the inclusion of diverse linguistic perspectives.

METHODS

1. Literature Review

A comprehensive review of academic literature, literary criticism, and cultural studies was conducted to examine the historical context and current state of multilingualism in Australian literature. The review focused on key themes such as the marginalization of non-English voices, the impact of immigration and globalization, and the role of language in shaping identity and belonging. The research also explored theoretical frameworks such as postcolonialism, multiculturalism, and language theory to understand the social and cultural forces influencing multilingual literature in Australia.

2. Case Studies of Multilingual Authors

To further explore the topic, a selection of case studies was examined, focusing on contemporary Australian authors who write in languages other than English. These case studies included works by Indigenous authors, migrant authors, and authors who blend languages within their texts. The analysis considered the linguistic features of their writing, the cultural and social themes they address, and their reception within the Australian literary community. Interviews with authors, literary critics, and translators were also conducted to gain insights into the challenges and opportunities of writing in multiple languages.

3. Data Collection and Analysis

The data collected from the literature review, case studies, and interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify common patterns, challenges, and emerging trends in multilingual Australian literature. Key themes explored included linguistic diversity, the relationship between language and identity, the representation of minority communities, and the role of translation in bridging language barriers. The analysis also examined how these authors navigate the tension between maintaining linguistic and cultural authenticity and engaging with the broader, predominantly English-speaking literary market.

RESULTS

1. Underrepresentation of Non-English Languages in the Literary Canon

The study found that while Australia is home to a wealth of multilingual communities, the literary works produced in languages other than English remain significantly underrepresented in the Australian literary canon. English-language literature continues to dominate, and works in Indigenous languages, as well as languages spoken by migrant communities, often struggle to gain recognition. This underrepresentation is partly due to historical factors, including the legacy of colonialism, which marginalized Indigenous languages, and the ongoing dominance of English in the education system and media.

2. Invisibility of Indigenous Languages

Indigenous Australian languages, despite being central to the cultural and spiritual life of Indigenous communities, remain largely invisible in the literary landscape. Indigenous authors who write in their native languages face numerous challenges, including the limited availability of literary resources in these languages and the lack of formal recognition of Indigenous languages within mainstream publishing. As a result, many Indigenous authors are compelled to write in English, often blending English with their traditional languages or using English as a medium to express their cultural heritage. This linguistic hybridity reflects the complexities of Indigenous identity in contemporary Australia.

3. Migrant Literature and Linguistic Identity

Migrant authors in Australia frequently face a similar struggle with linguistic representation. Many authors who are part of the country's migrant communities write in languages such as Italian, Greek, Mandarin, and Arabic, but their works are often translated into English for wider readerships. While translation plays an important role in making these works accessible, it also presents a tension between linguistic authenticity and commercial viability. The use of multilingualism in these works, including the incorporation of untranslated words or phrases, highlights the importance of language in shaping cultural identity and the lived experiences of migrant communities.

4. Role of Translation

Translation emerged as a significant factor in the cultivation of multilingual literature in Australia. Translators play a critical role in making non-English literary works accessible to wider audiences, but their work also raises questions about the preservation of cultural nuances and the challenges of maintaining the original meaning and tone. Translators often find themselves navigating a delicate balance between fidelity to the source language and the need for readability in the target language. The role of translation, therefore, is not merely one of linguistic conversion but also cultural mediation.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study emphasize the complex dynamics surrounding multilingualism in Australian literature and its broader cultural implications. Australia's literary landscape, while predominantly shaped by English-language works, is gradually evolving to embrace linguistic diversity. However, as the analysis reveals, much work remains to be done to make multilingual voices visible and integrated into the national literary canon. The study also illustrates the challenges faced by authors writing in languages other than English, including issues of translation, cultural representation, and the preservation of linguistic identity. Below, we delve deeper into these themes and discuss the broader implications for Australian literature, culture, and identity.

1. Underrepresentation of Multilingual Voices

The underrepresentation of non-English languages in Australian literature is not merely a result of authorial choice but reflects deep-rooted historical and socio-political dynamics. For Indigenous authors, this underrepresentation is particularly poignant. Indigenous Australian languages, once spoken by hundreds of groups across the continent, have faced centuries of suppression following European colonization. As a result, many Indigenous authors are compelled to write in English to reach a broader audience, even though their cultural heritage and oral traditions are deeply connected to their native languages. While some authors like Kim Scott and Oodgeroo Noonuccal have found ways to blend

Indigenous languages and cultural references into their works, these efforts often remain peripheral within mainstream literary recognition.

The marginalization of Indigenous languages within the literary establishment reflects a broader societal disregard for these languages in public life, including in education, government, and media. Indigenous language revitalization efforts have been gaining traction in recent years, with initiatives aimed at teaching and preserving these languages. However, for these languages to find a place in Australian literature, they must be seen as legitimate literary languages—worthy of creative expression and recognition.

Similarly, migrant languages spoken by communities from Italy, Greece, China, Lebanon, and many other countries are often relegated to a secondary status in the national literary imagination. Although Australian society is built on immigration, the literary canon remains heavily skewed toward English-language works. The voices of migrants, who write in their native languages, often face a double struggle: first, to overcome the invisibility of their language within the broader cultural narrative, and second, to navigate the limitations imposed by the English-language literary market.

2. The Role of Translation in Multilingual Literature

Translation plays a pivotal role in the cultivation of multilingual Australian literature, serving as a bridge between languages and cultures. However, the process of translation is not without its complexities and limitations. Translation is often seen as a process of adaptation, where a text is transformed from its original language into a target language, often English in the context of Australian literature. While translation helps to make non-English works accessible to a broader audience, it also brings with it the challenge of fidelity.

The nuances, idiomatic expressions, and cultural references embedded in non-English texts may not have direct equivalents in English, which leads to inevitable losses in meaning. This creates a tension between the desire for linguistic authenticity and the necessity of making the work comprehensible to an English-speaking readership. Authors, therefore, face a dilemma: how can they retain the essence of their original linguistic and cultural identity in a translated text that is primarily consumed by English readers?

For migrant authors, this challenge is particularly acute. While some authors opt for a hybrid approach, blending English with their native languages (e.g., the use of Italian phrases in a novel set in a migrant community), others choose to write predominantly in English, simplifying their linguistic expressions for broader consumption. However, this often results in a dilution of the cultural richness embedded in their original language. This highlights the need for greater investment in literary translation as a way of preserving the authenticity of migrant literature while making it accessible to Australian readers.

Indigenous authors face a similar challenge in writing and translating their works. While the act of writing in an Indigenous language holds immense cultural significance, practical barriers such as limited access to translation resources and the scarcity of native speakers who are also literary translators further complicate the process. Additionally, many Indigenous authors must navigate the intersection of cultural representation and translation, as they strive to represent their community's experiences authentically while ensuring the work remains intelligible to non-Indigenous audiences.

3. Cultural Representation and Identity

Language is inextricably linked to cultural identity, and the marginalization of non-English languages in Australian literature is, in part, a reflection of the marginalization of certain cultural identities. The dominant English-language literary tradition often fails to fully capture the complexity and richness of the migrant and Indigenous experiences. By relegating non-English voices to the margins, the broader literary landscape misses out on the full spectrum of experiences that define Australia as a multicultural nation.

Multilingual literature offers an opportunity to decolonize the literary canon by recognizing and validating the languages and cultural perspectives of minority communities. Migrant literature, in particular, provides a window into the lived experiences of those who navigate multiple identities—

cultural, linguistic, and social—on a daily basis. These authors often explore themes of belonging, displacement, and cultural hybridity, offering fresh perspectives on Australian identity that go beyond the Eurocentric narratives that have historically dominated the literary canon.

Indigenous literature similarly challenges the dominant narratives by providing Indigenous communities with a platform to express their worldviews, histories, and spiritual connections to the land. The growing recognition of Indigenous authors, both within Australia and internationally, marks a significant shift toward acknowledging Indigenous perspectives on a larger scale. However, the continued invisibility of Indigenous languages and their literary potential remains a critical issue that requires focused attention.

4. The Future of Multilingual Australian Literature

To cultivate a truly inclusive Australian literary tradition, it is essential to integrate multilingualism into both the production and reception of literature. This can be achieved through several strategies:

- **Promotion of Indigenous Languages:** Government and institutional support for the revitalization of Indigenous languages is crucial. This includes funding for educational programs, literary initiatives, and translation projects that ensure Indigenous authors can write in their native languages and see their works published and celebrated.
- **Investment in Translation:** More resources need to be directed towards the translation of migrant and Indigenous works. This includes fostering partnerships between authors, translators, and publishers to create accessible versions of works that maintain linguistic integrity while reaching broader audiences. In particular, developing programs to train Indigenous-language translators would be a critical step toward ensuring that these languages find a place in Australian literature.
- **Literary Awards and Recognition:** Recognition of multilingual works through literary awards and institutional support can help bring attention to non-English voices. Encouraging the inclusion of multilingual works in major literary prizes and academic curricula will provide these voices with the platform they deserve.
- **Multilingual Education:** Expanding multilingual education and promoting language diversity within academic institutions can help future generations of writers engage with their cultural and linguistic heritage, producing works that reflect the full diversity of Australian society.

The cultivation of multilingual Australian literature is not only a matter of preserving and promoting linguistic diversity; it is a step towards decolonizing Australian cultural narratives. By incorporating Indigenous and migrant languages into the literary landscape, Australia can create a more inclusive, representative, and dynamic literary tradition that reflects the true diversity of its population. For this to happen, substantial changes must be made in how multilingual voices are supported, recognized, and celebrated within the Australian literary and cultural spheres. Only through concerted effort and investment in translation, education, and cultural representation can Australia begin to bring the "invisible words" of its multilingual communities to the forefront of its literary canon.

The results of this study highlight the complex relationship between language, identity, and cultural representation in Australian literature. The underrepresentation of non-English voices in the literary canon speaks to broader issues of power and visibility within the national narrative. The dominance of English, coupled with the marginalization of Indigenous and migrant languages, reflects the broader historical and socio-political context in which Australian literature has evolved.

Indigenous languages are particularly vulnerable, as many have faced centuries of suppression and are at risk of extinction. However, there is growing recognition of the importance of preserving these languages and incorporating them into the literary landscape. Indigenous authors who use their native languages in literature play a crucial role in revitalizing cultural traditions and promoting linguistic diversity. Efforts to support the translation of Indigenous works, as well as the development of Indigenous-language literary programs, are key to fostering a more inclusive literary environment.

Similarly, migrant literature provides valuable insights into the experiences of Australia's diverse communities. The use of multilingualism in these works not only reflects the personal identities of migrant authors but also offers a window into the complexities of living between cultures. By embracing

multilingual literature, Australia can expand its literary canon to include a broader spectrum of voices and experiences, thus enriching the national conversation about identity, belonging, and diversity.

CONCLUSION

The cultivation of multilingual Australian literature is essential for fostering a more inclusive and representative literary tradition. Despite the historical dominance of English-language works, there is growing momentum to acknowledge and promote the voices of Indigenous and migrant communities. By embracing multilingualism in literature, Australia can celebrate its linguistic diversity and offer a more nuanced understanding of its cultural identity. Efforts to support multilingual authors, invest in translation, and revitalize Indigenous languages are critical steps toward creating a more inclusive literary landscape. The future of Australian literature depends on recognizing and amplifying the "invisible words" that have long been marginalized, ensuring that all voices have a place in the national narrative.

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