Beyond the Mother Tongue

THE POSTMONOLINGUAL CONDITION

Yasemin Yildiz
INTRODUCTION

Beyond the Mother Tongue?

Multilingual Practices and the Monolingual Paradigm

RETHINKING MONOLINGUALISM

On September 29, 2002, the Sunday issue of the New York Times included a sixty-eight-page paid insert previewing a conceptual artwork called Wordsearch: A Translinguistic Sculpture conceived by German artist Karin Sander and sponsored by the Deutsche Bank, the world's biggest corporate art collector. In response to the sponsor's request to offer a global perspective in a metropolitan location, Sander's project set out to document as many of the languages spoken in New York City as possible. It did so by finding one native speaker for each of 250 languages and asking each speaker to contribute one personally meaningful word in his or her "mother tongue" to a list. This list of unduplicated words was then translated into all the other languages. The resulting 62,500 words were arranged into columns resembling stock market tables and published as the actual "translinguistic sculpture" in another paid, eight-page insert in the business section of the New York Times on October 4, 2002. This commissioned artwork, Wordsearch, thus sought to render the novelty of globalized life at the turn of the millen-
niun through attention to the proximate coexistence of many languages in the same space.

To *Wordssearch* and many other cultural texts, the phenomenon of multilingualism appears as a remarkable new development of the globalized age. Yet as linguists have come to agree, and as scholars in other fields increasingly document, multilingualism is and has been far more common worldwide than had been previously acknowledged. Indeed, it is monolingualism, not multilingualism, that is the result of a relatively recent, albeit highly successful, development. But a monolingual paradigm, which first emerged in late-eIGHteenth century Europe, has functioned to obscure from view the widespread nature of multilingualism, both in the present and in the past. While scholars across different fields have noted the "monolingual bias" or the "monolingual habitus" in particular areas, no study to date has spelled out the far-reaching implications of this insight. Recognizing the workings of the monolingual paradigm, I suggest, requires a fundamental reconceptualization of European and European-inflected thinking about language, identity, and modernity. For monolingualism is much more than a simple quantitative term designating the presence of just one language. Instead, it constitutes a key structuring principle that organizes the entire range of modern social life, from the construction of individuals and their proper subjectivities to the formation of disciplines and institutions, as well as of imagined collectives such as cultures and nations. According to this paradigm, individuals and social formations are imagined to possess one "true" language only, their "mother tongue," and through this possession to be organically linked to an exclusive, clearly demarcated ethnicity, culture, and nation. Indeed, as we will see, even an apparently multilingual artwork such as *Wordssearch* still functions according to the central precepts of the monolingual paradigm.

The pressures of this monolingual paradigm have not just obscured multilingual practices across history; they have also led to active processes of monolingualization, which have produced more monolingual subjects, more monolingual communities, and more monolingual institutions, without, however, fully eliminat-

ing multilingualism. Schooling has been one of the primary means of such a social engineering of monolingual populations. The diverse linguistic landscape of eighteenth-century France, where large parts of the population did not speak French, for instance, was reengineered over time to produce a more monolingual population of French speakers. This last point also underscores the significance of the modern nation-state for the monolingual paradigm, or rather, of the monolingual paradigm for the modern nation-state, with which it emerged at the same time.

There are signs, however, that the tide is turning against such strict monolingualization. For a supranational entity such as the European Union, for instance, the challenge has become to manage multilingualism, not to discard it. Increased migration and mobility, the advance of communication technologies, and the spread of media have also contributed to the sense that multiple languages coexist and interact in new constellations, a sense that an artwork such as *Wordssearch* reflects and contributes to. Even English-dominated domains such as the global entertainment industry see new linguistic diversity. Hollywood movies such as *Babel* and *Inglourious Basterds* or globally consumed American TV shows such as *Lost* and *Heroes* have begun to feature more languages accompanied by subtitles, while popular musical forms mixing languages have tempted audiences with "livin' la vida loca." An increasing number of language memoirs thematize life in multiple languages as a significant experience. Literary and cultural studies scholars, meanwhile, have begun to make both older and newer forms of multilingualism visible. Yet this new *visibility* of multilingualism is not simply due to its more frequent practice, since forms of multilingualism have existed all along. Rather, globalization and the ensuing renegotiation of the place of the nation-state have begun to loosen the monolingualizing pressure and have thereby enabled the contestatory visibility of these practices in the first place, albeit still in circumscribed fashion. Multilingualism, then, has not been absent in the last couple of centuries, but it has been and continues to be refracted through the monolingual para-
digm. This persistence of a monolingual framework, I argue, is the backdrop against which we need to see today's seeming increase in multilingualism.

To capture this ongoing dominance of the monolingual as well as the incipient moves to overcome it, I introduce the term "postmonolingual." This "post" has, in the first place, a temporal dimension: it signifies the period since the emergence of monolingualism as dominant paradigm, which first occurred in late eighteenth-century Europe. Such a historicized understanding underscores the radical difference between multilingualism before and after the monolingual paradigm, a difference that previous studies have neglected. This historicization is necessary, I argue, because the appearance of the monolingual paradigm substantially changes the meaning and resonance of multilingual practices. But since the monolingual paradigm has spread only gradually and unevenly across different contexts and not at all to others, "postmonolingual" constitutes by necessity a situated and flexible periodization, inflected by contextual differences.

This flexibility of the term also means that it is not limited to one geographic area—in this case, Europe—but may extend to other contexts as well, whenever monolingualism becomes a dominant form. It is in this sense that the present book should be understood as a study of the workings of the monolingual paradigm and multilingual attempts to overcome it, rather than as a study of multilingualism per se. Viewed through this—flexible—temporal lens, "postmonolingual" refers to the unfolding of the effects of the monolingual and not to its successful overcoming or transcendence. But besides the temporal dimension, the prefix "post" also has a critical function, where it refers to the opposition to the term that it qualifies and to a potential break with it, as in some notions of postmodernism. In this second sense, "postmonolingual" highlights the struggle against the monolingual paradigm. As Marianne Hirsch notes with regard to the "post" in her own term "postmemory," the prefix "reflects an uneasy oscillation between continuity and rupture" ("The Generation of Postmemory" 106).

Taking these dimensions together, "postmonolingual" in this study refers to a field of tension in which the monolingual paradigm continues to assert itself and multilingual practices persist or reemerge. This term therefore can bring into sharper focus the back-and-forth movement between these two tendencies that characterizes contemporary linguistic constellations. Focusing on the tension rather than on one or the other pole helps to account for many phenomena that initially appear to be contradictory. Early twentieth-century Prague, where Kafka lived, for instance, becomes graspable as both a multilingual space in which multiple languages coexisted and as a place rapidly transitioning to a monolingual structure with individuals increasingly embracing only one, ethnically predetermined language. As Emily Apter demonstrates in her book The Translation Zone, the complex entanglements of language(s) with culture and politics demand such a focus on tensions, struggles, and "language wars." This definition of the postmonolingual condition indicates also that in the primarily European context on which this study focuses, the opposite of the monolingual paradigm—that is, a multilingual paradigm that would restructure perceptions and social formations along new lines after monolingualism—does not yet truly exist. Yet imaginative works in literature and other fields suggest the possible contours of such a multilingual paradigm and contribute variously to just such a restructuring, as I demonstrate throughout this book.

Because the German tradition has played an important role in establishing the monolingual paradigm, Beyond the Mother Tongue focuses on German-language writers who are uncomfortably positioned within the paradigm and have thus had to grapple with it to a significant degree. This group includes pre- and post-Holocaust German-Jewish figures, such as Franz Kafka and Theodor W. Adorno, and contemporary writers from new immigrant communities, such as Turkish-Germans Emine Sevgi Özdamar and Feridun Zaimoğlu, as well as the unique case of bilingual Japanese-German author Yoko Tawada. Using a range of multilingual forms to bring German into contact with a series
of other languages, from Yiddish, French, Latin, and English, to Japanese, Afrikaans, Arabic, and Turkish, these authors provide a privileged position from which to explore the strictures of the monolingual paradigm and evaluate the means of reimagining the identitarian force of language. As this list of languages begins to indicate, even though “German” is the common denominator for all the writers considered, their multilingual connections open up paths to other languages and histories across the globe and resituate German itself in the process. To recognize the possibilities and pitfalls of multilingualism, however, requires the post-monolingual mode of reading that this book offers—a mode of reading attuned both to the existence of multilingual practices and to the continued force of the monolingual paradigm.

EMERGENCE OF A PARADIGM

Emerging only in the course of the eighteenth century at the confluence of radical political, philosophical, and cultural changes in Europe, the notion of monolingualism rapidly displaced previously unquestioned practices of living and writing in multiple languages.29 “Exclusive first language allegiance [. . .] was not the most desired of linguistic identities or imagined communities in the late medieval period,” Mary Davidson notes with regard to Chaucer and his contemporaries (Medievalism 137). This attitude extended to the political realm where it was of little concern to premodern rulers whether and how their subjects spoke one or more languages. They themselves did not necessarily privilege the local language either. As late as the 1780s, King Friedrich II of Prussia famously preferred to speak and write in French, while harshly dismissing German. With the gendered and affectively charged kinship concept of the unique “mother tongue” at its center, however, monolingualism established the idea that having one language was the natural norm, and that multiple languages constituted a threat to the cohesiveness of individuals and societies. Even as they supported the study of other languages, late eighteenth-century German thinkers such as Johann Gottfried Herder, Wilhelm von Humboldt, and Friedrich Schleiermacher spearheaded the view that one could properly think, feel, and express oneself only in one’s “mother tongue.” This notion of the mother tongue has been in turn a vital element in the imagination and production of the homogeneous nation-state.

Philosophically, a new conception of language prepared the way for this conjunction of language and nation. As linguistic anthropologist Susan Gal argues, it was only in the Enlightenment era and the subsequent Romantic reaction to it that language came to be considered as an object with particular attributes (“Migration” 14). In this conception, which largely persists to this day, “a language” is a clearly demarcated entity that has a name, is countable, and is the property of the group that speaks it, while also revealing that group’s idiosyncrasies.20 This reified conception of language enabled the distinction between monolingualism and multilingualism. It also relegated linguistic practices without proper names to the status of deviation, hodgepodge, or simply invisibility, rather than recognizing them as “language.”21

With German thinkers at the forefront, the eighteenth century also witnessed the highly consequential political linkage of language and nation. Herder was one of the key figures to pave the way for this view. He celebrated the distinctness of each language, which he saw as emanating from the genius of a particular nation (Volk).22 On the one hand, this perspective led to a greater recognition and appreciation of the multiplicity of languages. On the other hand, Herder insisted on the need to maintain the distinctness of these national languages lest they lose their authenticity and rootedness in their respective nations. He thus conceived of both languages and their speakers as more separate and different from each other than had previously been the case. Herder did therefore not abandon multilingualism in so far as it meant appreciation of many languages, but rather reworked it in relation to the new vision of language, subject, and nation. The multiplication of languages is not an issue for this Herderian view as long as each language is conceived as distinct and separate and as belonging to just one equally distinct and separate people. What
this position cannot abide is the notion of blurred boundaries, crossed loyalties, and unrooted languages.\textsuperscript{23} This changing attitude towards language(s) finds a clear articulation in the field of translation.\textsuperscript{24} While previously a “universalist” conception of languages prevailed, now a “relativist” perspective began to take hold.\textsuperscript{25} The universalist conception, dominant until the eighteenth century, deemed languages to be essentially equivalent and their specific forms only an irrelevant surface feature compared to the more important aspect of the content of any text. The relativist perspective, on the other hand, saw languages as radically different from each other in their specificities and their makeup. In this new vision, translation no longer merely transported content from one form into an equivalent form without damage, but rather necessarily transformed the content in the process. Wilhelm von Humboldt’s suggestion that languages were not a neutral media but rather reflected the thoughts they expressed was influential in this regard.\textsuperscript{26} With this greater attention to form came also a greater sense of the difference of languages and their distance from each other. At the extreme end of this relativist view, languages were essentially seen as untranslatable and closed off from each other.

This new perspective not only drew attention to each language’s specificity, but also to the individual’s relationship to his or her—presumably singular—primary language. That relationship was now seen as more internal and innate, and also more circumscribed by inheritance and nationality. In his influential 1813 lecture on translation, Schleiermacher provides the image for this new model, while contrasting it to an older one:

For whoever acknowledges the creative power of language, as it is one with the character of the nation [Eigentümlichkeit des Volkes], must also concede that [. . .] no one adheres to his language only mechanically, as if it were something externally attached to him like a strap and as if one could as easily harness another language for one’s thought as one would exchange a team of horses [Gespans]; rather, every writer can produce original work only in his mother tongue [Muttersprache], and therefore the question cannot even be raised how he would have written his works in another language. (“Über die verschiedenen Methoden des Übersetzens” 85; “From the Different Methods of Translating” 59, trans. modified)

Schleiermacher introduces the image of interchangeable straps and harnessed horses to reject the view of languages as external, indiscriminate means for transporting individuals from one place to another. In a metaphorical move that is characteristic for the period and indicates changing philosophical paradigms, he replaces this mechanistic image of speakers’ relation to language with an organic one.\textsuperscript{27} The counterimage to the mechanistic view is encapsulated in the reference to the “mother tongue.” Schleiermacher does not elaborate on this image in the same manner in which he provides an extended metaphor for the rejected view. The “mother tongue” functions as a shorthand that barely needs explication. In this shorthand, the weight of the argument falls on the element of “mother” in Muttersprache. It stands for a unique, irreplaceable, unchangeable biological origin that situates the individual automatically in a kinship network and by extension in the nation.\textsuperscript{28} In contrast to the mobility implied by the harnessed horses, the “mother”—a markedly gendered kinship concept—stresses a static mode of belonging to the national collective. Schleiermacher does not need to elaborate that one cannot willfully change one’s mother like one can a team of horses; this point appears self-evident and underscores the effectiveness of the chosen metaphor.

The uniqueness and organic nature of language imagined as “mother tongue” lends its authority to an aesthetics of originality and authenticity. In this view, a writer can become the origin of creative works only with an origin in a mother tongue, itself imagined to originate in a mother. The result is a disavowal of the possibility of writing in nonnative languages or in multiple languages at the same time.\textsuperscript{29} By the mid-nineteenth century, this position has become a truism, as borne out by composer Richard Wagner’s assertion that “to make poetry in a foreign tongue has
hitherto been impossible, even to geniuses of highest rank” (Das judentum in der Musik 150; tr. Judaism in Music 83).10 Such a “retrospective monolingualization of the West European literary system, based on the Romantic stress on the mother tongue as the primary material for literary creation,” as decreed by translation scholar André Lefevere (“Translated Literature” 76), effects a historical amnesia about all earlier multilingual configurations while it seeks to deter future turns to any language other than the solely sanctioned “mother tongue.”

THE MOTHER TONGUE: A LINGUISTIC FAMILY ROMANCE

The “mother tongue” is the affective knot at the center of the monolingual paradigm and therefore a knot worth unraveling. This knot relies heavily on the invocation of the maternal, without however necessarily referencing actual mothers.11 As the discussion of Schleiermacher begins to illustrate, the “mother” in “mother tongue” stands in for the allegedly organic nature of this structure by supplying it with notions of maternal origin, affective and corporeal intimacy, and natural kinship. Yet the emotional and ideological connotations of “mother tongue” on which Schleiermacher draws and with which we are still familiar today are themselves historical artifacts and not transhistorical constants. Originally a Latin term, lingua materna was used in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern period to refer to lay people’s vernaculars in contrast to learned Latin.32 Muttersprache first began to be an emotionalized term in the late eighteenth century, when it was newly linked to a notion of linguistic socialization—that is, at the same time as the monolingual paradigm took shape. This change itself occurred in the context of larger social and political transformations that produced new and interrelated conceptions of family, kinship, motherhood, nation, and state. The family, for instance, only then began to be thought of as consisting solely of biological kin and excluding other members of the household such as servants. This rethinking corre-

sponded to the reorganization of labor and the household that resulted in a stricter separation of the private and public realms. The new context defined (bourgeois) motherhood increasingly as the site of affective care rather than simply physical care.13 It was this image of the bourgeois mother that entered into the modern “mother tongue” discourse.

That the ensuing constellation of “mother” and “language” continues to be a complicated one is demonstrated by the diverse perspectives on it among contemporary feminists. Some feminist critics celebrate the “mother tongue” as bearing residues or traces of the maternal body. Feminists who view the mother tongue in this manner valorize it as the expression of the repressed and dominated maternal and set it against male authority.24 Yet, other feminists, working within a psychoanalytic framework, stress the divergence between the maternal and the linguistic. For instance, some readings align the maternal with the pre-Oedipal and preverbal. Developed in particular by Julia Kristeva, this vision sees the maternal as preceding language. Kristeva’s proposed structure thus locates language and the law of the father as separate from the mother, who is “pure bodily closeness” (Johnson, Mother Tongues 66). A third strand, which guides my approach here, rejects both of these utopian figurations of the mother. As feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti puts it, “Lacanian psychoanalysis shows us that there is no such [. . .] thing as a mother tongue, that all tongues carry the name of the father and are stamped by its register” (Nomadic Subjects 11). For Braidotti, “mother” does not stand for something outside the law of the father but rather resides squarely within it. Nevertheless, the mother’s body and all that it suggests about affection, proximity, and presence continues to function implicitly in the still-active concept of the mother tongue.

The complex imbrication of the mother’s body with language and male authority is underscored by media theorist Friedrich Kittler’s historical account of the turn to phonetics in literacy education.15 Around 1800, the bourgeois mother began to be incorporated into the role of teaching her children to read. Kit-
tler demonstrates in great detail how the mother's mouth became the central conduit in the production of proper sounds in the mother tongue. The child was supposed to see and hear the mother's mouth produce sound at the same time that she pointed to the corresponding written letter. Thereby, a connection would emerge between the mother's mouth, the sound, and the letter. The mother, however, was first instructed in textbooks by male experts in how to produce the sounds properly. Her body was meant to function as a medium for those male experts in their attempt to control the proper (re)production of language. As this scenario strikingly demonstrates, the "mother tongue" coming out of a women's mouth was not just any language that a mother spoke, but rather the result of male ventriloquism. While this technique supported the ongoing standardization of the language, it also relied on the child's associating the written letter with the proximity and intimacy of the maternal body.

As this historical account illustrates, the manufactured proximity between "mother" and "language" stages the fantasy behind the modern notion of the mother tongue—namely, that the mother tongue emanates from the mother's body. This notion indicates that, within the monolingual paradigm, "mother tongue" is more than a metaphor. Instead, it constitutes a condensed narrative about origin and identity. Freud describes origin fantasies that take the shape of narratives in order to give rise to new subjects as "family romances." In these family romances, children reimagine parents in a grandiose manner in order to deflect their growing sense of the parents' ordinariness. Using this basic structure, I propose to read the modern notion of "mother tongue" as a linguistic family romance. The linguistic family romance helps to fantasize a bodily as well as familial grounding in language that does not exist, say, in Schleiermacher's image of language as changeable horses strapped to a carriage. At the same time, this model offers a blueprint for tracing the emergence of possible alternative family romances that produce different conceptions of the relationship between languages and subjects and the origins of their affective ties. As we will see, the key elements of this linguistic family romance—namely, affect, gender, and kinship, tied to a story of origin and identity—reappear in numerous texts, albeit in altered form. Yoko Tawada, for instance, interpellates a German typewriter as her new "Sprachmutter" (language mother), in an ironic reversal of the organicist notions of "Muttersprache" (mother language). Time and again, going beyond the mother tongue towards a potential multilingual paradigm entails rewriting this linguistic family romance.

The notion of the unique "mother" insists on one predetermined and socially sanctioned language as the single locus of affect and attachment and thus attempts to obscure the possibility that languages other than the first or even primary one can take on emotional meaning. However, despite these strictures, different languages can and do elicit heterogeneous affective investments and emotional reactions. In fact, as psychoanalyst Jacqueline Amati-Mehler and her colleagues note, new languages can open up "new intellectual and affective pathways." Such a notion differs from presumptions that the mother tongue is always the language of emotion and subsequent languages are merely languages of distance and detachment. In the case of Kafka, for instance, French serves to negotiate a much-needed opening between German and Yiddish, as I demonstrate in chapter 1. For Ozdamar, on the other hand, German is the language in which she successfully works through trauma that took place in Turkish, her erstwhile "mother tongue" (see chapter 4).

The fact that "mother tongue" is a highly ideological, charged, and misleading term is in some ways easy to recognize. Yet simply avoiding this term and substituting it with a more neutral one, such as "first language," does not in itself resolve the issues tied up in it. The conception of language, origin, and identity that "mother tongue" marks is very much in effect today, even when the term itself is not explicitly invoked. It is therefore useful to think with this term rather than to ignore it. In fact, I argue that it is the affectively charged dimension of the "mother tongue" that accounts for the persistence of the monolingual paradigm and its homologous logic. We thus need to work through
the mother tongue and not simply sidestep its force. Viewed from this vantage point, writing "beyond the mother tongue" does not simply mean writing in a nonnative language or in multiple languages. Rather, it means writing beyond the concept of the mother tongue.

SITUATING BEYOND THE MOTHER TONGUE

The postmonolingual perspective helps to throw a new light on the simultaneous presence and absence of multilingual dimensions across many disciplines. As Doris Sommer demonstrates in her important contribution to a "bilingual aesthetics," multiple languages appear in the margins or even at the center of many twentieth-century texts from philosophy, linguistics, psychology, literary and cultural criticism, and political theory, but remain unexplored. She points, for example, to Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophy of language, and draws attention to the fact that he seems to explore every possible language game, but does not ever consider "bilingual games," although he himself lived in multiple languages. Yet, Wittgenstein's insistence on publishing the German original of his text in the English edition of his work leads to the bilinguality of his Philosophical Investigations, in which German and English face each other on opposite pages. Such a "language game" goes "unremarked while monolanguage games get tireless attention from Wittgenstein," Sommer comments (Bilingual Aesthetics 159). With the lens of the present study, Wittgenstein's practice becomes legible as caught up in the postmonolingual condition. In contrast to scholars such as Sommer, who emphasize multilingual experimentation alone, this book keeps its focus on the tension between experimental practices and the dominant paradigm in order to explore why and how the monolingual persists even in the face of multilingual forays.

This focus on the postmonolingual tension is enabled by the interdisciplinary scholarship of the last two decades that has brought out the significance of multilingualism, albeit not that of monolingualism. Since the 1990s, literary and cultural studies have begun in earnest to note multilingualism both in the present and in the past. Because of the amnesia about multilingualism, the first step has been to reestablish its existence as a widespread phenomenon. Building on the pioneering but long ignored work of Leonard Forster, contemporary literary scholars have expanded on his initial archive of multilingualism in literature. This has meant collecting diverse forms of multilingualism—from authors writing in two or more languages (such as Samuel Beckett, Yoko Tawada), writing in a so-called nonnative language (such as Joseph Conrad, Edwige Danticat), to mixing different languages in one text (such as James Joyce, Gloria Anzaldúa), to simply being multilingual, while writing in one language (such as Anita Desai). Considering the twentieth century alone, these archives help to reveal the significance of multilingualism for modernism on the one hand and for postcolonial and transnational writing on the other. The makeup of Beyond the Mother Tongue pays heed to both of these realms of multilingual writing, and combines two chapters exploring a modernist framework (Kafka, Adorno) with three chapters exploring the globalizing present (Tawada, Özdamar, Zaimoğlu).

However, as this grouping of authors reveals, my archive differs from that of most scholars working in literary multilingualism. Most significantly, much scholarship on multilingualism focuses on constellations that involve English. Evelyn Ch’ien even goes so far as to claim that “weird English constitutes the new language of literature” (Weird English 4). Yet "weird German”—a version of which I will discuss via Zaimoğlu’s book Kanak Sprak (Kanak Speak) in chapter 5—and many other multilingualized languages surely are also producing new literary effects. It is also important to understand that the global circulation of English may even have limiting effects for multilingual experimentation. Tawada’s German and Japanese writing, for instance, frequently builds on the presumption that her audiences do not understand one of the two languages she uses and therefore listen to its sounds or consider its forms more closely, a situation that would be radically different if she wrote in English and Japanese. To be sure, English