Editorial

This issue of Multilingual Margins presents two papers originally written more than 20 years ago and published as reports for the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA). In the mid-nineties, this organization held a healthy brief to improve education in so-called developing countries, especially focusing on early childhood education and adult literacies, and education for democracy and health. The Agency commissioned work on factors determining the successful or unsuccessful implementation of mother tongue/bilingual programs, and the two texts published in this special issue were written with a broad readership of educational aid workers, local politicians and policy makers in mind. Why republish this work (that was written for a relatively non-specialist audience) at this time for a predominantly academic readership?

There is one justification in particular for offering these two papers for re-consideration and that is the renewed urgency with which multilingualism is being debated across the South, and in South Africa in particular. For long a mainstay of faculties of education and teacher training colleges, multilingual education has in the last few years taken center stage in the academy at large, spurred by nation-wide student protests demanding new epistemologies, decolonial curricula and transformed educational institutions. These movements have emphasized the importance of multilingualism, and the use of indigenous languages in particular, as loadstones in the building of a decolonial academy. The arguments put forward resonate with those promoted by proponents of mother tongue education, who, for more that a century, have advocated tirelessly for a greater role for indigenous languages across society at large, and in education in particular.

What the reports reproduced here show is that we need to pay more attention to the complexities, pluralities, contradictions and unimagined possibilities in the notion of multilingualism. We must not lose sight of the fact that multilingualism understood in its conventional, uncritical and everyday sense as 'more than one language' is to a large extent an articulation of, what we can call today, the *coloniality* of language. The term coloniality refers to the knowledge systems and institutions that undergirded and protected coloniality-modernity, a global system for sorting people into categories (ethnicity, race, social class) needed in the advance of modernity. Coloniality of language' is the manifestation of colonial power through technologies and arrangements of language, "a process of dehumanization through racialization at the level of communication" (Veronelli, 2016: 408). Multilingualism comprised a key technology in how languages and speakers were separated, hierarchized and oftentimes invisibilized. It is thus a somewhat dangerous notion when handled carelessly. Demanding more multilingualism in the abstract is like demanding 'more money' in the abstract; disconnected from its situated history and anticipated futures, it makes little sense, and in fact, risks falling into the wrong pockets and reproducing the status quo. The reports republished here show on a number of levels how a new participatory politics of language built on

an active engagement with, and respect for, the voices of the most vulnerable and marginalized, offers a more empowering and workable understanding of multilingualism and, for that matter, of language generally. There is much to learn from the long history of research and debate on multilingualism. What we haven't yet fully appreciated is the extent to which we need to radically rethink the grounding of multilingualism in some system of ethical thought distinct from neoliberal epistemologies of contemporary coloniality-modernity.

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REFERENCES

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