



# The Evolving Field of Multilingual Studies

Guest post by Mimi Yang

Multilingual Studies was not quite a field until recent years. The 21st-century informational and digital age has catapulted previously “distant” cultures and “unfamiliar” people into encounters and engagements. Thus, Cultural Studies, which originated from social class, colonial, and postcolonial inquiries in the Western hemisphere, has exponentially expanded into intercultural studies, cross-cultural communication, global studies, and multicultural studies.

Traditionally, linguists study multilingualism with “standard” approaches to well-defined linguistic aspects. For example, when studying the influence of Mayan indigenous languages on Mexican Spanish, traditional linguists might examine phonetics as an established scholarly norm: how the Spanish vowels were mutated by the pronunciation of the Nahuatl language and how the Nahuatl lexicon vanished due to the replacement of Spanish vocabulary. This is typical of the structured method that “compares 'lexical diffusion' models of change with those which claim that change comes about as a result of the operation of regular phonetic laws” (Milroy, 1985, pp. 339-340). While valid, the violent historical context was neglected, and the colonialist/imperialist intention to eliminate Indigenous cultures and languages was never rendered relevant to multilingual studies. Therefore, traditional multilingual studies do not leave much room for variability in frameworks, and are mainly meant for the “pure” linguists in an “ivory tower” and do not allow ample space for an integral view of the “why” but only stress the “what.”

## How did the field of Multilingual Studies evolve?

The multi/intercultural push-and-pull “disrupts” well-established norms in multilingual studies. Hashemi and Babaii observe the current state of applied linguistics, “researchers often deal with complex phenomena and systems with ‘adaptive,’ ‘nonlinear’ and ‘dynamic’ processes and multi-dimensional outcome” (2013, p. 841). They advocate “other categories” (p. 836) in the research design, with “multilevel discourse analysis through presenting micro-genetic and macro-genetic treatment” of languages (p. 839). Therefore, “the findings from one strand would complement and/or cross-validate the ones from the other” (p. 842).

Since the 1980s, we have witnessed significant waves of intercultural and interdisciplinary components, propelled by younger generations of scholars. Studies of syntax, semantics,

morphology, phonetics, and phonology have been revitalized with some of the key elements seamlessly “borrowed” from Multicultural/Intercultural Studies. The current scholarship on multilingualism acknowledges and adopts an “inter” and “cross” process, which is key to intercultural communication. In this process, multiple languages converge to facilitate intercultural encounters and engagements, thus creating dimensions that were not possible in previously “neatly” defined canons. The areas of pragmatics and diachronic linguistics especially benefited from the “inter” and “cross” processes as there is now more room and legitimacy for the addition of contexts and linguistic history in Multilingual Studies. With the awareness of an “inter” and “cross” feature inherently embedded in multilingualism, linguistic crossing between different languages mirrors an intercultural process. Multilingualism thus encapsulates intercultural dialogues in their most visible form.

Consider a specific example of the evolving field of Multilingual Studies. The recently published book, *Multilingualism in Its Multiple Dimensions* (Yang, 2024), is an effort to steer away from traditional Multilingual Studies, in response to the urgent interdisciplinary and intercultural need for an updated 21<sup>st</sup>-century Multilingual Studies. The book chapter authors come from disciplines including Linguistics, Sociology, History, Culture Studies, ESL, English, Modern Languages, Linguistic History, Political Sciences, as well as from industry. Across the globe, they examine multilingualism in African, East/South Asian, European, Latin American, Middle Eastern, and North American contexts. When multilingualism maps out its footprints in every corner and every aspect of human life, it creates or dismantles power dynamics and structures, forms or “deforms” identities, preserves or loses cultural heritages, effectuates new pedagogies in education, and leads to utilitarianism in the empirical world. These multiple dimensions of multilingualism reconfigure traditional scholarship and redefine multilingualism as a symbiotic twin of multiculturalism, sustained by intercultural dialogue.

## Conclusion

The evolving field of Multilingual Studies integrates intercultural and interdisciplinary studies missed in traditional scholarship. Most people are multilingual or interlingual (that is, bilingual, trilingual, or simply polyglots), who cross linguistic frontiers as part of daily life or at times mix different linguistic codes as a second nature, usually to a receptively multilingual audience. Linguistic code switching (moving between languages or dialects in a single conversation) in itself brings cultures together in speech and dialogue, which, in return, stimulate further code-switching. Some of us are multilingual by training and others were born into an intercultural and interlingual environment. Multiple dimensions of multilingualism weave intercultural dialogues inherently and intimately.

## References

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