

On Reelecting Monolingualism

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1. Introduction

Thank you to Prof. John Borneman, Sarah Porter, and Liana Pshevorskaya, and to you all for being here today for this exploration on monolingualism. Part of the initial motivation to write a book on monolingualism for me was the hunch that all of us, who work with thoughts and ideas, with critiques and texts, with human communities and cultures—all of us have to contend eventually with the constraining and ultimately irrational effects of monolingualism, across the whole range of our everyday experiences: from the most minute logistics of our institutional existence, to the most sophisticated methodological and ethical questions that spark our research or advocacy, from the normative stylistics of academic publishing, to how we recognize and engage the thoughts of our students in a multilingual classroom—and, of course, to how we make sense of our currently gaslit political and cultural moment.

I’m not sure if any of you sign up to receive Google Scholar alerts about a particular topic you’ve been working on. I do, and there’s always an ambivalence I feel, each couple of days, when the new-publications information on “monolingualism” roll in. It’s not just that I know ahead of time that 90% of the publications dealing explicitly with things “monolingual” will inevitably come from computational engineering, forensic linguistics, and mathematics—these being fields whose methodologies often evoke in me all the apprehensions that engaging in “hard” interdisciplinarity always tends to evoke. But it’s also that these Google Scholar alerts on new publications about monolingual phenomena remind me that it had always been rather multilingualism—civic, aesthetic, political multilingualism, in all of its social, literary, and historical contexts, that I’ve wanted to be *alerted* to instead—to the kind of linguistic plurality and meaning-making practice that have opened up the world of research and creativity and relationality for me. I don’t feel this way about monolingualism, this clinical, unlikeable word, with its quizzical -ism at the end. To paraphrase a popular War on Drugs ad from the Reagan era, no kid ever says “When I grow up I want to be a monolingualism researcher”. And yet I’ve found myself spending a good chunk of my early career studying this thing that I both oppose and practice in various ways and, though I’d often rather that not be the case, I think part of the stamina required of those of us to whom normative monolingual privilege accrues must mean sticking around long enough, not just to criticize it, but to understand its workings and transformations, even when other more interesting and beautiful topics beckon us too.

I was recently reading a new manuscript-in-preparation called *Colonial and Decolonial Linguistics* and I was so happy to see the word “Colonial” in its title—and that it hadn’t been left off, as though “Decolonial” were the only part of the story that needed telling in 2019. In the same spirit, I think all treatments of multilingualism and translation also need to save space for some kind of a solid, serious position on what monolingualism is and, more importantly, what it does—

as that unmarked norm that so often obfuscates or stifles, but sometimes also enables the other forms of linguistic plurality and language friendship that we love and practice.

I had in fact an entirely different talk planned for this visit, till about three weeks ago when I first started to internalize the possibility that US Americans might indeed reelect this current President in 2020, and so I began to immiserate myself around the question of why people reelect things that they know, or are told, have been bad for them—that they are scolded about routinely. And of course for many of us in the room it is baffling to have to swallow a scenario in which our fellows—in New Jersey, Arizona, California, Massachusetts, and also in Germany and the UK—may be in various ways reelecting monolingualism in 2020 too—after all of the cognitive, social, political, cultural, moral and additionally the commercial arguments *against* monolingualism and *for* various forms of multilingualism. And so it seems to be one of those moments, again, where I've been meeting many language researchers and teachers, both here and in the UK, where I was speaking the other day, who are again throwing up their hands in frustration at declining language enrollments, and puzzling at the gradual monolingualization of international education and scholarly publishing. So I want today to take up some of the more lugubrious propositions about our age that I made in my 2016 book *The Invention of Monolingualism* and think whether or not those scenarios seem to be playing out before our very eyes. This may at first seem to be a salt-in-the-wounds approach, for which I apologize, but I want actually to see if I can offer some thoughts about why our age in languages seems to be running right now on much more than mere linguaphobia or ideological monolingualism in their most recognizable, controversial forms.

2. Ideological thinning, administrative thickening

In the monolingualism book, I parted to an extent with my friend and colleague Yasemin Yildiz who argued in her magisterial book [Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition](#), that there is today an uneasy postness in the monolingualism of our societies and our literatures, a growing sense that the strictures of linguistic nationalism, which had directed much thought about linguistic practice in the global colonial northwest throughout the 18th–20th centuries, were being worn only uncomfortably, and that this tension between monolingual constraints and multilingual realities was leading today to a greater consciousness in literature and social life about the possibility of an entirely new way of figuring meaning and linguistic practice in the 21st century, of thinking beyond the very idea of “a language” as an individuated, countable entity. That we can, in the words of the pan-Africanist sociolinguist Sinfree Makoni and applied linguist Alistair Pennycook “[disinvent and reconstitute languages](#)” in new ways.

How could one ever cast doubt on that hopeful and powerful message? And yet: My own gentle response in *The Invention of Monolingualism* was that I believed, and still do, that monolingualism as a political and economic structure is just now really getting started in earnest, particularly in its quest to individuate and then [commensurate](#) stable monolanguages in relation to one another, for the purposes of global commerce and data management. This monolingualization and commensuration process, of establishing and fortifying a global grid of panfunctional, exchangeable, semantically isomorphic monolanguages—a project I will argue is again afoot around us in the current era since 1990 and is a continuation of some efforts strategically begun in 17th century London and Paris—can be engineered quite independently of how people like you and me, and our various familiar and unfamiliar fellows around us, actually speak and teach—and, to a certain extent too, independently of how they write. So monolingualism as a supply-side enterprise can be pursued quite successfully, despite all of the visible social evidence of multilingual practices around us.

For instance, I do much of my own work some 2,500 miles southwest of this building, in the southwesternmost US state of Arizona, which is also northern Latin America, and which is also current and ancestral indigenous land, of the Tohono O’odham and Pasqua Yaqui nations, and so there’s a lot of multilingual border thinking and border speaking that we do there already. And that border thinking is enriched and joined of course by the tens of thousands of multilingual new Arizonans in Tucson from Syria, Iraq, Vietnam, Bosnia, Cuba, Somalia, Burma, Bhutan, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sudan and Afghanistan. And so when the decolonial feminist philosopher and activist Maria Lugones talks in her work about the “[peopled ground](#)” of decolonial thinking, these are the multilingual speakers who ‘people the ground’ in the little provincial capital of Tucson where I come to you from. And yet: monolingualism as a supply-side project of epistemic prospecting is still doing a rather bang-up job in Arizona right now, and it has a rather tight grip on how Arizona’s institutions run, including its universities. So, clearly, monolingualism is still busy fortifying its claim on the future of meaning-making, busy convincing young people to stay in their lane of language use, and telling them what kind of multilingualism they’re allowed to have, and doing so not only in the forms we may most readily identify as ideological.

The 2016 US general election was just a few months after the *Monolingualism* book had come out, and it seems I was still too preoccupied with scouring it for typos to focus on the real question of that moment, which should have been: how monolingualism had continued to evolve before our eyes, already since I’d put down my pen on that book in the late days of Obama era. I’d always intended to have that one book be my one, saying-my-piece piece about monolingualism. But after 2016, with Trump and UKIP / Brexit and AfD in Germany, and ÖVP in Austria, it became clear that the book had been only a modest, initial glance at things—a first pulling off the bandage of monolingualism, to find the many other bandages beneath it.

And of course monolingualism is no essence or entity; it has no being or substance, it has only powerful and “mythic” effects, in Roland Barthes sense of the word “[myth](#)” It is also no unified phenomenon: Brazilian monolingualism, which is a strong ideology too, is quite different in its effects and designs and participatory or exclusionary logics than is American monolingualism or Turkish monolingualism. American and British monolingualisms, for their part, don’t have to contend adversarially with the global hyperobject of English, precisely because they are the primary matrix of that hyperobject. And monolingualisms differ also in that colonial and settler monolingualisms, like those in the UK and US respectively, don’t enjoy the potentially decolonial potency that for instance Bangla or Tamil or Kurdish monolingualism do. So I try these days to take special care not to conflate different and contradictory local expressions of monolingualism—as they may reflect various critical or hegemonic projects, or sometimes do both at the same time.

I remember for instance reading Orhan Pamuk’s 2002 novel [Snow](#) and thinking about how the protagonist of that book, Kerim Alakuşoglu, an exile in Germany for 12 years, refused to learn German, as a strategy for “protecting his soul”. And yet, of course, not learning a language, a language that is expected in a country where one resides, is in no way tantamount to monolingualism. Though, not demonstrating such willingness to learn a state language routinely raises the charge of monolingualism from state actors against you. And this is a ritual scene that tends to bring all the institutional and ideological weight of monolingualism crashing down on the subjects at hand. I still remember listening to President Obama, that multilingual cosmopolitan raised by the world and around the world, at a Facebook townhall in Palo Alto in 2011 saying that undocumented Americans wishing to stay in the US should *pay a fine and learn English*. And I realized then just how centrist and common-sensical a position that had become. The President’s formulation itself was such a faint and prosaic recitativ of Teddy Roosevelt’s stances on

assimilationism. Roosevelt's vivid rebuke of the spectre of the US as a "polyglot boarding house"—and Obama's bland recasting of this—showed how subtle, understated, and yet unquestionable this thickened administrative monolingualism had become around citizenship, and how these modest-sounding procedural demands to *pay a fine and learn English* rest on these officials' self-assured presumption that they themselves are the ones attempting to combat monolingualism.

Habermas and other theoreticians of communicative competence can also be found doing this: suggesting that establishing a common language as minimum precondition for public reason is in fact an antidote to monolingualism. In the German case, this is presumed to be a Turkish- or Arabic-speaking or Russian immigrants' so-called monolingualism, not usually an English or American one. There are of course a few problems with this: attributions of monolingualism to immigrants are often false, based as they are on a mimetic fallacy that Turks, for instance, don't speak other languages too (like Kurdish, Laz, Arabic, French, and English) or that Latin American immigrants don't speak indigenous and other languages in addition to their multiple varieties of Spanish. And so it is somewhat frustrating to have to point out that these speakers cannot reasonably be characterized with the word monolingual for the sole reason that those who interpellate them as such presume the underlying monolingualism of their ancestral communities.

And secondly, the effect of *pay a fine and learn English* as a performative demand is itself a monolingual one, in that it monolingualizes public, civic space, even when its announced intent is to promote linguistic plurality. And my colleagues in the UK, with whom I spent this past weekend, note interestingly that the more unequivocal the state demand is that migrants to the UK learn English, the fewer financial provisions there are, under those successive governments, for migrants to do precisely that. So the mandate on the political level seems not to catalyze such provision or support, as we might assume, but rather to diminish it. So: monolingualism, I think, is still a perfect storm.

But I'd like to spend the remaining thirty or so minutes not so much addressing ideological monolingualism as a politics of the aggrieved or powerful, or as a [raciolinguistic](#) proxy discourse, which it often is, as Jonathan Rosa and Nelson Flores argue, than about political economies of monolingualism globally and how they are being fortified around us. And, eventually at the end: how literature is coming to terms with this new age since 1990, an age which I describe as the linguacene.

3. Fortifications: Civic, Legislative, Technological

Fortification, as in fortified monolingualism, is a word I started using, shortly after my book on monolingualism came out in 2016, to suggest that monolingualism is not only increasing its *ideological* power around us, in the sense of overt xenophobic nationalism and linguistic racism—and this claim about monolingualism's increasing ideological power is a point about which I already express some differences with other esteemed writers on the topic, who have seen monolingualism as rather on the wane, or in decline. I am indeed of course concerned about overt political expressions of monolingualism in national contexts, but along with that increasing ideological power come—as with most any scene where forts and fortifications are being built around existing power—always-innovating technologies of security, and economies of dissemination and restructuration which—often despite an accompanying aura of regret and pragmatism—serve to justify, not so much a rancorous and ideological monolingualism, or linguistic supremacy, but a quite centrist, technocratic, administrative, Obama-style reinvestment

in monolingual procedures in the middle of our institutions, one that cannot be pinned on ideological nationalism, racism, or xenophobia as such.

And so it was quite important for me in the book to distinguish monolingualism from other important concepts like linguistic imperialism, linguistic racism, or even linguistic purism and nativism. Monolingualism, like Franz Kafka's Oklahoma Theater, from his *America* novel from 1914, is a collaborative pageant that requires hundreds of millions actively participating in the performance in some way—that performance of *needing no other language but one*—and actively compelling others to participate. I've even thought of it, now and again, as a kind of “fourth unity” of modernity—beyond the three dramatic unities of French Classicism: of action, place, and time. Monolingualism bears all of the dramatic, mythical, and liminal features of collective ritual ordeal, and I'm convinced that nationalists, authoritarians, and cultural conservatives can't maintain the myth of monolingualism alone. It's a multi-partisan, opt-in affair.

About ten years ago I [wrote](#) about the naturalization reforms in Germany that took effect in 1999 during their Red Green coalition under Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder and how, though these watershed reforms seemed to be a progressive move away from models of ethnonational citizenship, they were quietly doubling down on a new kind of “cosmopolitan monolingualism”, a civic vision of a *somewhat* ethnically pluralist society, bound together by a shared language, an aspirational society that *somewhat* different kinds of persons could and would opt into, primarily by performing command of the German language in recognizable ways.

What was interesting was that the German federal government had never before been procedurally and politically interested in what or how immigrants spoke. Of course, lots of Germans had their own vociferous opinions about this, but from 1914 all the way through National Socialism and until 1999, never had language risen to the level of concerted federal policy around naturalization. With this new model of German citizenship circa 1999—which focused on the voluntaristic acquisition of German, rather than on the crypto-essentialism of German blood—the problem of course was what this “opting into” was going to actually look and sound like, and how different speakers' successes or deficits in that voluntaristic process would be formally and informally evaluated, and by whom.

And so this was one of the ways I saw, ten and twenty years ago now, monolingualism quietly fortifying around ostensibly progressive communicative virtues in Germany. I saw it as something between a *ius sanguinis* and a *ius soli* model of citizenship, and called it a *ius linguarum*, as in a “law of languages”, a principle of right that guarded the prospect of belonging to public life in newly intensified ways around how one spoke. But, since then, what have joined those civic forms of monolingualism-as-diversity, for instance in the US and UK, are new legislative and administrative techniques that have the effect, if not the intent, of reinforcing the effects of monolingualism.

So I think, as many of us in this room have witnessed in our own work, monolingualism has been able to thicken in the last twenty years not so much in the realm of bald-faced policy propositions about the superiority of speaking one language alone, but rather in administrative and procedural realms that effectively target and isolate particular kinds of speakers and that subject them to all kinds of impossible and repeated language ordeals. Refugee Status Determination procedures are one example where thickened effects of monolingualism serve to dissuade, dispirit, and disqualify claimants with otherwise truly credible stories to tell about the threats against them in the states where they once held citizenship. No one I know working in the refugee status determination system in the UK right now would go so far as to say that a concerted ideological monolingualism is out to prevent people from availing themselves of international law, or from

conveying a credible story. But effects of administrative monolingualism increasingly prevent them from doing so all the same.

And yet the state signatories to the [1951 Convention on Refugees](#) have in fact bound themselves to burdens of [listening](#) to claimants in ways that are quite a bit more than monolingual, beyond those required in normal civil or criminal procedures of evidentiary assessment, particularly because of the state obligation of nonrefoulement, and the frequent absence of corroborating evidence beyond a claimant's own testimony. And so RSD decision-making has by law a higher burden of listening to claimants than in any other jurisprudential realm I know, such that we can really think about it as an important cross-roads in international law around the gap between multilingual persons and monolingual jurisprudence. However, state practices around RSD are currently going in the opposite direction, cutting provisions for interpreters, searching for ways to disqualify claimants on linguistic or forensic-linguistic grounds, and very frequently succeeding at doing so. So this is one of the areas where monolingualism is thickening in violation of international law, and doing so around the most vulnerable multilingual speakers in our societies. Germany, it should be said, is doing a far better job at this than the UK or US.

Beyond the administrative realm of fortified monolingualism in RSD is the legislative domain, where various state legislatures around the country have seen fit over the period 1997 to 2016 to [rebrand](#) bilingual education as multilingual education, and in doing so symbolically taking bilingualism away from the people to whom it has traditionally belonged—so, in the US, heritage language speakers of Spanish for instance, who have often come to regard their Spanish as a source of pride, ancestral connection, and community, and not necessarily as a neoliberal asset for global competition. As Flores points out, the education theorist Guadalupe Valdes [foretold](#) this problem, now 18 years ago in an article from 1997, where she sounded a cautionary note about dual-immersion programs in the US, which she saw in some ways as a wealth transfer scheme away from *de facto* bilingual children toward elite monolingual children, who could eventually use their emergent or symbolic bilingualism as a form of leverage over their Latinx peers. This recoding of immigrant, community, ancestral bilingualism as globally competitive multilingualism has been extraordinarily successful and compelling as an ideology in the US between 1997 and today. It has produced in effect what the educational linguists Juan Freire, Veronica Eileen Valdez, and Garret Delavan call a “[disinclusion](#)” of Latinx people from language policy and planning about their own language in states like Utah, California, Massachusetts, and Arizona.

So how is this legislative recoding a fortification of monolingualism? It is in some ways a design for a “multilingualism without people”, a “multilingualism without bodies and histories” or, certainly, without bilingual Latinx people, in the sense that the virtues and values that had long been developed in activist and educational circles around bilingual pride get disarticulated from that setting and reinvisioned for those who already enjoy normative monolingual privilege. The political challenge of bilingualism, which was so richly controversial in the US throughout the 1960s–1990s has become muted in these new discourses, and otherwise monolingual US schoolchildren are now able, at least on their résumés, to “have” both monolingualism and multilingualism at the same time—the credibility and normativity of the one, and the flexible assets of the other—without any of the racialized imputations of deficit that have readily accrued to so-called bilinguals.

Over that same period, so 1997–2016, a third form of fortification has also been arising in an ostensibly separate realm, and that is the realm of advanced algorithmic machine translation platforms that harness the power of large-scale corpora of real, printed language-in-use. Since 1990, these so-called Cross Linguistic Information Retrieval platforms (abbreviated as CLIR) have

been under extraordinarily rapid development so as to facilitate the fast, if not immediate transfer of data commodities from language to language, serving transnational commercial clients in supply-side manufacture logistics. This complicated multilingual process is built however on a need for orderly, reliable, constituent monolingualisms or monolanguages that will work in concert in such a way in global circulation so as to not diminish revenue, slow down time-to-delivery, or cause expensive optimization errors for developers.

And this new paradigm of global algorithmic language management is what I call [supralingualism](#), a discourse that seeks not to obviate the relevance of different languages entirely, but to manage their plentitude in the most economic and often austere ways possible. Each of us can probably imagine what kinds of language and meaning lose out in such a supply-side efficiency model: our treasured local varieties, cryptolects, nuanced and specialized languages, indigenous knowledges, counter-languages, etc. which by necessity exacerbate the global just-in-time delivery mandates of commercial multilingualism.

What is particularly breathtaking about this domain of research and development is its bold reliance on the concept of '[ontology](#)' to give order to its various closed sets of variables in algorithmic modeling analysis. There's certainly nothing wrong with using ontology in virtual settings such as this, but to extend it to the notion of cross-linguistic ontology, i.e., the notion of a closed set of cognates across multiple languages, is a bridge too far—as the last century of anthropology, applied linguistics, translation studies, and literary theory have been in part dedicated to showing. I know we all have our wonderful Princeton University Press tome *The Dictionary of Untranslatables*, which helps remind us how and why languages cannot be put in any closed-set ontological relationship to one another, without cleaving off all of the most important, emic meanings that emanate from them. And yet that this kind of virtual ontology is the methodological premise of most CLIR innovation over the past two decades. And those methodologies of course don't stay in the lab, they very quickly make their way onto all of our end-user devices.

Thanks to this new paradigm of CLIR and its commercial implementation platforms, language(s) have—and this the phrase economists use to describe the transformation—“crossed the [production boundary](#)” in the last two decades from non-productive to productive, becoming value-creating commodities in the way that financial commodities had been made to do in the 1970s. And we all are now witnesses to what the recategorization of financial products as “value-creating” has yielded between 2008 and 2019. I believe a similarly tumultuous future awaits language too, now that we are no longer just commodifying language in the pejorative sense we are accustomed to thinking commodification, but also commoditizing it—in the sense of rendering predictably tradable, switchable assets for global glossodiversity management. This quiet recategorization, and then also financialization, of language as value-creating in a Neoclassical economic fashion, and its consequent elevation to a form of rent-seeking behavior, can be seen not only in these CLIR methodologies but also precisely in the legislative language by which bilingualism has been rebranded as multilingualism in the US in the last two decades.

4. Caveats

I want to pause here to just clarify that this claim, that monolingualism is fortifying in new civic, legislative, and technological ways around us, need not diminish the powerful insights that colleagues have provided us for decades about translanguaging, multilingual subjectivity, code-meshing, code-mixing, [code-swishing](#), [metrolingualism](#), translanguaging, [transidioma](#), multiethnolectal linguistic crossing, translation, transduction, [tradaptation](#), etc.) The practices that

these terms seek to highlight continue to burgeon vividly everywhere we speak, everywhere we listen, they are the real world of meaning. And so, despite the fortifications we are tracking in monolingual procedures, it is not quite a zero-sum game we're in today, along the lines of "When monolingualism fortifies, multilingualism weakens." I don't think that's the case. But it is a complex adversarial and structural relationship, to be sure, and many of the fortifications of monolingualism that are underway around us are indeed designed and conceived to help obviate the need for translanguaging—and definitely code-switching—in socio-commercial life. They're often designed to do so in a way that does not appear to be a frontal attack on people's linguistic practices, ways that appear assistive, predictive, unobtrusive. I said in the 2016 book that "Monolingualism manages other languages, it does not quite oppose them."

So I do believe that radically transformative, effective, and joyous forms of real-world translanguaging can continue to flourish. And yet, it's so interesting to me that one of the few grand virtues that is ascribed to practices of translanguaging and code-switching—and quite generously and ubiquitously so—is "creativity." Multilingualism is reflexively understood as creative, but not so reflexively as: credible, which brings us back to the question of RSD hearings and multilingual jurisprudence. One of the tasks we face in the next fifty years is how to make our institutions take translanguaging and multilingualism and code-mixing as propositionally *credible*, at least as credible as the least creative forms of monolingualism to which we routinely ascribe credibility.

And yet, one of the things I wanted to do in my 2016 book was to insist that we cannot and ought not deny outright, all of the things that monolingualism as a social structure and a principle of governance has been able to achieve since the 17th century, when it was first really effectively being engineered. I wanted to concede that monolingualism played a part in consolidating forms of mass literacy and government accountability, such that for instance French Republican society was reformed—violently, coercively reformed—so that former-subjects-now-citizens had a shot at understanding, on a propositional level, the laws of their government. The English Statute on Pleading from 1326 is also a good early example of states coming to their senses about the idea that defendants should probably understand the language they're being condemned in.

Turkish-speaking Ottoman subjects even until the 1920s often had no basic idea what the documents coming out of their imperial court meant. These documents were syntactically Turkish but lexically Persian and Arabic, and imperial subjects curious about the rules about taxes had to get their tax collector to interpret tax law for them, which usually isn't such a good thing. There's even a whole cartoon series called *Karagöz and Hacivat* that is all about the incomprehensible court language of Istanbul's imperial administration up through the 19th century. And there are many equivalent scenarios around the world that show how the Bakhtinian heteroglossia, which we may tend today to celebrate, has also been at times a nightmare of coercion and confusion for people who may lack access to prestige languages. Moreover, much of the political subjectivity and solidarity that has counted as revolutionary in the modern era required certain forms of monolingualism to sustain them communicatively. and so I wanted in that book not to decry monolingualism as a scourge, without at least acknowledging that it has enabled a lot of social, institutional, political, and interactional norms to emerge that we find ourselves liking, whether or not we like monolingualism itself.

5. Critique in the Linguacene

So we can't turn our gaze so fast to multilingualism without taking stock of the structures monolingualism has created and continues to create in this moment. And this means taking part as

listeners amid the imagining of alternatives that many Global Southern thinkers have been offering all along. Here I'm thinking, for instance, about the work of [Eduardo Viveiras de Castro](#), thinking translation through decolonial anthropology and Amerindian perspectivism, of [Setiono Sugiharto](#), writing from the Indonesian higher education context, offering Southern critiques of the notion of a “multilingual turn” in Applied Linguistics. The sociolinguist [Rita Franceschini](#) put this imperative so beautifully, when she called for Global Northwest researchers like me to learn from what she calls the “long duree of intelligences of multilingualisms within ecologies of ongoing rather than recent change.”

This will be a project that will take decades not years, and thus one that needs stamina and accountability around monolingualism rather than fragility, remorse, and exoneration. I've calculated, for instance, that I will be retiring in May 2042 and will likely look back on these two decades 2010–2030 as a time when discourses about multilingualism were formulated decisively in the ways that structuralism and the linguistic turn of the 20th century set the agenda for much of the linguistic imagination of the second half of the 20th century in Europe and elsewhere.

So, to pull some things together as we get toward the end today, I'm convinced that multilingualism, monolingualism, and translation have become altogether different phenomena than they were only thirty years ago, when the first algorithmic, corpus-based machine translation platforms began their roll-out. No longer is monolingualism merely a nationalist rallying cry, multilingualism a cosmopolitan ideal, and translation a slow artisanal practice alone. Rather, each has become part of a globally interlocking delivery modality for commercial products, linguistic and material alike. The boom in celebratory thinking about multilingualism, in and outside of academia, has as much to do with this new value-producing matrix as it ever did with shifting political ideas, post-migrational superdiversity, and the so-called decline of the ethnonational state.

And so I've proposed that the thirty years since 1990—a window spanning the roll-out and refinement of algorithmic cross-linguistic information retrieval (CLIR) capacities—is a new age in language and meaning-circulation, which I call the linguacene. And in this age the ascendant paradigms are the supply-side management of global multilingualism through constituent prestige monolingualisms in ways that primarily serve commercial clients, security agendas, and borderless-market stratagems, by reducing the time necessary for translation and other forms of cross-linguistic communication. Untranslatability—or what is sometimes called semiodiversity—is of course a barrier and a nuisance to these commercial purposes, and CLIR platforms accordingly aim to commensurate different languages to one another so as to produce what [Yaseen Noorani](#) calls “soft multilingualisms.”

“Linguacene” is a term that obviously shares the -cene suffix with Anthropocene, in part to accentuate how fortified translational monolingualisms also accelerate the industrial effects already characteristic of the late Anthropocene: global warming, climate precarity, ecological destruction, and human and nonhuman suffering. As a literary scholar, I am interested in how these linguacene effects play out in literary craft as well, a domain that is often held up as somewhat resistant to free-market forces due to its aura of slowness, its aesthetic particularity, its cultural specificity, and its linguistic, poetic precision. So a next book I'm writing, *Literature in the Linguacene*, takes a look at an emerging set of works I term linguacene literature—primarily novels—that, from their various cultural vantage points in German, English, Danish, Swedish, Portuguese, and Turkish—observe and critique the industrial commercialization of translatability through fortified monolingualisms. I've backed away somewhat from [translingual literature](#) as a special category of writing, in order to focus on literature that—whatever its narrative idiom—helps to undo the strange myth of monolingualism in various ways, to minoritize it historically,

and to render its workings bare. So I'm reading these works that engage consciously with the unmarked case of monolingualism and that seek to critique it from within, to show how monolingualism works now—and how it continues to be, in the artist David [Batchelor](#)'s words, “the reminder of the culture we have not been able to create.” Thank you!