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CONCLUSION

Toward a Multilingual Paradigm?

The Disaggregated Mother Tongue

THE DISAGGREGATED MOTHER TONGUE

What is the relationship between language and identity today? According to the monolingual paradigm, there is one privileged language, the mother tongue. This language is special because one is born into it, one acquires it with the “mother’s milk” (H. Weinrich, “Chamisso”) or at least at the “mother’s knee” (B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*). The individual is connected to it through family and kinship ties and experiences childhood through it. The sounds of this language can stir something deep down inside a person; this is the language of primary attachments, the language in which one first says and becomes “I.” It is a language that signifies belonging and reaffirms it. On a practical level, it is the language one masters best and has full command of. Other languages may be enjoyed but will never be mastered in the same way and can never attain the same deep meaning, they can never penetrate to the very core of the subject in the same manner. This story about language and identity, I have argued, can best be understood as a linguistic family romance that constructs a narrative of true origin and ensuing identity. The concept of the

mother tongue and its rich connotations, in other words, offers a strong model of the exclusive link between language and identity.

Yet, while this vision may be true for some, it is just as often untrue for others. The “mother tongue” can be a site of alienation and disjuncture, as German was for Kafka; it can be the medium of chauvinist expulsion from, and endogamous self-enclosure into, identity (Adorno); the “mother tongue” can be experienced as enforcing a limiting, suffocating inclusion (Tawada) as well as being a carrier of state violence (Özdamar) and social abjection (Zaimoğlu). These dimensions are part of the less told story of the “mother tongue.”

More importantly, however, this concept blocks from view the possibility of multiple, and even contradictory, attachments, of desire for something unfamiliar and unrelated as well as the pleasure derived from new childhoods and new connections. Reading multilingual forms against the backdrop of the monolingual paradigm reveals that languages not considered “mother tongues” can be the site of joy and significant reconfiguration, as French and Yiddish were for Kafka. It may be the “foreign” elements of a language that enable attachment to it in the first place, as in the case of Adorno. For him, as we have seen, foreign-derived words secure nonidentity and retain the memory of historical failures rather than smoothing them over. They also carry the utopian promise of a “language without soil.” Such detachment from the mother tongue is also a desired outcome of Tawada’s bilingualism, where a foreign language is a gateway to liberation and pleasure and provides new perspectives on the world and new experiences of it. Against the violence of the mother tongue, a new language can be the means of working through trauma and recovering liveliness (Özdamar). Additional languages can help project new locations on transnational maps, as English does in Zaimoğlu’s *Kanak Sprach*, or they can locate subjects in relationship to national histories from which they are excluded, as Yiddish and Hebrew fragments do in the same text.

But what about those for whom the “mother tongue” does indeed fulfill its promise and to whom it gives a sense of wholeness,

belonging, and affective attachment, one might rightly ask at this moment? What if the loss of a “mother tongue” is a painful experience rather than a liberating one? Eva Hoffman’s memoir of being “lost in translation” provides such an account of leaving behind her beloved Polish to become a new person in English. The readings in this book lead me to argue that while the “mother tongue” may indeed be experienced as a wholesome unity by some, the problem lies in the monolingual paradigm’s insistence that this is always and exclusively the case.

The distinct aspects of the monolingual paradigm that are tackled by each of the writers discussed in this book ultimately indicate that, rather than being a seamless whole, the “mother tongue” is an aggregate of differential elements, all of which are subject to historical and social configuration. They reveal that what is called the “mother tongue” combines within it a number of ways of relating to and through language, be it familial inheritance, social embeddedness, emotional attachment, personal identification, or linguistic competence. Contrary to the monolingual paradigm, it is possible for all these different dimensions to be distributed across *multiple* languages, a possibility that becomes visible only in multilingual formations or when the monolingual paradigm is held in abeyance. Multiple origins, relations, and emotional investments are possible and occur daily—something to which the texts analyzed in this book variously testify. This means that we need to reimagine subjects as open to crisscrossing linguistic identifications, if not woven from the fabric of numerous linguistic sources. Such multiplicity breaks with the monolingual premise so often hidden in the notion that language correlates to identity. Languages do indeed relate to identities, but not in any predetermined, predictable way, as this book demonstrates.

POLITICAL STAKES: MULTILINGUAL SUBJECTS AND MONOLINGUAL CONTAINMENT STRATEGIES

Recognizing the monolingual paradigm and its workings can be a step towards denaturalizing monolingualism as an unques-

tioned norm and standard according to which other linguistic configurations and practices are measured. Given the political investments in language as a boundary marker, such an undertaking necessarily has political implications. For a look at how the postmonolingual condition plays out in current public discourse in Germany and how it could be refigured, it is worth considering a recent media campaign sponsored by major corporations and endorsed by the German state.

In spring 2010, the *Deutschlandstiftung Integration* (Germany Integration Foundation), a foundation sponsored by major media corporations in Germany, started its first public campaign under the title “Raus mit der Sprache. Rein ins Leben.” Its ostensible goal was to encourage immigrants living in Germany to learn German. To this end, the foundation produced publicity materials that were carried in newspapers and magazines, and on websites and public billboards. In all these formats, the campaign slogan was superimposed on a series of photographs, each showing a more or less prominent minority figure in his or her twenties, thirties, or forties. Ranging from sports stars and politicians to hip-hop musicians and other entertainers, the depicted subjects appear as lively, excited, and happy, or hipster cool. The focal point of each of these largely grey-hued pictures, meanwhile, is the tongue: each subject sticks out a tongue that has been painted in bright stripes of the German national colors of black, red, and gold. In this manner, the campaign promises inclusion and enjoyment to those who allow their bodies to be painted in the national colors exclusively.

The campaign’s slogan underscores this exclusivist agenda: *Raus mit der Sprache* is an idiomatic expression that can be best translated as “spit it out.” This demand to speak is usually addressed to a person reluctant to provide information. The campaign’s message of “speak already” thus construes an addressee who is willfully silent and who needs to be playfully challenged to give up that position. The second part of the slogan, *rein ins Leben*, (throw yourself into life) promises the gain from following this challenge, while it likewise suggests that the addressees

are not yet “in” life. As the English equivalent “spit it out” implies, this entry “into” life first requires the abjection of (another) language, for the literal meaning of *Raus mit der Sprache* is “out with the language.” In order to enter life, you have to eject language. The economy of “in” and “out” follows a substitutional logic, in which there is no room for the coexistence and interplay of languages.¹ Instead, one language has to make room for the other. The images illustrating the campaign assert this monolingualizing assumption visually: this tongue can only have one national coloring; no blurring of the colors, no blurring of the lines is visible.

This campaign represents in some ways the opposite of the artwork *Wordsearch*, with which I began this book. As I have shown there, in *Wordsearch* the individual becomes the scale at which the mother tongue concept is preserved, while the global city on which it draws—New York—is imagined as multilingual via the side-by-side coexistence of undisturbed “mother tongues.” In this way, *Wordsearch* may be multilingual but it does not go “beyond the mother tongue.” The media campaign, on the other hand, responds to potential multilingualism in the national space by wanting to paint all tongues in the same colors. Here, the question of the “mother tongue” of the depicted individuals remains secondary to the desire to represent the nation as a linguistically homogeneous place.² As the campaign slogan suggests: out with the (other) language. Even the campaign’s design underscores this attitude, as it advertises German language courses primarily in German rather than in languages that beginning learners might know. That is, the campaign refuses even to acknowledge the multilingualism of the very public it is allegedly addressing and instead insists on reproducing the vision of a purely monolingual national space.

With the recuperation of the notion of a “national tongue” and its inscription onto the very bodies of minorities, this campaign is symptomatic of recent political and social developments in contemporary Germany that once again stress homogeneity as an ideal.³ Despite the deep-seated demographic changes in the

postwar period due to migration, elaborated in chapter 5, political elites admitted only in the late 1990s that such migration was not a temporary or marginal issue. Yet this admission and some accompanying legal changes—such as modifications of the citizenship law—provoked a defensive response that sought to assert the continued primacy of German culture. The term *Leitkultur* (guiding or lead culture), coined by political scientist Bassam Tibi and popularized by Christian Democratic politician Friedrich Merz in the late 1990s, articulated this desire for continued cultural hegemony. The German language was from the beginning the *sine qua non* of this *Leitkultur*. Rather than simply see German as a necessary language for navigating in the country, this debate increasingly cast other languages as damaging and counter to “integration.”⁴

This stress on homogeneity, I would argue, constitutes an inadvertent admission of the reality of heterogeneity. In post-monolingual terms, it constitutes an attempted reassertion of the monolingual paradigm vis-à-vis the realization of multilingual realities. Coloring the tongue is a response to recognizing that not all tongues are German, that the country is multilingually inhabited. This particular vision does not want to admit the nature of multilingual practices, the ability to live multiple belongings, but neither does it want to admit the reality that many minorities are already German speakers, even if the dominant society does not yet believe that.

This move to homogeneity does not target all languages in the same way, however. Recent debates about bilingual schools demonstrate differential treatment of multilingualisms in the German context.⁵ While bilingual English-German schools are rapidly gaining in popularity and are welcome, the call for opening Turkish-German bilingual schools has been met with a strong negative reaction by the public.⁶ Green Party head Cem Özdemir noted in this context that the responses to a proposal for a bilingual Turkish-German school almost gave the impression that “Turkish was a language of lepers” (quoted in Wierth, “Zweisprachige Gymnasien”), expressing the abjection of Turkish in

contemporary Germany. Multilingualism thus takes on a different status depending on the languages involved. This is even true when the individuals involved are not themselves working-class immigrants. The experiences of a Turkish-American academic couple residing in Germany for research purposes illustrate this differential treatment across levels of class and education.⁷ Raising their children bilingually at home, with Turkish and English, the couple also facilitated their German-learning in daycare during their temporary stay in the country. Despite this fact, daycare workers reprimanded one parent for speaking in Turkish to the children. No such situation arose for the parent speaking in English to the same children, however.

The differential attitude towards Turkish in the contemporary German linguascape is closely connected to what anthropologist Ruth Mandel helpfully calls “selective cosmopolitanism” (*Cosmopolitan Anxieties* 14). With this term, Mandel describes the fact that Turkishness and forms of Turkish culture pose a challenge to German self-conceptions of cosmopolitanism. While seeing themselves as cosmopolitan—as consumers of Italian or Chinese food, Brazilian or African dancing, and so on—many majority Germans cannot accept Turkishness as part of this cosmopolitanism. This means that, on the one hand, Turkish-Germans are not considered cosmopolitan themselves and, on the other hand, that Turkish-German cultural expressions are not considered part of a cosmopolitan spectrum, but rather are stigmatized and viewed as abject. Using Mandel’s term, we could therefore speak of a “selective multilingualism” reigning in contemporary Germany. Not all multilingual practices are rejected; instead, some, involving particular languages, are more heavily policed than others.

Given the selective multilingualism of the present vis-à-vis Turkish (and Arabic), a historical memory of how various minority subjects have grappled with inclusion into and exclusion from the German language could be a helpful corrective to the pathologizing attitudes towards Turkish and the position of Turkish-German speakers in the contemporary political scene. The design

of my book, which combines pre- and post-Holocaust German-Jewish writing with postunification Turkish-German writing, as well as a Japanese-German writer, evokes that historical memory. There is a continuity of grappling with linguistic difference that affects primarily those deemed internal others, even if the specific linguistic practices, languages, and styles, as well as the larger historical dynamics, differ.

EMBRACING A DEETHNICIZED GERMAN, OR,
GERMAN BEYOND THE MOTHER TONGUE

Especially in light of the selective multilingualism of the public sphere and although they relate stories of loss and exclusion, what is remarkable in the chapters of this book focusing on Turkish-German constellations is the turn towards German, accompanied by a—postmonolingual—twist. In fact, contrary to expectations, *Beyond the Mother Tongue* does not document multilingual moves *against* German. Rather, the writings discussed here all *embrace* German, but as something other than the public discourse would have it. The German that emerges here in postmonolingual perspective has been and continues to be a home for many—a home that is itself undergoing transformation, a home that is not exclusionary, that it is impure, marked, tainted, “enriched,” and charged. The use of German by those not deemed legitimate speakers, whether Kafka or Zaimoğlu, indicates that German is already a lingua franca—with all the de/formations that happen to such a language, as the different forms of “Englishes” in the world demonstrate. This view of German as a lingua franca rather than as a purely national language could be a curative to the proprietary, exclusionary claims made on the language today. Instead of coloring the tongues of minorities in national colors, it would mean bringing out the new colors the language takes on through its multitude of new speakers.

How else to understand what German is doing in the periphery of Mongolia today? This question is raised by the German-language writings of Galsan Tschinag, a member of the Tuvan mi-

nority in Mongolia who learned German in the socialist “brother republic” of the GDR. After his return home, he transformed the heretofore solely oral traditions of his Tuvan people into literature in German. Tschinag continues to live in Mongolia and write in German. His use of the language radically delinks it from ethnicity and territory and turns German into a “nomadic” language and *transnational* cultural archive to inscribe a minority history in another national context. But Tschinag is not alone.

Let me end with a brief glance at another easily overlooked route through the contemporary linguascape. In the 1999 Turkish film *Güneşe Yolculuk* (Journey to the Sun) by director Yeşim Ustaoglu, the German language makes an unexpected appearance. The film takes place in Turkey and combines a story about the repression of Kurds with a story about Turkish-Kurdish friendship and love. In the midst of this film, which moves from Istanbul to rural eastern Turkey and at first sight has nothing to do with Germany or Germans, a shy teenager, who does not speak any German, confesses his love to his girlfriend—in German. Through this shy, secretly learned *Ich liebe Dich*—or, as it is pronounced in the film “Ih libbe dih”—German becomes, for a short, moving moment, the language of a love in Anatolia. This German is not tied to nationality or ethnicity, but rather constitutes a moment in which the oppressive ethnic ascriptions that set the story into motion are held at bay in utopian fashion. This confession of love does not refer back to ethnicity but comes out of new linguascapes enabled by migration. The teenager addresses his girlfriend in German because she is one of the “re-migrants,” a return immigrant from Germany. Through this return migration, the German language has also migrated into new spaces, and just as, despite all animosity towards them, Turkish and Kurdish have found a new home in Europe, German has also become a “Turkish” and “Kurdish” language. Like the German-language writings discussed in this book, this deterritorialized German confession of love is also an expression of the postmonolingual condition.

