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Introduction: Imagining Communities, Multilingually

Jesse van Amelsvoort and Nicoletta Pireddu

Only a couple of years ago, one of our colleagues in linguistics was attempting to find monolingual speakers of Dutch. This proved nigh impossible: most potential research subjects confessed to having a sufficient command of English to hold everyday conversations, or spoke a specific regional language, or a diasporic language, or in another way appeared to move through various languages and linguistic registers in life. This case might be uniquely specific for the Netherlands – a small country with an international economy –, yet it appears true to us that the contemporary world is increasingly characterised by, and appreciative of, multilingualism. This emerging phenomenon reveals more than the pervasiveness of linguistic pluralism in patterns of communication both globally and locally. It also prompts us to explore the implications of multilingualism for how people in the West, if not worldwide, imagine the links between one another. How does the coexistence of different linguistic codes redefine speakers' collective allegiances? How do literary and aesthetic representations symbolise the multiple identification mechanisms enabled by linguistic diversity and what do they entail for our understanding of community formation outside the frame of nationhood, which historically has relied upon geopolitical and linguistic delimitation?

The development of the nation-state triggered an identity construction process based upon a biunivocal correspondence between territorial borders and a dominant language, as pivotal to the creation of a shared sense of belonging as to the exclusion of those who are not or should not be participant in this invention – what in Benedict Anderson's almost stereotypical words is an 'imagined community'. Indeed, in the almost forty years since the publication of *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson's 'reflections on the origins and spread of nationalism' have frequently been cited, appraised, and criticised. A seminal example of what Lorraine Daston and Sharon Marcus have recently called 'undead texts', Anderson's work continues to inspire and provoke scholars across the humanities and social sciences.[1] To say that a nation is an 'imagined community' has become something of an academic cliché: not a falsehood, but so general that it risks signifying nothing. Despite this unfortunate twist, Anderson's analyses and concepts remain relevant to understanding the formation of communities both historically and in the present. As an undead text, *Imagined Communities* persists but is also continuously discussed, nuanced, and taken into new directions. The contributors to this special issue engage with Anderson's work precisely from the perspective of language and multilingualism, thus teasing out a dimension of his work that is seldom

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commented upon, but which does rear its head in new and important ways in our contemporary historical moment.

The central claims of Anderson's analysis regarding the advent of what he has called 'print capitalism' in late medieval and early modern Europe are well-known.[2] The invention of the printing press enabled the spread of books throughout the continent, while the rise of the economic system of capitalism created among printers an awareness of the market and its saturation. In the beginning, presses took over work done by monks all throughout Europe's Christian centres of learning – Bibles, religious pamphlets, the occasional work of philosophy. Soon, however, this market was saturated. Europe's *lingua franca* was Latin, an antiquated language that was not widely spoken outside monastic walls since the Western Roman Empire's demise in 486. By 1300, it was spoken by only a small percentage of the population. Thus, the presses took to printing in vernacular languages.

This switch from Europe's central, cosmopolitan language towards its many vernaculars still determines much of our – meaning Europe and the rest of the 'Western' world's – contemporary linguistic and cultural landscape. The printers' move towards efficiency necessitated and sped up the drive towards unified grammatical and syntactical systems; it can indeed be argued that the general understanding of language as a bounded, separate entity is grounded in this development that started centuries ago.[3] As printers started to print books in vernacular languages and moved to create standardised rules, they also shaped a public consisting of people who would be able to read the language. Even though France was created before the French, as Eric Hobsbawm has so aptly put it – and the same can be claimed for e.g. the Italians, to give one other major European example –, from this point on Anderson discerns a clear line towards modern national consciousness.[4] Any nation must be imagined 'because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them' (6). The 'deep, horizontal comradeship' (7) that sustains a community must be constructed and sustained through imaginative media, be they newspapers, novels, or, later, radio and television.

Multilingualism and Community Formation

Much has been written about Anderson's ideas, but surprisingly little has been said of the assumed monolingual nature of Anderson's nation-state concept. This is all the more striking since his monolingualism announces itself early on in his argument. Of Latin in the time it was still Europe's *lingua franca*, Anderson writes for example: 'In the sixteenth century the proportion of bilinguals within the total population of Europe was quite small. […] Then and now the bulk of mankind is monoglot' (38). While passages like these have been commented upon, Anderson's monolingual bias is remarkable – both in its existence and in its explicitly stated nature.[5] Although many linguistic anthropologists have addressed the nation's standard language

ideology, it is rare to find a more sustained engagement with the 'imagined community' notion from the perspective of multilingualism.[6] By engagement, we do not mean merely critique, but also elaboration, expansion, and application in other spheres of inquiry. The overarching question that animates our special issue is whether an imagined community can also be multilingual, and, conversely, how the multilingual imagination of community works. Studies by, for example, Arjun Appadurai on the social function of the imagination may provide a starting point in this discussion, but cannot completely answer these questions because a work such as *Modernity at Large* is not attentive to matters of language and multilingualism.[7] Other scholars have also grappled with them, but without ever formulating a systematic critique of Anderson's monolingual bias connected to theories of community formation and the application of his central metaphor to other types of social arrangements.

Some literary scholars have engaged with Anderson from the perspective of multilingualism, textuality, and communities. Doris Sommer, for instance, contributes to the discussion with her conceptualisation of bilingual aesthetics and multilingual play that suspends a priori reading strategies without the 'other language' in a text being relegated beyond national borders.[8] Likewise, Jonathan Culler's essay 'Anderson and the Novel' as part of a volume on the impact of *Imagined Communities*, argues against reading novels for their 'representations of nationhood', instead encouraging claims that 'the novel was a condition of possibility for imagining something like a nation, for imagining a community that could be opposed to another, as friend to foe, and thus a condition of possibility of a community organized around a political distinction between friend and enemy'.[9] The novel contains a 'formal adumbration of the space of a community' (50), in the process working with the insider/outsider binary. Culler's essay critically evaluates different ways of thinking about communities, yet remains silent on issues of either mono- or multilingualism.

Rebecca Walkowitz, in *Born Translated*, has picked up on Culler's essay to move the goal posts of our understanding of Anderson's work. Walkowitz argues that, while Anderson acknowledged the role of translation in the formation of national communities, he was less aware of how his own prefaces to updated editions showed that 'translation puts pressure on the conceptual boundaries between one community and another'.[10] Tellingly, Walkowitz moves from translation as part of the constitution of national communities to an understanding of communities that is not necessarily anchored around the national. While the focus on translation is welcome, Walkowitz does not go so far as to address – or define – multilingualism and its role in the redefinition of the nation. As with Sommer and Culler, Walkowitz does not connect community formation, and the nation as one instance thereof, with multilingualism.

Wen-Chin Ouyang explicitly marks the beginning of our critique, when she writes that the nation is 'defined by the language of its national canon', which

is 'necessarily monolingual'.[11] Indeed, Ouyang's disciplinary field of world literature offers more clues on how to think through the relation between language and community formation. Here, and especially among those scholars who are concerned not merely with circulation but also with issues of language and translation, we find acknowledgements of the monolingual nature of Anderson's language concept,[12] as well as of the many multilingual localities that have in recent centuries been subsumed in territorial nation-states.[13]

Language and multilingualism thus remain at the heart of the formation and maintenance of larger collectivities, yet they also represent a conceptual and analytic problem. For the imagination of the nation to be expressed, one needs language, and language includes as well as it excludes. No nation imagines itself 'coterminous' with the world, in Anderson's formulation (7), yet today nations are increasingly spread out over the globe, with languages stretching far beyond the territorial boundaries nationalists attach importance to. If traditionally the nation could be conceptualised as a bounded whole, the current state of affairs is more aptly captured by what Victoria Bernal has termed 'nation as network'. Here, diasporas and extraterritorial groups are able to engage the politics and imaginations of the nation via the internet and digital media.[14] A nation's people can overflow its boundaries, without their sentimental attachment to its institutions waning.

Todd Kontje's recent book *Imperial Fictions* is another example of the growing acknowledgement that communities are not tied to the nation-state only.[15] His entry point is the fact that 'Germany' as a united nation only existed in the periods 1871–1945 and 1990 to the present day – although that nation casts its supposed historical roots millennia back. From this point of view, contemporary multiculturalism is not novel, but rather the latest metamorphosis in a longer historical trajectory of what we could perhaps call the 'more-than-national'. Communities were always imagined, but often not in the mould of the modern nation-state.

If Bernal and Kontje ask us to reconsider the imagination in light of communities far larger than a nation's territorial boundaries (either contemporary or historically), multilingualism also manifests itself in the opposite direction. A multilingual imagination is also attuned to smaller-scale heterogeneities within national borders, such as multilingual communities at the local level. Francesca Orsini's work on the 'multilingual local' goes far here in thinking about communities, presumed monolingualism, and actually existing multilingualism on this level.[16] Localities often escape the rigorous nationalisation of language norms and prescriptions that has taken place in Europe over the past few centuries.

Yasemin Yildiz's work on Europe's 'postmonolingual condition' suggests that, due to the increasing acknowledgement of its multilingualism, the monolingual present is slowly giving way.[17] She is, however, clear on the difficulties of moving beyond the stringent unity of people, place and politics as it has been

erected in Europe in the past few centuries: she explicitly refers to a condition that is '*post*monolingual', as opposed to effortlessly multilingual. History casts its shadows, putting in place the prefix 'post-', which serves as a reminder of the continuing pull of the past. Yildiz emphasises the differences between ideological or top-down notions of monolingualism on the one hand, and a kind of empirical, on the ground multilingualism that is being revaluated, on the other. Thinking along these same lines, David Gramling has underscored the tension between multilingual texts and monolingual reading publics.[18]

For us, then, 'imagined communities' is a metaphor that is not restricted to monolingual nation-states only; rather, it describes the process by which communities can be formed. As soon as a group cannot physically come together in its entirety, as is possible with friends, a family, or even a neighbourhood, we need the imagination to aid us. As Matthew Rofe has written, '[a]cknowledging community as a form of "collective imagining" […] enhances the ability to conceptualise the existence of communities beyond the constraints of territory'.[19] Anderson himself already suggested as much, in a little-noticed aside: 'In fact, all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (*and perhaps even these*) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined' (Anderson 6, emphasis added). If we can ever entirely rid ourselves of 'constraints of territory', in this special issue we intend to enrich the debates we have surveyed by thinking more deeply about the languages that carry these imaginations – and, in turn, which communities these languages imagine, and how.

The essays in our issue engage with a wide range of geographies and localities, art works, and historical periods, tracing continuously how these works, in their attention to language(s), imagine issues of belonging, identity, and living together. The various contributors pursue both a critique and an elaboration of Anderson's work from the perspective of literary, artistic, and societal multilingualism. Focusing on non-conventional corpora, each of them interrogates the representation of communities by paying attention to multilingualism, matters of migration and integration, and peripheral identities. The essays look at novels, travelogues, poetry, video art, and oral history from all around the world, and centrally investigate the legacies of enforced monolingualism and language standardisation in different continents and epochs. In the process, they show the importance of bringing marginalised voices into mainstream discussions on identity and belonging to undermine the nation-state's ideological apparatus in the twinned issues of the multilingual imagination of community and the imagination of multilingual community.

Communities, Territories, Languages

Three concepts that resurface throughout our special issue are community, territory, and language – whether mono- or multilingualism. Each contributor

conceptualises them and their implications differently, thus carrying Benedict Anderson's central metaphor into a pluralistic present that defies old (and new) nationalist discourses. Be it a specific Amsterdam borough's linguistic innovations at the hands of a widely transnational population, the increasing transnationality of U.S. campus fiction, multilingual historical archives, or a polyglot urban landscape, the essays pick up underappreciated comments by Anderson himself and resituate them in connection with migration, globalisation, and digitisation – moving from a narrowly defined and bounded understanding to openness and multiplicity. Far from reifying the Andersonian imagined community, the eight contributions intend to problematise and offer fresh perspectives on this notion.

In the first essay, "Postcolonial Literatures and Translational Readings," Simona Bertacco asks why singular or national languages or cultures should matter to literary studies in the global age where it is becoming increasingly difficult to locate cultural artifacts in one single geography. Focusing on postcolonial literatures as corpora of diasporic texts that speak of exilic and translated lives through the explicit use of multiple languages, Bertacco proposes a model of decolonial reading that explores the potential that multilingual literary texts have to change the configuration of readerships and redefine what counts as literary language.

Reflecting on the attitude translingual literature demands of its readers and using the Anglophone Caribbean poets Edward Baugh and Velma Pollard as her guide, Bertacco follows, for example, Doris Sommer in arguing that readers should listen to texts to understand how they should be read. Imagining communities multilingually requires openness in reading, and an approach to unknown or untranslatable words not as an impediment, but as a daily reminder of the ambiguities and paradoxes of global language politics.

The productive challenges of the linguistic and cultural unknown provide a framework for Helena Bodin's exploration of texts created or published between 1906 and 1915 on Constantinople by Virginia Woolf, Vita Sackville-West, Joseph Conrad, Wyndham Lewis, and Vasily Kamensky, which engage with the multifarious expressions and stimuli of the imperial capital. In her "Modernist Writers and the Multilingual Print Culture of Constantinople," the heterogeneity of narrative and cognitive strategies with which they convey their experiences connotes Constantinople as a contested object of desire of several national and supranational forces between East and West that defies the single, monolingual community, be it imagined or real. The multilingual and multiscriptal print culture of Constantinople, as well as the modernist writers' literary and artistic imagination and their various translation and transcription practices, delineate what Bodin defines as heterolingualism, namely, linguistic – or literary – situations where communication in one language directed to *other* languages and produced in *other* scripts forms the expected precondition.

Nisha Ghatak, in “Spelling Desire in the Coloniser’s Tongue: Locating Multilingual Female Writers in Twentieth-century India,” draws attention to another unique socio-linguistic and identitarian reality that questions the nation as a homogenous socio-communal construct – namely, postcolonial India, informed by what she defines as the paradox of ‘singular pluralities’. A democratic country built on multi-ethnicity, multiculturalism, multilingualism, secularism, and on a tainted history of colonial rule, contemporary India problematises its identity as a ‘nation’ also through the pluralistic canonisation of its ‘national’ literatures deriving from vernaculars. Within India’s cultural and linguistic heterogeneity, Ghatak analyses three confessional narratives by Kamala Das, Maitreyi Devi, and Amrita Pritam, to emphasise how gendered social privileges further complicate the multilingualism of twentieth-century female writers. Located in different geographical spaces within the same country, these authors reimagine the concept of ‘community’ as plural and multilingual, and coalesce as forces of literary resistance against the impact of colonisation on Indian female lives.

Catherine Barbour’s essay “Translingual Empowerment: Exophonic Women Writing in Catalan and Spanish” expands the discussion on language, community, and gender in female-authored narratives as sites of women’s empowerment by examining the works of Najat El Hachmi, a Catalan writer of Moroccan origin, and Romanian-Spanish writer Ioana Gruia. Barbour examines their overt and contrasting representations of the fluid process of translanguaging, that is, moving between and across languages, showing how the writers’ adopted languages compete with each other from within a multilingual and multicultural Iberian Peninsula. Focusing on representations of female resistance, mobility, and sexuality in the novels, she investigates the extent to which linguistic flexibility can act as a catalyst for female agency and self-realisation and how translingualism can facilitate new cultural imaginings and opportunities. Notwithstanding the limits and pitfalls of linguistic assimilation and the potentially traumatic process of detachment from the mother tongue, Barbour concludes that the ambivalent location and allegiance to multiple competing identities in translingual writers and texts undermine essentialist parameters of languages, literatures, and nations.

Our exploration of linguistic, cultural, and demographic diversity in the contemporary world literary panorama continues with Almas Khan’s study of the campus novel as a genre that, by becoming more global in recent years, also incorporates diasporic, multilingual experiences and hence transnationalises narratives. Debating multilingualism’s role in forging alternative communities to nation-states that have historically enforced monolingualism and racial hierarchies, in her essay “Multilingualism and Racial (Re-)formation in the Contemporary U.S. Campus Novel,” Khan interrogates contemporary U.S. higher education as a driver for more equitable communities. She analyses the intersections between multilingualism and the politics of racial (re)formation in contemporary American campus novels by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Jeannine Capó Crucet, and Amitava Kumar, depicting African,

Latinx, and Asian experiences, and shows how inclusion of stories about heterogeneous students in US campus novels does not automatically endorse the optimistic rhetoric of campus diversity plans. Amidst a recent surge of anti-intellectualism and racism in the U.S., Kumar, Crucet and Adichie's novels invite readers to conceive of multilingualism as an integrationist ethical practice for global justice.

The last three articles in our special issue transcend the literary domain by engaging with representation, languages, and community formation in other discursive and aesthetic productions, from oral history to visual, performing, and multimedia arts. In "Ngomeni, Fort Jesus: A Digo Home, not a Portuguese Fortress," Jauquelyne Kosgei investigates the role that previously hidden, ignored, or suppressed oral knowledge plays in expanding the existing (and mainly colonial) archive on African history. Focusing on Fort Jesus in Mombasa, Kenya, she takes issue with the narrative that has been *officially* perpetuated about this iconic national institution, namely, its construction by the Portuguese and the vital role it played as a symbol of power and control over the Swahili coast at large for foreign powers (Portuguese, Omani Arabs, British) who fought over the fort for centuries. Against this backdrop, Kosgei's research foregrounds the neglected role of the local Digo ethnic group in this history, as both protagonist and storytellers of an alternative, oral narrative. Kidigo, the language in which this account has been preserved and disseminated for centuries, and Kiswahili, the dominant language on the Kenyan coast and the language of performance of this oral history, not only destabilises the privileged position English has occupied in narrating this region, but also offers multiple perspectives of the world, be they complementary or competing.

Challenges and oppositions to national narratives of identity and community through the usage of local, non-standard language varieties is also central to Aafje de Roest's study of Smib, a trendy Amsterdam hip-hop art collective that uses this self-named and self-claimed local youth language in their art performances to express feelings of resistance. In "Speaking Smibanese: Hip-Hop, Local Youth Language Variety, and Representations of the Amsterdam Bijlmer," De Roest analyses how Smibanese, drawing from multiple language reservoirs, shapes hip-hop artists' representation of themselves, their home environment, and their local community. By making their messages understandable for some (the ingroup) and incomprehensible for others (the outgroup), artists are both including and excluding people, thereby creating and appealing to imagined communities that both literally and figuratively speak the same language. De Roest hence suggests that Smibanese might be able to grow from a marginalised local youth language into a popular resistance vernacular within Dutch society. No longer a means of communication between local youth and residents, local codes can turn into powerful practices to articulate questions on identity and community and to express views on local issues in a wider, national, or even global perspective to a broad audience.

Languages, diversity, and civic participation are also the overarching issues of our last essay, "A Multitude of Soliloquies: On Democracy, Language, and Power in Bouchra Khalili's *Speeches*." Susette Min focuses on the multilingual and multidisciplinary art practice of Moroccan-born French artist Bouchra Khalili as a model to dismantle hegemonic orders and to involve marginalised people in the articulation of subjunctive ways of belonging and living with difference. In her *Speech Series*, Khalili conveys the urgent imperative for multiple dialects, cognitive styles, ways of speaking, and multilingualism to ensure comprehension of the policies and laws to which immigrants are subject to, and also the opportunity to reinterpret the constitutional and democratic principles that underpin them. Yet, Min's reading of Khalili also interrogates the nation-state's and global capitalism's sustained need for particular infrastructures, including the mandate for cosmopolitan monolingualism as an effective injunction to prevent certain populations from engaging in democracy. An ideal democracy entails people actively and constantly interrogating, debating, and revising its system of government. However, Min observes, the chasm between this democratic procedural ideal and its current form is widening, as the disenfranchised have little or no recourse to be part of the demos.

As a whole, this special issue invites us to reimagine collective identity and belonging and highlights the centrality of narratives in challenging monolithic thought locally and globally, when community does not necessarily live in one, circumscribed place anymore, when a territory is not defined by linguistic, cultural, and ethnic homogeneity, or political sovereignty, and when an activistic focus on standardised, national languages gives way to a multilingualism both as serial monolingualism (various languages understood as bounded existing together) and as an appreciation of internal variety.

Notes

[1] Daston and Marcus, 'Undead Texts'.
[2] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 18. Further references are given parenthetically in the text.
[3] For a critique of understanding languages as bounded, and the influence on theories of multilingualism, see Young, 'That Which Is Casually Called a Language'.
[4] See Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, 60.
[5] Segal and Handler, 'How European Is Nationalism?', 7-8; Wogan, '*Imagined Communities* Reconsidered', 406.
[6] See, for example, Woolard and Schieffelin, 'Language Ideology'; Gal, 'Contradictions of Standard Language'; Gal, 'Migration, Minorities and Multilingualism'.
[7] Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*.
[8] Sommer, *Proceed with Caution*; Sommer, *Bilingual Aesthetics*.
[9] Culler, 'Anderson and the Novel', 49. Further references are given parenthetically in the text.
[10] Walkowitz, *Born Translated,* 39.
[11] Ouyang, 'Orientalism and World Literature', 132.
[12] Claesson, Helgesson, and Mahmutović, 'Publication, Circulation and the Vernacular', 304.
[13] Orsini, 'The Multilingual Local in World Literature'; Prokopovych, Bethke, and Scheer, *Language Diversity*.
[14] Bernal, *Nation as Network*.
[15] Kontje, *Imperial Fictions*.
[16] Orsini, 'The Multilingual Local in World Literature'.
[17] Yildiz, *Beyond the Mother Tongue*.
[18] Gramling, *The Invention of Monolingualism*. See also Tidigs and Huss, 'The Noise of Multilingualism'.
[19] Rofe, '"I Want to Be Global,"' 2518.

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