



# International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism

ISSN: 1367-0050 (Print) 1747-7522 (Online) Journal homepage: [www.tandfonline.com/journals/rbeb20](http://www.tandfonline.com/journals/rbeb20)

## Critical polyglot studies: a critical sociolinguistic approach to polyglossia in the 21st century

1st ed., by C. Yebra López and U. Chohan, New York, Routledge, 2025, 232 pages, eBook £35.99, Hardback £145.00, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781032697772>

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**To cite this article:** Santiago Betancor-Falcon (20 Jul 2025): Critical polyglot studies: a critical sociolinguistic approach to polyglossia in the 21st century, International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism, DOI: [10.1080/13670050.2025.2530202](https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2025.2530202)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2025.2530202>



Published online: 20 Jul 2025.



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## BOOK REVIEW

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Carlos Yebra López and Usman W. Chohan's book *Critical Polyglot Studies* (2024) establishes a new subfield within Sociolinguistics by presenting the first academic and systematic critical analysis of polyglossia in the 21st century. The book's objective is twofold. Firstly, the authors draw on Critical Theory to critique dominant discourses on polyglossia and 'polyglots', challenging mainstream language ideologies and myths as well as elucidating potential paths for emancipation, resistance, and political activism. Secondly, the book meticulously traces the genealogy of three interconnected phenomena: the popularization of polyglossia as the 'serial accumulation of languages', the emergence and evolution of the *Polyglot Community*, and its progressive industrialization. In doing so, it provides a critical analysis of how these language-learning communities and businesses both draw upon and perpetuate the problematic ideological framework that the book seeks to critique.

This investigation is divided into two main parts. In the first section, titled *The Polyglot Community: A Cartography*, the authors conduct a review of the relevant critical literature on language, postulating polyglossia and 'polyglots' as the latest manifestation of long-standing colonial and ethnonationalist language ideologies—such as Lingualism (Gramling 2016) and Standard Language Ideology (Lippi-Green 1994)—; a conceptualization of named languages as independent entities that, in their normative and standardized form, are instrumentalized to buttress ideologies such as nationalism, colonialism, whiteness, androcentrism, and middle-classness. Moreover, neoliberalism has recently built upon these prejudices, commoditizing named languages, reproducing problematic language ideologies, and exploiting them for commercial gain and social one-upmanship.

Against the backdrop of this critical framework, the authors then critically explore the history and evolution of the *Polyglot Community*—a hybrid space for language enthusiasts wanting to meet like-minded people—and its progressive industrialization—a landscape comprising social networks, language learning apps, 'polyglot' gatherings, and printed media—which, authors argue, has tarnished the utopian potential this online community had in its beginnings as a space for freedom, authenticity and connectivity among language enthusiasts.

Enshrouding the *Polyglot Community* and industry there is what the authors term the *Polyglot Matrix*: an 'ideological framework consisting of a network of mutually reinforcing fallacies that are deeply ingrained in the imaginary of "polyglots," and are shaped by, and in turn also perpetuate, the material functioning of the Polyglot Industry' (2024, 105). The authors then provide readers with the *red pill* to this *Polyglot Matrix*, in a chapter entirely dedicated to deconstructing and refuting the main pillars of this ideological edifice: (1) the idea that (non)natives exist and natives are superior [(non)nativespeakerism], (2) the idea that only some speakers have an accent [accentism], (3) the supposed foreignness of language, (4) the belief that people think and dream in languages, (5) languages as countable and collectible entities, (6) code-switching, (7) the idea that each language contains its own cognitive universe and learning them changes your perception of reality [neo-Whorfianism], (8) the one-to-one correspondence between languages and national flags [flaggism], (9) multilingualism as the exception to monolingualism, and (10) the idea that being multilingual necessarily equals being a tolerant person.

In the second section of the book, titled *Critical Polyglot Studies: A Roadmap*, Yebra López and Chohan elaborate on the theory and best practices of Critical Polyglot Studies, which they define as ‘a critical sociolinguistics subfield motivated by a skeptical and evaluative approach to the mainstream, positivist treatment of polyglossia understood as serial language learning’ (2024, 151). The authors argue that ‘polyglossia’ and ‘polyglots’ are not brute facts, but ontologically unstable concepts that are discursively constructed.

Thus, the authors base their ontology on critical realism—i.e. polyglossia and ‘polyglots’ do exist, but we cannot have objective knowledge about them—, while adopting an *immanent critique* approach (Fitzgerald 2016), by which the authors do not aim to establish the truth about these concepts, but rather to indicate the contradictions present in people’s representations of polyglossia and ‘polyglots’, as well as to expose and dismantle oppressive systems that exist in the material world.

The ultimate objective of breaking out of this ideological matrix is emancipation, the painful process of freeing oneself and others from the power-knowledge alienation that conditions our understanding and practice of languages and polyglossia. Consequently, the authors discuss a series of remedial, subversive, disruptive, paradigm-shifting, abolitionist, and revolutionizing best practices (one per sector of the Polyglot Industry) that can be used to challenge the *Polyglot Matrix* and industry. In so doing, the authors believe there is the possibility of recuperating the utopian potential of the *Polyglot Community* by embracing an enlightened, decolonial, economically anarchist, and emancipating theoretical framework and practice of polyglossia and online learning communities.

Finally, they explore institutional case studies, namely Yebra López’s company *The Hyperpolyglot Activist*, which aims to fill a gap in the scholarly literature, combining polyglossia, Linguistics and activism; as well as Chohan’s initiative to create *The International Association of Hyperpolyglots (HYPIA)*, ‘a community of [around 500] “hyperpolyglots” founded on anarchist principles, that works towards outreach, engagement, research, recruitment, and awareness’ (2024, 186).

All things considered, *Critical Polyglot Studies* serves as an accessible and comprehensive introduction to the academic study of polyglossia and ‘polyglots’ from a critical perspective. Moreover, when compared to the existing literature, this thorough examination of the ideological foundations of polyglottery, alongside its detailed mapping of both the *Polyglot Community* and industry, stands out for its novelty, relevance, and focus on current trends in language education. It provides a refreshing contribution to academic fields such as language learning and teaching, where informal language learning has remained significantly understudied, particularly from a critical perspective.

I would especially recommend this book to two specific readerships. Firstly, to sociolinguists and critical scholars who, while well-versed in the sociopolitics of language, may not be well acquainted with ‘polyglots’, their culture(s), the online spaces they inhabit, and the market forces aspiring to capitalize on them. This type of academic reader is likely to not only expand their knowledge on the problematic aspects of ‘polyglossia’ and recent developments in these informal learning communities but also discover fertile ground for future original and critical inquiry, which is much needed in this still largely uncharted subfield.

Secondly, I would also recommend this book to individuals—both within and without academia—who share both a passion for language education and a commitment to social justice. This includes language enthusiasts and professionals, ranging from beginner language learners and ‘polyglots’ to educators, researchers, and policymakers. In other words, it is a vital resource for those who devote their lives to the spoken and written word but often lack the critical awareness necessary to transform their love for language into a disruptive and revolutionary practice.


As a critical scholar in the field of language education and a ‘polyglot’, I am continually struck by the persistent depoliticization and acritical attitudes that characterize much of the research on language(s) as well as online language learning communities. Given this context, works like this stand out for their originality and substantial contribution to radicalizing language education. Moreover, while some chapters might be theoretically dense, others are reasonably accessible to aspiring language activists.

For instance, the chapter that deconstructs language myths and ideologies sheds light on fundamental sociopolitical aspects of language—facts that, unfortunately, remain unfamiliar to many language educators and researchers—; a short chapter capable of inoculating the reader against problematic language ideologies and laying a solid foundation for the fostering of critical awareness and informed practice of language activism.

As such, I would regard this chapter, for instance, as an essential component of any training curriculum for language educators, as well as for university-level philologists, linguists, and students in other language-related disciplines. Those of us who use language(s) daily and have made—or aim to make—language the cornerstone of our lifestyle, profession, and research cannot afford to disregard the inherently political nature of our craft. On the contrary, we must strive to understand language as deeply contingent on its sociopolitical context, so armed with this understanding, we may gain the potential to serve as catalysts for positive change and social justice.

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2025.2530202>

