

## EDITORIAL

### **Languages of the Land: Indigenous Knowledges, Linguistic and Epistemic Justice, and Multilingual Futures**

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#### **Article Info**

Received: May 7, 2025

Published: June 21, 2025

## **INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE: RETHINKING LANGUAGE AS RELATIONAL AND PLACE-BASED KNOWLEDGE**

Multilingualism is inherently intersectional, multimodal, and transdisciplinary. Multilingualism encompasses both local and global dimensions and is connected to community identities, self-expression, embodiment, and linguistic and biocultural diversity (Chiblow & Meighan, 2021; Lin & Vaz Bauler, 2023). Multilingualism is also entangled with the ideologies of monolingualism and English dominance in the neoliberal era, consequently necessitating a decolonizing and social justice-oriented approach (Macedo, 2019; Phipps, 2019).

Amid ecological and humanitarian crises, ongoing genocide, cultural and linguistic erasure, and the continued dominance of coloniallingualism in language education, language is more than a mere tool of communication—it is a living embodiment of relationships to land, to self, to ancestors, and to knowledge and belief systems. Coloniallingualism is defined as the privileging of dominant colonial languages, knowledge, and neoliberal valorizations of diversity. Coloniallingual ideologies influence how we use language, the categorizations we use, what we value, and how we relate to each other, our environment, and the more than human (Meighan, 2022).

Natural and social sciences have demonstrated that multilingualism, Indigenous knowledges, climate action, and sustainability are intertwined (Orlove et al., 2023). However,

the relational connections of language, body, place, and accountability to more than human relations are still not a priority in many English and world language classrooms (Engman & Hermes, 2021). This special issue of the *Journal of Education for Multilingualism (JEM)*, titled “The Intersectionality of Multilingualism, Indigenous Knowledges, and Sustainability”, emerges as a timely response seeking to relink these relational connections (Mignolo, 2017) and respond to urgent global calls for decolonization (Battiste, 2013); linguistic and epistemic justice (Kerfoot & Bello-Nonjengele, 2023); linguistic human rights (Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 2023); and environmental sustainability (see also Convention on Biological Diversity, 2022; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015; United Nations Sustainable Development Goals).

To this end, and during the current United Nations Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022-2032), this issue invites readers to engage with multilingualism not simply as a pedagogical or policy issue, but as a relational, ecological, and epistemic stance. The issue is dedicated to not only promoting multilingualism and linguistic diversity but also to promoting biocultural diversity and intersections with environmental sustainability and Indigenous knowledge systems across the globe. Environmental sustainability involves diverse ways of knowing, being, and interacting with the human and more-than-human (Bastardas-Boada, 2014).

In this light, multilingualism, particularly Indigenous and minoritized languages, is vital for fostering innovative ideas and including time-tested ecological know-how and sustainable practices (Ferguson & Weaselboy, 2020; McGregor, 2018). Sustainable multilingualism must also address the epistemic and linguistic injustices faced by minoritized and Indigenous communities and their languages and cultures (Canagarajah, 2022; Chiblow & Meighan, 2023; Dovchin, 2019; Leonard, 2017). Including Indigenous cultures, languages, and knowledge in discourses relating to multilingualism is therefore a vital reminder of our commitment to decolonization and social justice and must be integral to language education curricula and institutional and global strategic plans aiming to sustain equitable multilingualism and environmental sustainability.

Tackling the intersection and multiple dimensions of multilingualism, sustainability, and Indigenous knowledge systems requires a mindset shift in mainstream (language) education and policy. This involves a call for what Meighan terms a “transepistemic” approach: “an epistemic (un)learning of the Western ‘epistemological error’”, as well as coordinated efforts to reexamine current values, worldviews, what is visible and invisible, and our relationship

with the environment, to “enable equitable validation of all languages and knowledge systems, including those Indigenous and minoritized” (Meighan, 2023). This transepistemic lens seeks to (un)learn inequitable epistemic, linguistic, and racial hierarchies and enable the co-existence and validation of Indigenous and minoritized ways of knowing.

In line with a commitment to conceptualizing and embodying equitable multilingualism, this special issue explores the intersectionality of multilingualism, Indigenous knowledges, and sustainability in a culturally responsive, creative, and critical manner. The special issue links bi/multilingual education with environmental issues and UN Sustainable Development Goals to engage with efforts to support the maintenance, reclamation, and revitalization of Indigenous and minoritized communities, languages, and cultures in multilingual settings. In doing so, contributors to this special issue resist the reductive framing of multilingualism as solely a technical, decontextualized skill or hobby for elites (Ortega, 2019) and instead insist on its capacity to nourish biocultural diversity, heal colonial wounds, and foster equitable and sustainable futures.

## VISION AND ETHOS OF THE SPECIAL ISSUE

The contributions to this issue span geographies worldwide from the Maldives to New Mexico, from Mexico to Denmark, and from the Ryukyu Islands to Scotland. They are linked not by uniformity of method, but by a shared commitment to relationality, community, resistance, hope, and imagination. The articles, both empirical and conceptual, explore and demonstrate how language is a vessel of ecological memory, a tool for reimagining education, and a terrain of struggle against colonialism and imperialism. Together, they compose a compelling mosaic of scholarship, activism, and story.

## OVERVIEW OF CONTRIBUTIONS

*Back to the Future: Language Reclamation with Land and Ocean* by Madoka Hammine is a study of Indigenous (Ryukyuan) language reclamation among adult L2 learners in Japan. Through the Master-Apprentice language learning model, Hammine illustrates how learners reconnect with ancestral memory, land, and ocean, challenging Western linear notions of time and age. Language learning here becomes a cyclical act of healing, a return to youthfulness through cultural belonging, and an embodiment of ecological relationality.

*Language Gardens: Returning to the Poetics Found in the Linguistic Diversity of the Land* by Alison Phipps, Tawona Sitholé, and Hyab Teklehaimanot Yohannes draws on

permaculture, poetics, and Indigenous epistemologies to frame languages as part of the ecological tapestry. The authors, three displaced Indigenous scholars grounded in Blin, Shona, Nda, Gaelic, and English, cultivate a metaphor of language gardening—a practice that resists extractive logics and reimagines multilingualism as nourishment, abundance, and relational care in both education and community contexts.

*Learning from Mexican Indigenous Women's Life Stories: Multilingualism and Sustainability* by Yesenia Bautista Ortiz, Mario E. López-Gopar, and Ana Edith López Cruz centers two Indigenous Zapotec and Mixtec women in Oaxaca whose lives and linguistic practices illuminate the intersections of gender, sustainability, and Indigenous epistemologies. Through critical ethnography, the authors demonstrate how oral storytelling and language preservation are deeply tied to environmental knowledge and resistance against colonial erasure.

*Sustaining Indigenous Language and Knowledge in Island Communities of the Maldives: Challenges and Facilitators* by Naashia Mohamed, Mizna Mohamed, and Mohamed Inaz offers an ethnographic exploration into how climate change and language shift threaten the linguistic and ecological heritage of Indigenous Maldivian island communities. Through their land-language-knowledge nexus, the authors advocate for educational models that embrace relational values and Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) as central to environmental sustainability.

*Resisting Linguistic Imperialism: A Conversation with Robert Phillipson on Linguistic Human Rights, Multilingualism, and Indigenous and Minority Languages* by Robert Phillipson and Paul Meighan provides a theoretical anchor for the issue. Phillipson reflects on linguistic imperialism, linguistic human rights, and the systemic inequities embedded in global language policy. The conversation bridges decades of activism and scholarship with the ongoing need for multilingual education systems rooted in linguistic and epistemic justice, particularly for Indigenous and minoritized language communities.

Across these works, several shared themes emerge:

1. **Language as ecological knowledge:** Whether through land-based learning in the Maldives, storytelling in Mexico, or gardening metaphors in Scotland, these authors illuminate how language encodes, sustains, and transmits ecological knowledge.


2. **Reclamation and resistance:** Each contribution highlights acts of reclamation—of language, identity, land, and time. These are not nostalgic returns, but forward-facing refusals of colonial logics.
3. **Multilingualism as relational practice:** Rather than being treated as discrete competencies measured against colonial frameworks and assessments, languages are viewed here as networks of relations between people, places, histories, and futures.
4. **Transepistemic transformation:** The issue embodies Meighan’s call to move beyond Eurocentric paradigms and coloniallingual ideologies. It invites educators and researchers to value multiple ways of knowing, being, and languaging as necessary to just futures.


## CONCLUSION: A CALL TO ACTION

This special issue is not only a scholarly intervention but also an invitation to educators, activists, policymakers, and students. The contributions urge us to reconsider how we teach, value, and live with languages. As linguistic and biocultural diversity decline hand in hand, the stakes could not be higher.

We must speak and listen with the land. We must listen to ancestral stories, not as relics of the past but as roadmaps, guides, and ecological encyclopedias (Chiblow & Meighan, 2021, 2023). We must cultivate multilingual and sustainable futures rooted in the knowledge of Indigenous communities who best know the lands and waters on which we reside, linguistic human rights, and linguistic and epistemic justice. As editors, we are deeply grateful to each of our contributors. Their work enacts what this issue envisions: a decolonial, multilingual world in which language is not merely spoken, but lived, tended, and revered.

## THE AUTHORS

**Paul Meighan**  is a Gael sociolinguist, Indigenous to the Scottish Highlands and Islands. His work and research focus on addressing coloniallingualism in TESOL through transepistemic education and pedagogies for multilingualism, multiliteracies, and language reclamation. He is author of the forthcoming *Coloniallingualism: An Introduction to Language, Power, and Colonialism* (Routledge) and co-editor of the forthcoming volumes *Countering Coloniallingualism in Language Education: Research Practices and Pedagogies from the Global South* (Routledge) and the *Routledge Handbook of Racial and Epistemic Inequity in Applied Linguistics*.

**Ching-Ching Lin**  is a proud native of Taiwan, and a faculty member in the TESOL and Bilingual Education program at Adelphi University. She is the co-editor and a contributing author of the following two volumes: *Internationalization in Action: Leveraging Diversity and Inclusion in the Globalized Classroom* (Peter Lang Publishing, 2020) and *Reimagining Dialogue on Identity, Language, and Power* (Multilingual Matters, 2023).

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