

The Multilingual Issue: Untranslatability, linguistic multitudes, embodied speech

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The Multilingual Issue engages with articulating queerness across different languages, considering untranslatabilities as well as hierarchies that have developed between languages. Those have emerged due to epistemic, economic, and cultural dominance, ableism, imperialism, and colonialism. Such hierarchies include the devaluation of embodied speech as it, for example, comes along in sign languages of Deaf cultures. It's seen also in code-switching, which predominantly occurs amongst migrants, in performative poetics, queer slangs, racialized and classed registers, or in the expressiveness of sexual body language. The issue's aim is to disrupt and highlight these hierarchies, while respecting untranslatabilities and linguistic multitudes that derive from migration, disability, and disenfranchisement.

Language in an asymmetrically globalized world

We put out the call for this multilingual issue because of the constraints that English—the established *lingua franca* of academia and transnational activism—often presents, as much as it connects diverse communities (activist, socio-cultural, academic, artistic) globally. As David L. Eng and Jasbir K. Puar self-critically note in their introduction to the *Social Text* issue “Left of Queer” (2020): “As an uninterrogated and unmarked version of American Studies, queer studies determines what archives in the global South are legible and, indeed, matter.” (4) Accordingly, countering a U.S. academic hegemony of queer studies means acknowledging that there are various queer studies world-wide not yet in full dialogue with each other. As such, we wanted to explore concepts that can only find space outside of English, or intermingling with Englishes. Regardless, those concepts should be thought in the plural. When talking about the global South and the global North, we/the authors of this issue provide glimpses that challenge the simplistic nature and supposed cohesiveness of this binary (both through queerness and migration.) We understand and use this geopolitical shorthand to highlight the conditions of creation and being, of a South within the North which functions differently than a North within the South. While our authors, in their multicultural trajectories and biographies, come simultaneously from the East and the West, the South and the North, blurring normative binary boundaries, and opting instead for borderlands.

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Nonetheless, binary distinctions (gender and sexual as well as racial, class, and geopolitical) display their dominant force, and need to be addressed in order to be challenged. Queer theoretical proposals for simultaneously acknowledging as well as overcoming binary logic (Butler 1990; Sedgwick 1993; Engel 2006; Xiang 2018; Mananlansan IV 2018) and its effects in global politics and international relations (Weber 2016; Richter-Montpetit 2018; Rao 2020; Engel 2021b) dwell in what we here call “untranslatability” (due to the dominance of identity logic and binary thinking) while at once exploring multilingual potentials of queering. Yet, we would also like to insist, together with Sylvana El Khoury, that in the face of various (geographic, linguistic, cultural, and gender) transitions, “the essential translation question is no longer: how do I translate the untranslatable? It rather becomes: how do I translate the translated? [S. E. K. is here referencing Salman Rushdie] What I mean by ‘the translated’ is the hybrid, pluralistic speech / linguistic self that pertains to the historical accumulation of collective and individual subjectivities” (El Khoury 2022: 88).

We see queerness as epistemologically antithetical to binaries, strict categories, normalised hierarchies, and borders. Several of the contributions explicitly discuss or aesthetically undo national borders. These essays take issue with processes of conflict, war, and colonial/imperial regimes. Denis Ferhatović discusses Bosnian/Croatian/Montenegrin/Serbian “both one language and multiple languages” (writing in the aftermath of the Bosnian war and the break-up of former Yugoslavia), while Masha Beketova and Ju Bavyka use Deborah Rose’s “fire stick method’ of knowledge. With this approach, you put different ideas together to try to get sparks happening,” embracing the improvisational, context-focused, and messy nature of language, using—among four other languages—Surzhyk.

Our interest is to inspire intersectionally queer critiques of heteronormativity entering decolonizing paradigms, so that *queer* epistemologies and poetics arise from particular local contexts. Or from the in-betweenness of migrant experiences and dwelling in diverse (virtual or social) communities. How this takes place along with and builds upon code-switching and code-mixing, with the use of multiple languages, and how this makes elements move from one language to another (creating *mestizaje* or creole speech) is explored by the authors and contributors of *The Multilingual Issue*. The Chaka Collective provides a text which engages explicitly with Gloria Anzaldúa’s now classic book *Bolderlands/La frontera* that in 1987 introduced an intellectually thorough critique of dominant subjecthood, empowering marginalized subjectivity through a *mestiza* imagery, and poetics intertwining Spanish, English, Tex-Mex and “wild tongues which cannot be tamed” (Anzaldúa 1987: 54). This issue’s article was originally written by the Chaka Collective as the introduction to their translation of *Borderlands /*

La Frontera into German. We publish here its extended version, reflecting on the queerness of the original text, as well as the translation process.

Poetics are equally important for Rubia Salgado, who considers the pedagogical value of making use of poetry and poetic imagery in language courses for women* migrants and asylum seekers in Austria, organized by a feminist migrant collective, as a way of subversively fulfilling state requirements of migration policy. Salgado does this in the aesthetic form of a radically subjective notebook, displaying embodied thinking and intellectual encounters with inspiring literary material, with social violence, and an alter ego—handwritten in Portuguese and German with typed English annotations. In a similar experimental style, Masha Beketova and Ju Bavyka have written a multilingual theatre play, whose different voices intertwine Ukrainian, Russian, German, English, and Surzhyk. Their play confronts experiences of queer friendship and intimacy in exile and virtual reality, defined by the conditions of the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war.

These are some of the fabulous texts that we have received from different sociolinguistic contexts and in different formats and ways of signing, writing, or speaking. They provide a multi-faceted and in-depth engagement with migration, flight, postcoloniality and decolonising practices as a decisive part of queer experiences/practices. The element of migration and existing in-between language and sociocultural contexts, which we explicitly invited in the open call, has served as a recurring moment and motive of engaging with multilinguality. We welcomed the responses to our call for papers written by migrants and refugees with different places of origin, different places of arrival, and different degrees of force or self-determination related to this process. Daniela Rodriguez A. is one of the authors who explicitly tackles the violent experiences of flight and of enforced assimilation upon arrival (even more so), building from Anzaldúa's notion of linguistic terrorism (1987: 58). For Pêdra Costa, migration is an integral part of their academic and artistic profession. That means on the one hand enabling while on the other hand it confronts them (and us) in very personal and intimate ways. That includes colonial legacies, with global hierarchies between languages, and their different potentials of articulating emotional, bodily, and biographical experiences. Pêdra Costa's contribution to the *Multilingual Issue* "To talk as if they had a manifesto in their mouth" in the form of a 03:51 min video, provides the most explicit mode of bodily exploration of linguistic resistance and its sexual(ized) dimensions. The video is filmed with a dildo-camera penetrating Costa's throat, so that her declaration of the manifesto becomes a refusal of submitting to the ongoing colonial conditions enacted as and through opacity. This recording swallows us, while she reads out a manifesto of the Butthole (at times straining identifiable meaning) before she spits/lets us out.

Linguistic Multitudes

The Multilingual Issue decidedly leaves open whether the focus is on language or on queerness: Queer multilinguality or being multilingually queer? Claiming linguistic multitudes invites multiplicities that are uncountable and not bound to a single, overarching rule. Those multitudes are queer in the sense that they “aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically” (Sedgwick 1993: 8). Instead, they are fueled by a dynamic, where queerness and queering are continuously challenging and destabilizing each other (Engel 2021). Even when used in the singular, the multitude resists condensing into an (imaginary) entity. The multitude (Negri/Hardt 2005) as a political agent is not a group submitted to a party or an ideology. Nor is it a people submitted to an ethnic or national regime. It is not sovereign, but “singular plural” (Nancy 2000).

The multitude is assembling and disassembling due to the dynamic use of language in concrete, material-semiotic environments. Such environments are never exclusively linguistic, but historically and geo-politically situated, influenced by material and epistemic conditions, yet idiosyncratic and intimate, familial, un/familiar, anarchic or regulated, appropriated by hegemonic forces that nonetheless experience continuous resistance. We share with the editors of *Sexuality and Translations in World Politics* (Cottet/Picq 2019) the interest in untranslatabilities of sexual languages and ways of existence, and the linguistic hierarchies that have developed historically. As Cottet and Picq point out, translation happens most often “from dominant to dominated languages, from hegemonic centers to subaltern peripheries” (Cottet/Picq 2019: 2), and even if the other way round, much sexual terminology remains untranslatable and exposes “the limits of turning life into words” (ibid.: 1). Therefore, our decision to focus on multilinguality rather than translation is meant to shed light on power inequalities. It carves out space for that which would otherwise remain without language, or else be subsumed to a dominant language within scholarly or mundane discourse.

From a queer perspective, is multilinguality the rule or the exception? Consider that normative heterosexuality and rigid sex_gender binaries foreclose articulations and depictions of queerness, differing from the “deviant” or “perverse” or the “normalized” other. Thus, from a queer perspective languages and modes of communication are needed to allow one to switch codes or mix codes in order to be able to express oneself. This allows queers to enter into encounters and exchanges, form relationships, and organize communally or planetarily. Moreover, what these multilingual elements do is apply critique to the/an oppressor. In that way, they allow for punching up, without risking punishment

while simultaneously affording community membership to the speakers/users. Bringing queer slangs and code-switching into an academic text (T. 2020) is as much part of this as is poetic opacity (Glissant 2010; Bandau 2004; Lorenz 2014), wild tongues and linguistic *mestizaje* (Anzaldúa 1987; Halberstam/Nyong'o 2018), or the queer art of failure (Halberstam 2011). Consider that heteronormativity and heteropatriarchy are intimately entangled with coloniality, and with its neoliberal renewals (Manalansan IV/Cruz 2002; Schramm 2012; Viteri 2021), with class and caste relationships (Taylor 2005; Rao 2020; Ponniah/Tamalapakula 2020; Gleeson/O'Rourke/Rosenberg 2021), with histories of antisemitism and racism (Herzog 2007; El-Tayeb 2011; Holland 2012), as well as reinforcing "compulsory ablebodiedness" (McRuer 2002), which is simultaneously providing the imaginary ground of a properly sexed, gendered, desiring body. How does queer multilinguality enable us to formulate this very sentence?

Apart from rich exchange of academic and activist knowledge production and theorizing, any of those (linguistic) elements indicate complex relations of oppression, exploitation, discrimination, and violence (Young/Ferguson/Valls 2022), as well as idiosyncratic experiences made of material conditions and personal bodily perceptions, emotions and feelings. Theoretical abstraction enters language mediated through embodied experiences, while those experiences are also mediated through language. The multilinguality we are referring to is also the multiplicity of embodied subjectivities—hidden or shared in concrete, or abstract ways. While an academic journal raises the expectation that formalized written language would be chosen to tackle the particularities of a topic, in this issue we also experiment with the genre of academic writing. That includes performance videos, sign language, poetry, and a short play, in order to overcome academic monolingualism. Claiming an omnipresence in the Other, rather than necessarily constituting its other (Derrida 1998; Chow 2008), monolingualism reproduces on a very practical level the hierarchies of a racist, classist, ableist and heteronormative system of education. This is particularly pressing when combined with the rules of language-learning imposed by repressive migration, and asylum policies (Salgado 2015).

Multilingual speech and queer slangs

"Multilingual" does not primarily mean that different languages are present in a space, or that someone is fluent in various languages, but instead points out that exchange and intertwinement of different languages provides possibilities of disrupting the violence of normalcy. Hetero- and cisnormativity are communicated through linguistic means, be that body language or speech or the written documents of science and medicine, education, law, or religion. Yet, language is an ambiguous phenomenon, which also mediates critique and resistance, which can, indeed, be simultaneously offensive and enabling (Butler 1997; Castro

Varela 2019). Mikhail Bakhtin's (2011, i.O. 1934) heteroglossia (literally, "varied-speechedness") appears throughout the issue at odds with the prescriptivist violence of monolingualism, linguistic terrorism, and linguistic — and accent — normalcy and ideas of language as a tidy organised category. Through mixing languages, dialects, slangs, translations, mistranslations, and untranslatability the collection of contributions illustrates the need for always expanding, borrowing, crafting, and open source systems of imperfect communication through reaching out for connection. In intertwining artistic and academic, poetic, analytic, and biographical elements, the dominant role of reason for theoretical inspirations is challenged. These assumptions have been undermined by this collection, together with hegemonic English, and the outputs of embodiment, emotion, activism and art enter academia.

An important phenomenon concerning the enabling and resistant moments of language is queer slangs. Part of the function of slangs is the shielding of the speakers from persons external to their group and potentially harmful to them. Queer slangs, crafted by communities over a number of decades, appear around the world (T. 2020). These are created from semantically altered words, by foreign loans, or neologisms, and backslang, other subcultural slangs, among other elements. It is thus possible to figure out the intra-community connections. Queer slang is exactly not meant to be translated but its charm and power lies in being accessible to a limited, in-group only. ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS, who invented and wrote in Damiá, a queer slang so far only available to a countable number of speakers. They bring this to the fore when offering for publication a text that will remain cryptic to its readers. Thus, "Leo cie lo ... A Series of Artefacts from the Near Future" presents fragments of the future in a language of queer people, and a few select speakers. This exhibits the imperfect nature of language (as well as its open source nature). The majority of the text is in Damiá, although some orientation is offered in English and then in Finnish (which in this online/digital journal issue we assume people take advantage of online translation features). Even though there is a dictionary and a translation tool available, the text actively asks the reader to sit with untranslatability — facing obstacles that for some may be an everyday occurrence, while others may have never faced them. It also dares to demand effort on behalf of the reader. Readers may have to look things up or have a fragmentary understanding of the text, with discomfort or frustration (perhaps) following. Unlike other queer slangs which organically grew collectively by and for communities, in this case there is authorship, and we cannot etymologically trace it to other cultures and sub-cultures through loans that would indicate the non-insular nature of organic slangs.

Queering Queerness with or without naming it

Queerness as a readiness to take on non-normative sexual form is in need for expressions that communicate these desires and experiences. Preity Kumar engages with the Creole term of “deh”, providing a thorough sociological / anthropological exploration of how it is used in rural Berbice, Guyana by women-loving women. Denis Ferhatović, as a linguist trained in tracing historical change, hybridization, etymology, makes use of his expertise in order to follow the meanderings of the particular sexual expression “bussy” turning up in English most recently— yet can be shown to carry historical traces in Bosnian, Russian, Romanes, Lubunca queer slang — as such subverting binary distinctions of sexed body parts long before the arrival of queer sexual politics. Familial constellations, geography, sounds and accents, violences, desires, and ideas of the self are often implied within the idea of a linguistic origin (Derrida 1998), or break away from it. Another contribution that focuses on the productivity of “errors,” and makes active use of them is Mariana Aboim’s “*fucking with grammar.*” Combining art-based research and theoretical considerations Aboim focuses on the function of grammar, and the rigour of academic writing. The author challenges the coloniality and epistemic violence of language, through incorporating Portuguese and Turkish grammatical elements into academic English — while simultaneously underlining their argument about embodied writing, through integrating queer childhood photos of themselves into the text. Activating this genre indicates one’s inescapable implication in cultural discourses, but also the potential to erode them from the inside.

While this is an issue of a Journal of Queer Studies, our multilingual approach does not require the explicit use of the terminology of queer, queerness, or queering. We are well aware of the fact that around the world there are — linguistic as well as socio-cultural — contexts where people decide against this terminology, or do not even care about it, due to a rich and established vocabulary (linguistic or embodied) of articulating the pluriverse of (sexed bodies, gendered relationships, intimate and sexual practices or imagination, of pleasures, desires), or their absence. [Gender Bites - Wild Tongues](#), a multilingual online platform on queer pedagogy, we had both been involved in, can be seen as a predecessor working with a similar aesthetic sensibility. Nonetheless, here as there, we are interested in making use of “queer” as standing in for an open, fluid, not pre-defined linguistic practice. One that explores the potentials of articulating or disarticulating non-normative, inventive, and experimental gendered and sexual experiences and subjectivities, desires and pleasures.

Embodied Language and Speech

It remains unclear whether there is such thing as “queer aesthetics.” Nevertheless, we use it here as a sensibility and a readiness to experiment with various (sub-)cultural elements, in order to propose (or make use of) certain aesthetic tools to challenge norms. Doing so, queer aesthetics foreground the needs, desires, and positionality of queer individuals. In the case of this issue what comes forward as such could be an anti-rigorous approach to academic writing that fucks with grammar (Aboim), looking into different languages to make sense of oneself (Rodríguez A.), switching between styles of language or languages (Beketova/Bavika; Vahemäe-Zierold/Kopf), coming up with an entire language, creating art in it, and inviting others to learn it so it becomes communal (ONCE WE WERE ISLANDS), reconfiguring forms of kinship and ways of practicing it (long distance, cross-border, trans or anti-nationally), accounting for and highlighting the role of the body in communicating and connecting, and fictionalising autoethnography (Costa; Vahemäe-Zierold/Kopf). All that considered, one could say that some of the texts address queer and queerness as a textual practice, or understand the text as a queer body. What kind of body is this text? How does it turn into a queer body? Is there something like a queer slang for the body? Rubia Salgado does not address queer subjectivities or modes of living in her text. Rather, her writing dehierarchizes, deverticalizes, and queers the normalizing rules of language learning and language, once the author multiplies through different voices and “I-Paloma” co-authors the text.

Rubia Salgado, Mariana Aboim, Anchan/Annacan Daučíková and the co-authors Martin*a Vahemäe-Zierold and Maria Kopf underline the role of embodiment in speech and body language as subversive to audism and monolingual dominance. This was part of the first and second of a series of workshops called Queer Multilinguality and Embodied Speech accompanying the production of the issue. There the participants, including the sign language interpreters, discussed together with authors how to overcome normative (linguistic) frameworks queerly. Vahemäe-Zierold, a Deaf German Sign Language (DGS) native who graduated with a thesis on the history of Deaf activism and works in anti-discrimination politics, and Kopf, a hearing sign language linguist, who combine their expertise in order to argue for the potential of sign languages to overcome binary thinking. Deploying various new signs in the field of gender and sexuality that have been developed and promoted by the queer Deaf community, the authors demonstrate how sign languages are simultaneously part of queer discussions, even as they are challenging them. The productivity of inventing signs and embodied gestures is also the topic of Anchan/Anna Daučíková’s video *Talking to You* (2021), which stages a conversation between Anchan and Tamarra,

artists based in Jakarta and Prague. This offers expressions from Indonesian and Czech language that might or might not be able to capture trans* experiences. *Talking to You* (2021) is a two-channel video installation, reworked by the artist into a 7-minute excerpt for this issue. It turns out that the invented hand gestures as well as wavering plexiglass boards, that are moved by the artists towards the camera, transgressing the intercontinental space, are much stronger than pre-existing expressions or the English-language exchange of the two protagonists.

These transitional movements were further explored in another workshop called The membra(I)ne as a Translation Device, which took place during the conference membra(I)nes (Leipzig and Halle/Saale, June 15-17, 2023). Engaging with Daučíková's video, participants of the workshop discussed processes of translation through the metaphor of the membrane. The two-channel video has its images meet at a clearly drawn line, which nonetheless appears permeable, porous, if not vaporous, inviting translations to take place. That is: translations in a wide sense of linguistic translation, translation between different media, and translation as a transfer between different embodied and/or technological practices. During the workshop we used this as a framework of presenting Daučíková's video, exploring the potentials of its translation into sign language (DGS/IS) by social media activist Dana Cermane. Despite that, there is equally a wider notion of the membra(I)ne, which allows us to reflect on transitions, transfers and Un/Durchlässigkeit (im/permeability) of cultural and biological material — as well as relations of domination. Membra(I)nes as facilitators of translation can be human or machine translators, or a cyborgian combination of both. In any case, they create a space of in-between: one where evaluation of options, a channeling and selection takes place, meaning particulars will make the transition. Or rather, that transition brings about particulars—even under conditions of undecidability or untranslatability.

Transitions are textures in motion, as we claimed in the next of our workshops, bringing about openings, which can be used for queering. Like trans*ness or transing, they disqualify binaries. Transitions are not linear processes, but complex, multi-layered textures in motion. In the workshop Poetic Transitions we were interested in poetic ways of creating sense from within the openings of those textures. How do they contribute to disqualifying the logics of binary and colonial reasoning? Are bodies transitioning poetically? And how do poetics turn the affective dimensions of language into tools of queer resistance? In looking for *transitions* rather than *translations* the focus is not on movements from here to there, or on causes and effects. Instead, we think of language in kaleidoscopic terms. In this sense, the contributions to *The Multilingual Issue* produce surprising relations and transitions: they explore aspects of embodied speech

connecting gender, class, race, abilities, and the sexual. They present the desires inherent to and aroused by linguistic multitudes, that queer multilinguality and understand language as the ultimate open-source tool. Tongues, hands, facial expressions and gestures, moving bodies, textures and sounds, wild and tender, caring and chaotic, communicate queerness queerly.

In closing, while opening (up)

We have included in this issue contributions of various genres, themes, and formats further blending aesthetics and modes of translatability between them. We include a video performance, diary/journal entries, conversations-turned-into-a-five-act-play, academic articles, and the introduction to a translated book. The contributions are written in Bosnian-Croatian-Montenegrin-Serbian, Brazilian Portuguese, Creole, Damiá, English, Finnish, German, German Sign Language and International Sign Language, Lubunca, Russian, Spanish (various varieties), Surzhyk, Swedish, and Ukrainian, to varying extents. Though none of the contributions directly take up issues of technology and language, AI language models, or translation apps, this entire issue is both assisted by them (as many of us will opt for the help of such services to understand parts of the texts we otherwise wouldn't), and proves a challenge to them (in that multilinguality / bilinguality / code-switching, errors, and poetics are not modes they can operate under currently). So it speaks perhaps to the potential of friends, colleagues, house-mates, office-mates, and acquaintances coming in to help read this issue together, παρέα. This is an issue about connecting through, over, and despite language, hacking language. We hope to show that process to be the bottom-up creative tool of connection that it is.

We want to ask you, dear readers, to be patient and engage with each contribution in a generous way, which often means using translating tools and dictionaries. We invite you to take time, and come back to the issue. We understand that what we propose is not a simple or straightforward journey, but one with many points of entry and direction changes.

We would like to thank the authors for their time and everything they have shared with us—in their contributions, in email communication, and in the workshops that took place from December 2022 till October 2023 in Leipzig, Halle, Berlin, Vienna, and online. We want to thank the [Hannchen-Mehrzweck-Stiftung](#), which funded the series of workshops, facilitated by the [Institute of Queer Theory](#) under the title [Queer Multilinguality and Embodied Speech](#) and parts of the production process. Thanks also to [Aktion Mensch](#), which funded the sign language interpretation of two of the workshops, as well as the DGS/IS videos accompanying some of the contributions.

Finding peer reviewers who felt they would be up to the task was a challenge — but eventually we found them, and their help has been invaluable. A big thank you goes to them for going beyond normative understandings of genres and with kindness offering constructive criticism to the authors. Not everyone is able to do that. We are also thankful for the proof-readers Charlotte Forrester, Jules Gleeson, Lina Gonan, Andrea Lassalle, Tuija Pulkkinen, José Luis Viesca Rivas, and Faeza Yuldasheva who engaged with the contributions, fostered the readability, and made inspiring suggestions concerning the communication of content_style. Adriana Torres Topaga created the wonderful layout for Rubia Salgado’s contribution, as well as the cover and back cover design of the issue—thank you! We are grateful for the liberty the board of *InterAlia* gave us to pursue this complex, messy—and at times difficult—issue. Thank you to all the authors for the personal, generous, intelligent, and playful creations they shared with us. That’s passed over to everyone who “picks up” this issue (thanks to you, too!)

Overall, we present an issue where disenfranchisement (due to ableism, xenophobia, classism, colonialism) informs how queerness is articulated. That articulation can indicate how embodied multilinguality can and cannot challenge linguistic, scholarly, and rigorous norms and established aesthetics. We wish to acknowledge that we are reading, writing, and expressing our thoughts and ourselves from our respective, particular positionalities. We each carry our biographies and historical heritage: perceiving and desiring (in) language(s) through multiple senses. The experimental openness of *The Multilingual Issue* has become possible thanks to the intellectual courage and curiosity of our contributors. The participants of online and in-person workshops that accompanied the production process, as well as open-minded reviewers and journal editors. We hope it will incite pleasure in our readers and inspire editors, publishers, authors, conference organizers, and curators to take up further topics, sensibilities, and aesthetics explored in this issue.

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