



<https://doi.org/10.22363/2687-0088-50150>

EDN: DANTXE

**Review of Matras, Yaron. 2024. *Speech and the City: Multilingualism, Decoloniality and the Civic University*.
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press**

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Urban multilingualism is no longer a marginal topic within sociolinguistics. It now occupies a central place in discussions of migration, citizenship, public space, institutional access, language policy, and the changing role of universities in society. In this respect, Yaron Matras' *Speech and the City: Multilingualism, Decoloniality and the Civic University* continues a line of inquiry that has treated the city not simply as a background for linguistic diversity, but as a sociolinguistic formation in its own right. Recent urban sociolinguistics increasingly conceptualizes cities as dynamic spaces shaped by migration, mobility, linguistic visibility, institutional regulation, and everyday practices (Smakman & Heinrich 2018, Zoumpalidis & Bergelson 2024). Matras' book aligns with this research trajectory, yet distinguishes itself by adopting a more explicitly civic and institutional focus. Its central concern is not only how multilingualism is lived in the city, but how it can be publicly narrated, institutionally supported, celebrated, appropriated, and, at times, resisted.

The book is based on the author's extensive research in Manchester, especially through the *Multilingual Manchester* project, but it is not simply a case study of one British city. Rather, it reflects on the responsibilities and contradictions of academic engagement. The title captures the breadth of the argument: 'speech' refers not only to language practices, but also to *voice, visibility, recognition, and participation* in civic life. Matras conceptualizes the city as more than a mere geographical setting, in other words, it is a site where competing understandings of belonging are produced, national discourses that treat multilingualism as a problem confront urban narratives that frame linguistic diversity as a shared *civic resource*. The book consists of eight chapters, which guide the reader from "Linguaphobia"



and “The City as Multilingual Utopia” to questions of knowledge, access, heritage, public celebration, advocacy, and the limitations of the civic university.

The opening chapter, “Linguaphobia”, sets the political and ideological frame for the whole book. Matras examines British debates surrounding Brexit and ‘English first’ rhetoric and the ways in which languages other than English become charged with suspicion in public discourse. The chapter emphasizes that the issue is not solely communicative. The presence of other languages is represented as a challenge to national cohesion, and, at times, security, even when the actual evidence does not support claims about widespread inability to communicate in English. In this sense, “linguaphobia” is not a fear of communicative breakdown, but a fear of pluralism becoming visible in public space. This argument gives the book its polemical angle: multilingualism is treated not as a form of diversity, but as the terrain on which citizenship, belonging, and power are negotiated.

Chapter 2, “The City as Multilingual Utopia”, develops the counterpoint to this national monolingual narrative. Here Manchester is discussed as a city in which a different understanding of multilingualism becomes visible. Matras draws on the notion of multilingual utopia not as an abstract ideal of harmonious diversity, but as a practical orientation toward urban life. The chapter starts from the public emergence of Manchester as a ‘city of languages’ and then complicates the very act of counting languages, numbers such as 100 and 200 languages can be politically powerful, but they also simplify multilingual repertoires, partial competences, and overlapping varieties. The city is not described as a set of neatly bounded language communities, but as a space of encounters, shifting repertoires, diaspora identities, institutional provisions, and complex everyday forms of linguistic contact. The book engages with broader debates on globalization, superdiversity, and metrolingualism (see Blommaert 2010, Vertovec 2007, Pennycook & Otsuji 2015, Zoumpalidis & Şimşek 2025), but Matras’ emphasis is slightly distinct. He is less interested in multilingualism as a descriptive label and focuses his attention on civic action that can emerge when multilingualism is publicly recognized.

Chapters 3 and 4 move from conceptual to institutional aspects. In “(Re)claiming Knowledge” (Chapter 3) Matras reflects on decoloniality, participatory research, linguistic citizenship, and the role of universities in producing knowledge with communities. Matras’ discussion is grounded in his own experience of working with Romani organizations and later with multilingual communities in Manchester. This biographical element is important here, as it raises a question regarding the relationship academic research establishes with the people whose languages, practices, and histories it studies. The chapter’s value lies in its refusal to reduce decoloniality to mere curriculum expansion; instead, it frames decoloniality as a fundamental question of authority, i.e. who defines the object of research, who is entitled to speak as an expert, and how knowledge can be produced in reciprocal relationships with communities rather than extracted from them. The fourth chapter, “Access and Agency”, continues this line through a discussion of multilingual provisions in public services. Drawing on *Multilingual Manchester’s* work with public service providers, Matras shows how multilingualism enters

everyday institutional life through interpreting and translation in health care, policing, libraries, local authorities, and community services. The chapter's strength lies in its attention to institutional actors. Practitioners are depicted not merely as implementers of top-down policy, but as active agents who make decisions, interpret needs, develop routines, and sometimes revise their assumptions in response to evidence. Multilingualism becomes civic not only when it is celebrated symbolically, but when it is built into access to services and the everyday functioning of urban institutions, and this is what the chapter traces.

Chapter 5, "Heritage and Skills", addresses the hierarchies in public discussions of multilingualism, that is languages associated with migrant and minority communities are often treated as heritage or private family practice (frequently referred to as 'heritage' or 'community' languages) while foreign languages taught in schools and universities are seen as useful skills. Matras challenges this separation. The chapter shows how home languages can be understood not as obstacles to integration but as *resources* for education, identity negotiation, intergenerational continuity, and civic participation. The point has particular force in the British context, where public debate persistently separates the so-called 'useful' languages for diplomacy or trade from the languages already present in the country through migration. Matras demonstrates that the languages present in the city are not peripheral to language education. On the contrary, they are part of the city's linguistic infrastructure, even when official institutions fail to recognize them as such.

In "Celebration and Citizenship" (Chapter 6) Matras examines public celebrations of multilingualism, including 'Language Day' events and the branding of Manchester as 'a city of languages'. Matras points out that public celebration requires organization, resources, institutional support, and symbolic framing. It can produce recognition, and it can also become part of city branding. Thus, Matras shows that such events can create a language narrative in which multilingualism is not merely tolerated, but becomes part of local belonging. Celebration is thus linked to citizenship as it creates the conditions for speakers and communities to *claim* public space through language.

The final two chapters shift the focus from the city to academia. Chapter 7, "Academia and Advocacy", is concerned with what happens when sociolinguistic knowledge enters public debate. Matras discusses the 2011 Census question on 'main language' and the campaign to change the wording for the 2021 Census. This discussion is particularly interesting because it shows how a seemingly technical matter of questionnaire design carries a strong ideological charge. A question that asks respondents to identify one 'main language' assumes a monolingual norm and fails to capture the *lived reality* of multilingual citizens residing in a multilingual city. Matras does not present advocacy as a smooth extension of research. On the contrary, he shows that public engagement can create tensions within universities, especially when advocacy conflicts with institutional policies or managerial interests.

The final chapter, “The Mirage of the Civic University”, gives the book its most critical institutional argument. Matras asks whether universities that brand themselves as civic are actually prepared to support the kinds of reciprocal, community-oriented, and politically engaged work that such branding implies. His answer is cautious, and at times openly sceptical. The neoliberal university may welcome diversity when it enhances reputation, student recruitment, employability, local branding, or impact metrics. It is less comfortable when civic engagement disrupts hierarchies, questions managerial control, or insists on the co-ownership of knowledge. This is where the book’s three main themes: multilingualism, decoloniality, and the civic university, come together most visibly. Matras shows that the celebration of linguistic diversity can be appropriated by the very institutional structures that limit its transformative potential.

The book has several considerable strengths. First, it connects urban sociolinguistics to public engagement without treating engagement as a secondary or applied extension of ‘real’ research. The *Multilingual Manchester* project is not presented simply as an empirical source, but as an attempt to create a different kind of relationship between researchers, students, practitioners, local institutions, and communities. Second, the book gives a persuasive account of how a city language narrative can be produced. The constant references to Manchester as a city of many languages are not taken at face value, Matras reconstructs the work through which such a narrative is produced, circulated, stabilized, and then partly appropriated. Third, the book is honest about the limits of university-based civic work. Many discussions of public engagement remain optimistic. Matras instead asks what happens when engagement becomes inconvenient, when decolonial language meets managerial control, and when ‘diversity’ becomes part of institutional self-promotion.

Some limitations follow from the same qualities that make the book original. Its argument is deeply anchored in Manchester and in the author’s own long-term involvement in the *Multilingual Manchester* project. This gives the book depth, authority, and a valuable insider perspective, but it also means that the comparative dimension remains more implicit than systematic. Readers interested in a broader typology of multilingual cities might desire a more sustained comparison with other urban contexts. Another point concerns genre. The book combines sociolinguistic analysis, political critique, institutional history, memoir, and advocacy. This hybrid form mirrors the entanglement of knowledge, experience, and civic action that the book examines, an appropriate if occasionally disorienting choice. At the same time, readers expecting a conventional empirical monograph with a more detached ‘author’ voice may find some chapter parts unusually personal or polemical. Yet this is less a weakness than a condition of the book’s argument, that is, Matras writes from within the field of action that he analyses.

Speech and the City is an important book for scholars of multilingualism, urban sociolinguistics, language policy, linguistic citizenship, and university-community engagement. Researchers interested in decolonial approaches to language will also find it valuable, particularly as it demonstrates both the promise and the difficulty

of translating such approaches into institutional practice. Matras' main achievement is to show that multilingualism in the city is not only a matter of repertoires, signs, or demographic data. It is also, and primarily, a matter of public voice, access, recognition, civic resources, and the right to participate in defining what the city is. The book therefore extends urban sociolinguistics from the study of linguistic diversity in cities to the study of how cities can become arenas for civic struggles over language, belonging, and knowledge.

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Review history:

Received: 16 December 2025

Accepted: 20 April 2026

Bionote:

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