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CRITICAL MULTILINGUALISM STUDIES: AN INVITATION

*In the moment when the second word is there,
the whole language changes, it quakes.*

*In dem Augenblick, wenn das zweite Wort da ist,
verändert sich die ganze Sprache, sie erbebt.*

“Klangtal” (“Soundvalley”)
Peter Waterhouse 2003, 79

Mikhail Bakhtin once meditated on how certain features of discourse tend to proceed with “a sidelong glance at someone else's hostile word” (1994, 108). Perhaps by this he meant a mode of discourse, or a mood of speaking, that can already feel the weight of what will have been said after it, before it, and during it, in other places and epochs—mostly out of earshot, mostly incomprehensible to the present speaker, all of it nonetheless bearing what Bakhtin described as *a claim to answerability* (1990). A speaker’s knowing glance toward a distant contemporary, one who is herself making contemporaneous meaning in other languages, discourses, disciplines, and symbolic orders, is itself a risky translational practice, an act of recognition that may sow as much danger as gain. Yet the necessity of such sidelong glances may be one of the primary epistemological baffles of multilingual thinking. They answer the demand issuing from a linguistically opaque world: that speakers, regardless of the languages and discourses they “command” at a given moment, divest

themselves of the prerogative to misrecognize other meaning-making presences—to forego the formidable, luxurious directives of modern monolingualism.

When Claire Kramsch asks, in this first issue of *Critical Multilingualism Studies*, “Multilingualism has always been with us. So what’s new?” perhaps we are invited to answer with a sidelong glance of our own: to the unprecedented acts and intensities through which contemporary languages are making their presence unmistakable here and now—amid and against the ritual constraints of monolingualism. Certainly, governments and markets are taking note, and their responses range from the motley and conflicted to the ambitious and exacting. On August 2, 2012, Georgia Congressman John Conyers took aim at a revived English-only bill in his House committee with a scripted speech in Spanish, a language he does not know, and which he pronounced with the dignified vulnerability and stylized distance of a reticent bar mitzvah reciting Torah: “Bueno. Aquí estamos otra vez...” The House committee chair, Rep. Trent Franks of Arizona, ultimately corralled his colleague’s dilatory talk—not with an earnest plea for monolingualism as the basis for civic communication in a pluralistic society, as one might expect given the content of the bill in question, but rather with a request *in the interest of fairness* that Mr. Conyers repeat his several-paged statement in Yiddish, Vietnamese, and French for other interested constituents. “I want to thank the gentleman,” continued Mr. Trent, “My... My wife would certainly have understood his statement. As it happens, I don’t” (Reilly 2012).

In the same year, a widely broadcasted Xerox commercial assured its viewers that the company will take care of translating technical manuals for off-shore manufacturers, so that Anglophone clients can best optimize their resources and personnel toward getting “ready for real business” (Xerox 2012). And, of course, Lawrence Summers all but clamored in *The New York Times* on January 20, 2012, for the off-shoring of advanced language-learning, on the basis that the world’s *de facto* multilinguals abroad simply do a better job at being multilingual than their “real-business”-oriented Anglophone counterparts.

Each of these three expressions of discontent (or, better, *Unbehagen*) in monolingualism indexes a newly captivated, sidelong glance at multilingualism, a labored recognition that some time-tested axis in the “world-language system” has come unmoored (de Swaan 2004). And yet, in each case, the reparatory reflex that follows this recognition is still to delegate answerability to an absent multilingual other: the House committee chair’s wife, Xerox’s World Readiness department, or Harvard’s best and brightest counterparts in China’s business schools.

Phenomena of globalization and (trans)migration have somewhat loosened the historical ties binding modern conceptions of the nation-state to monolingual practices and identities. This has led to what Yasemin Yildiz has described as the “postmonolingual condition” (2012), a contradictory mode of statescraft and civic subjectivity in which multilingualisms persist and reemerge—sometimes at odds with, and sometimes in collusion with prevailing monolingual regimes. Yildiz’ term “postmonolingual” reminds us that what we conceptualize as multilingualism and monolingualism are heuristic, structuring principles always in need of (re)historicization—tied as they are to specific formations of modernity that gained primacy in eighteenth-century Western Europe, amid colonial consolidation in South Asia, Africa, and the Americas. And yet, it is telling that Yildiz’ book is one of the only research monographs, alongside Lennon 2010 and Gogolin 1994, to take up the question of the historicity of *monolingualism* by name.

Indeed, the paradigm dissonances around recognizing societal/global multilingualism over the last decade have stirred up more than a little chaos in our fields of research, as we will see in the articles that follow: whether in the ideal of native-speaker authenticity (Kramsch), in liberal, rights-based arguments for access to global lingua francas (Ricento), in the theoreticist conceit of some forms of constructivist research on bilingualism (Callahan), in the optimistic history of machine-generated translation (Lennon), in the physiognomic legacy of Saussurian linguistics (Pratt), or in the divide between sociolinguistics and ethnomusicology (Sommer and Wald).

Each of the articles in our inaugural issue of *Critical Multilingualism Studies* comes bearing a kind of “discourse with a sidelong glance at someone else’s” word. But the dialogic presence these pieces respond to is not presumed to be a hostile one, as in Bakhtin’s account, as much as a *critical* one—a crucial, constitutive, indispensably reflective one. The analyses at work in this issue’s contributions bear the historically hard-won contours of transdisciplinary reason: of what Thomas Ricento points to as “consilience” in political theory, of what Elijah Wald and Doris Sommer consider the “pride of interstitial place” of border writing, or of our various discoveries—as researchers, teachers, and cultural workers—of “an appropriate subject position [...] in a world that, although it contains any number of multilinguals, is conceived and organized for monolinguals” (Kramersch).

Critical Multilingualism Studies is thus devoted to the patient but vigorous exploration of this array of emergent, mutually constitutive features of experience along the multilingual-monolingual spectrum—from debilitating crisis to quaking delight, from translation to code-mixing, from pre-modernity to post-modernity, from language teaching to “verbal hygiene” (Cameron 1994), from migrations to regionalisms, from utterance to publication, from state policy to public practice. The CMS initiative emerged from a series of roundtable discussions among students and faculty of various disciplines at the University of Arizona in Tucson, in January 2011. Itself a geopolitical border landscape where multiple languages—Englishes, Spanishes, and Tohono O’Odham, but also Arabic, Korean, ASL, Yoruba, French—cross minute equators of meaning each day. The University’s scholarly communities came together—from far ends of the campus, in many cases—to consider how their disciplines could best collaborate with others in their shared inquiries about multilingualism; to discuss what “blind spots” vis-à-vis multilingual praxis and theory might still persist amid our methodological gaps and overlaps; and to pursue whatever reorientations may be necessary in order to address these adequately.

Given its current and historical position as a borderland, with one of the most linguistically diverse populations in the United States (according to the Modern

Language Association's Language Map¹), Southern Arizona is an unsurprising meeting place for discussions around multilingualism, and indeed the University of Arizona has long been an active hub for scholarship in Border Studies, language preservation, indigenous languages, and bilingual education. But what became apparent during these open forums in 2011 was that both the enthusiasm for and the relevance of Multilingualism Studies extended far beyond the disciplines and fields this area of inquiry is most often associated with in scholarly journals, conferences, and publisher catalogs—namely Education, Second Language Acquisition and Teaching, and—in some of its iterations—Comparative Literature.

In 2012, most departments on a given college or university campus house at least one researcher-teacher whose vocation revolves around a critique of mono- and multilingual practices of one kind or another, and yet—due to a predominant Area Studies disciplinary model that favors the study of discrete, national monolingualisms—these scholars tend to have no common place, time, or plausible rationale to assemble. For us, the “critical” in Critical Multilingualism Studies indexes precisely this assembly: a good-faith willingness among scholars in disparate fields to listen closely to each other's disciplinary vocabularies and discursive histories, and yet to begin to recast these in a newly juxtapositional light.

The highpoint of our conversations came in April 2012 in the form of an international symposium at Arizona under the title *Multilingual, 2.0?*, sponsored by the Confluence Center for Creative Inquiry. The eighteen invited speakers at that gathering represented at least as many scholarly departments: their diversity of disciplinary perspectives resists enumeration, since all of them work across multiple fields. The *Critical Multilingualism Studies* journal is therefore, on one hand, a continuing effort of the symposium organizers and participants; five of the six articles in this inaugural volume were developed from papers delivered at this symposium. But it is, most vitally, the manifestation of a growing desire among US-based and transnational scholars to understand a broader paradigm shift, in which this symposium was one moment of happy convergence among

many previous and potential others. *CMS* aims to offer an ongoing scholarly forum for the expression of this continuing paradigm shift—in the humanities, social sciences, and beyond.

Why *critical*?

The critical (as in searching, vigorous, and cross-disciplinary) study of multilingualism is not in itself new. Generations of scholars in educational policy, comparative literature, linguistics, translation studies and other fields have spent decades inquiring about the fundamental components that make up a multilingualism, and the last decade in particular has born a wealth of monographs that shed light, truly new light, on multilingual phenomena and practice.

Just as these monographs are emerging, however, we are witnessing a radical reinvestment in certain forms of ostensible multilingualism that, in fact, does the work of monolingualism: marketing, subsuming, and disseminating purportedly identical meanings across scores of language barriers at paces and with efficacies that were hardly imaginable a decade ago. The GILT (Globalization, Internationalization, Localization, and Translation) industry, embodied for example in Microsoft's "World-Readiness" branch, is poised to market its proprietary content in over 100 nationally imagined monolingualisms, whether or not the speakers "at the other end" of its product lines are indeed monolinguals, are indeed predisposed to use the language Microsoft has chosen for them, or are at all inclined to choose one language over another in "their" content interfaces. Forward-looking and market-driven, this industrial *culture* of multilingualism has taken on the work that, before 1990, was assumed to belong primarily to the diplomatic and higher-education sphere, or to vernacular contexts of migration and cosmopolitanism. And yet, this new culture of multilingualism is diligently doing nothing less than what its industry bids it to do: monetize translingual meaning on a grand scale. One is reminded now, more than ever, of the French advertising executive who resisted the *loi Toubon* on the basis that "Words, just like products, have to be competitive" (Cameron 1995, 213).

Given this radical spike in machine-generated, glossodiverse content circumnavigating the globe—and given, more importantly, a pre-production marketing logic by which a monolingual parcel of content (say, for example, a novel) may go to production if and only if it qualifies as capital-rich in scores of other-language markets via pre-release translation—multilingualism in 2012 is itself a qualitatively different matter than multilingualism in 1982. Industrial shifts have created massive detours and overpasses in the “traffic in meaning” (Pratt 2001). Our moment in multi/monolingualism is, perhaps, akin to that moment in automotive travel when the US interstate highway system was first being introduced, a defense-industry infrastructure that not only made new forms and intensities of travel imaginable and practicable, but that also made daily military and industrial shipping a structural *fait accompli* rather than a daunting *ad hoc* logistical equation. In the case of multilingualism, the automotive traffic analogy fails to illustrate the asymptotal proportions of meaning-production in the twenty-first century, where patented content awaits instantaneous distribution into one of many “homogenous, empty” languages-near-you (Benjamin 2010).

And yet most of us continue to traffic relatively unhindered in the vernacular meanings of our communities, families, civic discourses, and local infrastructures. We raise our children and read e-books multilingually or monolingually, whatever the case always has been. We elect bilingual school-board members and train medical interpreters for our outpatient clinics. The Nobel-laureate European Union has reimagined itself as an entity uniting not only 27 member states, but also 506 translation pairs among its 23 official languages.

Such ambitiously imagined and unevenly instituted changes in how meaning is being moved obviate the necessity to rethink what we apprehend under the concepts monolingualism, multilingualism, translation, and second language, from a vernacular as well as a macro-structural perspective. These terms—but also these experiences, these lives and histories—are now increasingly unmoored, adrift, and unaccounted for, in precisely that cultural moment when

most every wayward cartographic feature can be harnessed by Global Positioning Software. Perhaps this irony is not inopportune.

Theories of multi- and monolingualism must, for instance, account for the ways in which various languages differ in their mutual incomprehensibility. Brian Lennon describes a phenomenon he dubs “simulated multilingualism,” which arises in the breakdowns of machine translation’s struggle to overcome the problem of linguistic variety and complexity. Lennon’s analysis of mid-century attempts at computer translation also glances laterally toward Claire Kramsch’s distinction between “lower-scale multilingualism,” which involves the exchange of propositions in various linguistic codes, and “higher-scale multilingualism,” in which emblematic or indexical meanings are evoked in various modalities, registers, styles, and genres. What these concepts make clear is that any striving to “overcome” monolingualism itself soon encounters the social proliferation of practices inherent in the fabric of various language ecologies, beyond their mere words and syntax.

The condition of being “postmonolingual” furthermore restructures the very experience of what it means to be multilingual. In a poststructuralist terrain where the idealized native speaker is no longer the arbiter of meaning, and nationalized notions of cultural appropriateness become unanchored, we are often left to navigate symbolic terrains that are more confusing, ambiguous, and in some cases even inaccessible. Doris Sommer and Elijah Wald focus on the emancipatory potential unleashed in the creative play amid style shifts, be they linguistic or musical. In the novels they discuss—Luis Humberto Crosthwaite’s *El gran preténder* (1992) and Tato Laviera’s *AmeRícan* (1985)—bi-cultural performances garner symbolic capital by drawing from compound, varied repertoires of musical genre, dance participation, reception context, and cultural ascription.

The tactical stances of such figures as Hilaria Supa, the Peruvian congresswoman Mary Louise Pratt describes in this issue, further demonstrate the kinds of “slippery performances” heralded by Sommer and Wald; for example, Supa’s decision to use an indigenous language such as Quechua in the Peruvian

Congress can in one instance index a shift in the structures of privilege held by a dominant legislative language and how this very act of code-choice in turn resignifies the subsequent return to speaking Spanish as a deliberate, de-neutralized pragmatic move to forge alliances. Laura Callahan, in a similar vein, questions whether scholarly apprehensions of identity categories as either preimposed or emergent are really as incommensurate as the debates around qualitative and quantitative social research method have led us to believe.

While the interstitial performances of multilingual subjects can, in some cases, garner symbolic power in the form of political clout or aesthetic prowess, the “pretenders” in the multilingual memoirs analyzed by Claire Kramersch are plagued by anxiety and uncertainty on account of their self-described inauthenticity and illegitimacy. The very postmonolingual condition, the denaturalization of native languages, and the space of self-reflexivity that allows language use itself to become code choice, also presents the possibility of what Kramersch describes as kitsch, when bi- and multilingual moves register as fraudulent posturing or deceptive imitation. Kramersch’s line of inquiry poses important questions not only for scholars who study linguistic identity, but also for language educators, who—as Kramersch argues—must not only teach their students the elements of one, complete symbolic system, but foster their ability to move between styles like Little Joe Hernández and Hilaria Supa.

A critical multilingualism that embraces the poststructuralist whirl of linguistic encodings and identifications, does not abrogate questions of social justice and inequality, but it does allow us to regard them in a new theoretical light. From the fields of language policy and political economy, Thomas Ricento cautions us about discourses of “access” to English, which often serve to obscure how individuals’ paths to professional lingua francas are often structurally blocked by non-linguistic economic and infrastructural barriers. One of the additional lessons of Ricento’s analysis is that the individual acts of subversion performed by the multilingual language users in the analyses of Sommer and Wald and Pratt often remain muted by state-sanctioned myths of ethnic and linguistic neutrality.

To borrow a phrase from two of our first contributors Doris Sommer and Elijah Wald, *Critical Multilingual Studies* hopes to nurture a “pride of interstitial place” in scholarship—a comfort or even delight in being located between disciplines (literature, linguistics, history, public policy, anthropology, second language studies), between languages (Spanish, American and World Englishes, German, Quechua, Chicana Spanish, French, Kurdish, etc.), and genre (essay, lecture, article, memoir, translation, talk). We welcome contributions in any of these and other languages and genres, and from any of these and other disciplines, and we thank those who have already contributed so much to the *Critical Multilingualism Studies* endeavor. It is our hope that the arising juxtapositions will incline us closer toward answerability—that the second word’s presence, as Waterhouse writes, will allow the entire language to quake, and change, as needed.

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¹ Modern Language Association. "A Map of Languages in the United States." [Link](#)