

Gramling, David (2016). *The invention of monolingualism*. New York, New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

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Book Review

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ABSTRACT

EN This piece reviews David Gramling's *The Invention of Monolingualism* (Bloomsbury, 2016), winner of the 2018 American Association for Applied Linguistics book award. With the prevalence of academic discourse on bi/multilingualism, this book takes on the under-explored notion of monolingualism. Drawing from a range of disciplines, including applied linguistics, literary studies, translation studies, and comparative world literature, Gramling raises important questions about monolingualism, how the term is used, and understandings of language itself.

Key words: LINGUISTICS, LANGUAGE IDEOLOGIES, MONOLINGUALISM, MULTILINGUALISM, LITERARY STUDIES, TRANSLATION STUDIES, WORLD LITERATURE, CITIZENSHIP

ES Este texto es una crítica sobre *The Invention of Monolingualism* de David Gramling (Bloomsbury, 2016), ganador del premio 2018 de la American Association for Applied Linguistics. En un momento en que el discurso académico se enfoca en el bi/multilingüismo, este libro explora la poco investigada noción de monolingüismo. Utilizando datos de varias disciplinas (lingüística aplicada, estudios literarios, estudios de traducción y literatura mundial comparada), Gramling cuestiona la noción de monolingüismo, el uso del término y la comprensión de lengua en sí.

Palabras clave: LINGÜÍSTICA, IDEOLOGÍA LINGÜÍSTICA, MONOLINGÜISMO, MULTILINGÜISMO, ESTUDIOS LITERARIOS, ESTUDIOS DE TRADUCCIÓN LITERATURA MUNDIAL, CIUDADANÍA

IT Questo articolo è una recensione del libro di David Gramling, *The Invention of Monolingualism* (Bloomsbury, 2016), vincitore del premio 2018 dell'American Association for Applied Linguistics. In un momento come questo, in cui il bilinguismo e il multilinguismo sono al centro delle riflessioni accademiche, il testo affronta la nozione di monolinguisimo, ancora poco studiata. Attingendo da una vasta gamma di discipline, tra cui la linguistica, gli studi letterari, la scienza della traduzione e la letteratura mondiale comparata, Gramling solleva questioni importanti riguardo il concetto di monolinguisimo, l'uso che viene fatto del termine e la comprensione del linguaggio stesso.

Parole chiave: LINGUISTICA, IDEOLOGIA LINGUISTICA, MONOLINGUISIMO, MULTILINGUISIMO, STUDI LETTERARI, SCIENZA DELLA TRADUZIONE, LETTERATURA MONDIALE, CITTADINANZA

1. Counting what counts as language

"How many languages do you speak?" Applied linguists revel in the assumptions embedded in such a question. What does it mean to "speak" a language? Is there a target number of words, a bar of sorts, that earns a space at the table of knowing? Moreover, what counts as a "language" in this question? Do dialectal varieties count? Is a computer programmer bilingual for her ability to code in Python?

In discussing how many languages one speaks, there is enough to interrogate in the latter half of the sentence that it's possible to overlook the beginning—the seemingly innocuous "how many." Deceptively simple, all but invisible, one may forget that this "how many" belies the assumption that there exists an

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established a cartography of language, a bounded grid in which ways of communicating have finite borders that render “language” a system of namable, countable entities.

This cartography of language forms the basis for David Gramling’s *The Invention of Monolingualism* (2016), winner of the American Association for Applied Linguistics 2018 Book Award. Gramling, associate professor in the Department of German Studies at the University of Arizona, Tucson, opens the book by discussing his own educational experience “immersed in an undergraduate liberal arts culture that prized foreign language learning, as a matter of pride as much as one of profit” as compared to the broader norms of U.S. schooling centered on “the brute power of monolingual [English-speaking] privilege” (p. iii-iv). Seeking scholarship on monolingualism itself, Gramling found a rich, emergent body of work on multilingualism and bilingualism, but monolingualism itself seemed merely an implication against which bi/multilingualism was set up as an object of study. Monolingualism somehow seemed to escape the gaze of research in humanities and social science methodology. Gramling’s text thus seeks to explore the history of monolingualism as a concept “in hopes of displacing the positivistic pedestal upon which the word ‘monolingual’ currently rests: derided and derivative, yet left relatively undisturbed in theory, policy and practice” (p. 29).

2. Wrangling monolingualism

Monolingualism indeed faces little academic scrutiny as compared to its more exoticized cousins of bilingualism, plurilingualism, and translanguaging. Ellis (2006) reviewed scholarly literature on monolingualism, identifying three major representations:

- 1) Monolingualism as the “unmarked case,” or a norm against which multilingualism is set as the exception;
- 2) Monolingualism as a limitation on cognitive, communicative, social or vocational potential;
- 3) Monolingualism as a dangerous phenomenon with detrimental effects on social and educational policy.

Ellis (2008) subsequently edited a special issue of *Sociolinguistic Studies* on the topic of monolingualism, calling for a research agenda of more systematic exploration of the topic. Yet monolingualism continues to receive little attention in academic scholarship and linguistic discourse at large.

Gramling’s work acknowledges the ‘unmarked’ status of monolingualism, but operates outside any particular category of Ellis’ framework. As Ellis found, the small body of scholarly literature on the topic often approaches monolingualism as inherently problematic—either as a disadvantage for individual speakers or as an ideological force by which to undermine the language use of those who don’t fit into constructed monolingual norms. Gramling, however, takes a step back to approach monolingualism as “the logic by which language can be made enumerable in the first place” (p. 11). Outlining this logic in the book’s introduction, Gramling frames monolingualism as the bounding and enumerating of language, considered finite, transferable, translatable, and as a concept tied to nationhood. The book traces the emergence of the concept of monolingualism in Western Europe between the 17th-18th centuries, a time during which Enlightenment thinkers began

converting language from God’s unwieldy prerogative to humanity’s own, pluralizable panfunctional grid of rational extension ... a unified, possessable object called “a” language, whose essence inhered in its promise to know everything, say everything, and translate everything. (p. 2)

Gramling describes monolingual *ideologies*, or other systems of belief surrounding language, as related to, but distinct from, monolingualism itself. Monolingualism, therefore, becomes less a system of beliefs and more of a structure underlying these systems that allows an ideology to be connected to “a” language in the first place. While scholarship in language ideologies explores the maintenance and reproduction of ideologies by which language users are positioned in relation to linguistic, social, and racialized hierarchies (Rosa & Burdick, 2017). For Gramling,

most of the underlying features of monolingualism reproduce themselves...far beneath the threshold of individual belief and articulation, and even beneath the kind of terrain easily recognized as ideological. Monolingualism’s “ideology” is precisely to become transparent and plain, unworthy of comment or critique, and thus impervious to the ascriptions of racism, nationalism, purism, and elitism often leveraged at “beliefs about language”.... [Instead, M]onolingualism is primarily invested in erasing its own history of production. (p. 18)

Drawing on a broad mix of fields, disciplines, and methodological approaches, *The Invention of Monolingualism* seeks to uncover this history of production and to document how monolingualism manifests in modern day social, linguistic, and literary arenas.

3. Overview of chapters

As monolingualism has been an undertheorized concept in all fields of research, studying the phenomenon requires an interdisciplinary methodological approach. Gramling thus situates his book (and organizes its chapters) across the disciplines of applied linguistics, literary studies, comparative world literature, and citizenship studies. The arguments of the book are developed through historical analysis of philosophical and literary work stretching from 16th century Europe to the 21st century United States. A strength of this approach is that Gramling is clearly working from a body of scholarship in which he is well-versed by nature of his academic fields of study. However, this also means that readers must keep in mind that the book's analysis, and the title's assertion of "Invention," are context dependent. In other words, the book may be best described as a specific study of monolingualism *as developed in Western Europe and the United States*. Though this contextual specificity facilitates a cogent argument, curious readers will benefit from seeking further sources on monolingualism in other national and historical contexts (e.g. Park, 2008).

Within this analysis, each chapter demonstrates masterful methodological plurality. The range of data sources might, in another author's hands, make one's head spin. Gramling, however weaves a complex network of literary, linguistic, policy, and media sources together into a cohesive argument—namely that the underexplored, undertheorized derision which greets the notion of monolingualism constrains our understanding of language use and its societal implications.

Chapter 1, *Monolingualism: A user's guide*, compares how monolingualism is framed in academic discourse with how the phenomenon actually operates in practice. This chapter includes Gramling's most explicit pushback against the ill-defined, essentialized notions of monolingualism that pervade academia and other literary circles. Methodologically grounded in applied linguistics, this chapter will be of particular interest to readers of this journal due to the range of data sources, drawn from a variety of political, social, and technological arenas. Drawing on sources from government communiqués to Google translate, by the end of this chapter, what may have been assumed to be a simple linguistic designation becomes excitingly complexified in all its possibilities.

Chapter 2, *Kafka's well-tempered piano*, explores monolingualism in the literary realm across the seemingly unlikely pairing of Bach and Kafka. The chapter develops a musical analogy, recurrent throughout the book, between monolingualism and musical transposability illustrated through Bach's "well-tempered" clavier. In introducing this chapter, Gramling posits that, "The wager of monolingualism was also Bach's wager: that the sacrifices one makes in achieving transposability, say from the key of E to the key of A flat... were negligible when compared to the pragmatic benefits of exchangeability across keys" (p. 24). This concept is further developed through an analysis of Kafka's *The Missing Person*, a novel in which the protagonist is gifted a well-tempered piano just as he is struggling to fit into the monolingual language norms of his new homeland. The literary and musical analogies thus frame monolingualism as a *technology* which, like the well-tempered clavier, allows for transposability across keys or languages, but sacrifices the distinctive, nuanced individuality of a more untamed system.

The analogy of transposability extends to the modern market of world literature in Chapter 3, *The passing of world literaricity*. Gramling contrasts Kafka, a multilingual individual who largely published monolingual works, with authors such as Orhan Pamuk, Junot Díaz, and Terézia Mora who push back against literary monolingualism, producing confoundingly "untranslatable" works through their multilingual writing. This chapter grapples with the degree to which the increasingly popular "soft multilingualism" (Noorani, 2013), which has proven highly marketable in current world literature, actually disrupts literary monolingualism, or whether this trend merely reifies the concept of monolingualism by commodifying its opposition.

Chapter 4, *A right of languages*, pulls together the concepts of previous chapters to develop to a broader civic argument. Drawing on German language policy and migrant regulation, Gramling argues that notions of citizenship have begun to shift from an emphasis on blood-rights and territorial rights toward a system in which demonstrated linguistic competency has become a key criterion of belonging. Through the lens of citizenship, monolingualism not only impacts communication, but in the symbolic connection of language to nationhood. Gramling is quick to assert that pre-modern Europe was in no way a peaceful, panlinguistic utopia, but that individuals at this time did not necessarily have the entrenched notion of language as indicating belonging to a political entity such as a nation. Thus, as nations today become more broadly diverse in terms of

race, ethnicity, and national origin, language use becomes increasingly scrutinized and regulated as a vehicle for symbolic allegiance and purported social cohesion.

4. Applications and Implications

In its entirety, *The Invention of Monolingualism*, offers a rich analysis of monolingualism as a theory of language. As Gramling himself notes, he often stops short of discussing the material consequences of this theory. Early in the text, for example, Gramling seeks to disaggregate monolingualism from its historical role in imperial projects.

Not initially prone toward domination or purification, the monolingual imagination in the seventeenth century did little more or less violent than to perceive a global grid of discrete, namable, rationally extensive languages.... Monolingualism *manages* other languages; it does not oppose them. (p. 11)

Therefore, Gramling's work is productively read alongside other texts that document the connections between language, imperial projects, and social control (e.g. Heller & McElhinny, 2017). However, the principles of monolingualism Gramling highlights—viewing language as enumerable, translatable, and tied to nationhood—are fundamentally connected to understanding how these connections are applied and enacted.

In this way, the book has major implications for applied linguists exploring the underlying logics by which language hierarchies are created and maintained. If monolingualism frames the boundaries of language varieties as finite and measurable, for example, this has substantial explanatory power for investigating the notion of standardized language assessments or documenting how certain dialectal varieties become idealized as more “standard” or “academic” than others. Gramling's work also provides a foundation to further interrogate monolingualism. For example, if monolingualism is omnipresent in undergirding our modern understandings of language, does this presence affect all language users in the same way, or are the linguistic and material implications of monolingualism moderated based on positional factors such as race, class, and gender? For whom is monolingualism a *choice* and for whom is monolingualism never an option?

Histories of linguistic profiling (Baugh, 2003), brought to the forefront through recent incidents involving U.S. immigration enforcement (Cullinane, 2018), bring these questions into stark relief alongside the connections Gramling establishes between monolingualism and contingent notions of citizenship. The oath taken by those becoming naturalized citizens of the United States begins with “I absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty, of whom or which I have heretofore been a subject or citizen” (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2016). When language is tied to nationhood through monolingualism, this renunciation becomes implicitly tied to language as well. Whether two tongues or two passports, monolingualism and nationalism intersect to inform a monolingual ideology which questions the national loyalty of an individual using what is framed as a forbidden language (Gándara & Hopkins, 2010). As such, Gramling's work provokes a timely conversation around the intricacies between language, belonging, nationhood, and power.

5. Conclusion

Throughout the text, Gramling offers a rich analysis of an otherwise overlooked linguistic distinction. This work adds a productive dimension to scholarship that examines complex ties between language, literature, and citizenship. In exploring not only how monolingualism is discussed, but also how language users leverage it, this book provides an applied analysis of a phenomenon that is generally oversimplified—if it is discussed at all. An exemplar of methodological interdisciplinarity, *The Invention of Monolingualism* provides a necessary contribution to the field of applied linguistics, exploring an undertheorized notion with widely pervasive implications.

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