



## **Monolingual Policy in a Multilingual World: Social Challenges and Implications**

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### **Abstract**

This review looks at how one-language policy shapes life in places with many languages. Across schools, health care, courts, migration and online spaces, one-language rules sort people: they raise one prestige variety and push down other ways of speaking. Main problems include gatekeeping with high-stakes tests and documents; stigma, silence and identity conflict in classrooms and services; racialized and class judgments linking accent to trust and value; language shift across generations weakening family and community bonds and pressure on frontline staff who must fill gaps without training or materials. In health and in courts, one-language defaults create risks for safety and fair process; online, algorithms favour high-resource standards and misread minoritized varieties. Fragmented policy and poor language data hide inequities and slow change. Future work supports rights-based, additive multilingualism. The paper reveals the need for translanguaging teaching and fair, multilingual testing; guaranteed interpreting, translation and plain-language communication; professional learning for teachers and public-service workers; data systems separating results by language to track equity; legal protections against language and accent bias; audits of AI and platforms for dialect and language bias; partnerships with communities and minority-language media and cross-ministry planning with stable funding. Making institutions match multilingual reality improves equity, learning, safety and inclusion.

**Keywords:** Monolingual Language Policy; Multilingualism; Language Ideologies; Translanguaging; Linguistic Citizenship; Language Assessment; Language Access; Education Equity

### **Introduction**

Monolingual language policy—the idea that a country should use one standard language—grew with modern nation-states and still guides policy even as people move and mix languages. In the 1800s and 1900s, governments tied national identity to a standard language through schools, the army and mass printing, treating uniform speech as needed

for unity and efficient rule (Hobsbawm, 1992). Early language planning also taught that languages could be codified, expanded and managed as state resources (Haugen, 1966). So monolingualism is not a neutral fact; it is a political project that marks other ways of speaking as outside the civic norm.

A sociolinguistic view shows how these norms spread. “Language ideologies” are shared beliefs that link ways of speaking to moral order and belonging (Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994). Building on this, Silverstein (1998) described the “monoglot standard,” which imagines one pure code as the sign of the community and the test of competence and citizenship. These beliefs spread through school curricula, exams, media style guides, and official forms. They elevate an older, high-status variety as the normal way to participate. Access to schooling, services, courts, and employment is then filtered through this standard, sorting people by language and determining inclusion or exclusion.

Globalization strains this model. Travel, online platforms, and cross-border work create “polycentric” conditions—multiple, shifting centers of authority rather than a single national norm (Blommaert, 2010). In this context, the notion of fixed, separate languages becomes difficult to sustain. People draw on flexible repertoires across places, times, and media, and what counts as “good language” varies by audience and scale (Blommaert, 2010).

Even so, many institutions double down on one standard to keep control. This creates a gap between real multilingual life and the rules and services that people must use. Two ideas explain why one-language policies continue. First, translanguaging research says multilingual practice is not switching between fixed codes but using one flexible, personal repertoire. Policies that build walls between “languages” can block the very tools learners need (García & Wei, 2014; Otheguy et al., 2015). Second, raciolinguistic work shows that standard-language beliefs connect to racialization: even when speakers are close to the standard, listeners may still judge them as lacking because the speaker’s body is read as “nonstandard” (Flores & Rosa, 2015). These ideas shift focus from pure “skill” to how monolingualism sorts people.

Historically, states defended monolingualism for practical rule—clear administration, clear law and mass schooling—during nineteenth-century nation-building (Hobsbawm, 1992). Mid-twentieth-century planning treated standardization as a technical fix for modernization (Haugen, 1966). Later critiques showed unequal results, raising some repertoires and discounting others, often by class and race (Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994; Silverstein, 1998). In schools, “appropriateness” rules push minoritized students to copy middle-class, racialized standardness, turning difference into “deficit” (Flores & Rosa, 2015). In public services, weak language access shows how monolingual defaults can harm equity and safety; reviews link professional interpreters to better care for patients with limited proficiency (Karliner et al., 2007).

Today’s technologies make the problem bigger. In natural-language processing,

data and tests favor high-resource standards and penalize minoritized varieties, scaling up monoglot hierarchies (Blodgett et al., 2020). This “language-technology bias” moves sorting into automated systems: content moderation, hiring filters, customer help and public info tools may treat valid variation as error, rudeness, or risk, pushing people toward a narrow standard. Tools may claim to be inclusive, but their idea of “inclusion” often keeps the fixed boundaries that translanguaging questions (García & Wei, 2014; Otheguy et al., 2015; Blodgett et al., 2020). Monolingualism now also sits inside algorithms.

Viewed this way, monolingual policy functions as a governance tool: it elevates one variety as a proxy for civility, merit, and risk management. Shohamy (2006) shows that policy operates through both explicit rules and hidden instruments—tests, signage, and media norms—that shape language markets while claiming neutrality. Silverstein (1998) explains how the “monoglot standard” becomes taken-for-granted common sense, attaching rewards to the prestigious code. Blommaert (2010) adds that this “common sense” is now polycentric: multiple institutions, platforms, and publics set competing standards, so full linguistic citizenship requires navigating layered demands rather than mastering a single code. Together, these perspectives suggest that monolingualism persists because it consistently delivers social status and material advantages, even as it conflicts with everyday multilingual practice.

This review places monolingual policy on a long path from nation-building to today’s networked world and explains social reasons for its strength and effects. Historically, it helped build state capacity and national feeling; ideologically, it reflects wider projects of standardization and social order; institutionally, it shapes access to learning, justice and health; and technologically, it is now coded into data systems. The review uses three simple lenses. First, language-ideology research shows how “common-sense” ideas about what is “correct” speech can quietly allow exclusion while seeming neutral (Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994; Silverstein, 1998). Second, translanguaging research shows real communication does not fit the neat boxes used by policy, so strict “language” labels can misdescribe what people actually do (García & Wei, 2014; Otheguy et al., 2015). Third, raciolinguistic work shows that judging speech often means judging people, which is why “equal” treatment under one standard can still create unequal results (Flores & Rosa, 2015).

Seeing these patterns guides next steps. When schools demand one standard, multilingual learners face barriers; when courts, hospitals and agencies use only the standard, key rights and protections depend on performing that code; and when platforms and AI center high-resource norms, digital life shifts toward monolingual visibility. Health studies show targeted language-access systems can improve outcomes (Karliner et al., 2007) and translanguaging-informed teaching provides designs that use—rather than suppress—full repertoires (García & Wei, 2014). Shifting from “bounded systems” to “mobile resources” (Blommaert, 2010) and from “neutral standards” to “situated

ideologies” (Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994; Silverstein, 1998) gives better tools to judge policy choices.

So, monolingual policy is historically rooted, ideologically charged and institutionally powerful. It survives because it gives states and organizations symbolic and administrative payoffs, but these come with social costs along lines of race, class and cross-border mobility. A forward-looking agenda must face the gap between monolingual rule and multilingual practice, center equity in language access and examine how new technologies are writing old hierarchies into code.

### **Methodology**

This review examined published work on monolingual language policy in multilingual settings. Sources were limited to peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books and conference proceedings from established presses. Items qualified if they addressed how such policies are designed, put into practice, or what results they produce in schools, public services, courts and health care, migration systems, or digital platforms. Unpublished reports, preprints, theses, web content and studies focused on unrelated language topics (for example, formal linguistics) were excluded. Publications were located through targeted keyword searches in major databases using terms such as language policy, official language, multilingual education, interpreting, translation, assessment and linguistic rights and through screening reference lists of key papers. After selection, the material was grouped by recurring concerns: access and equity; capacity to carry out policy; testing and accountability; the work done by teachers and other frontline staff as intermediaries; and the use of technology. The goal was to present organized insights for practice and future research, not to calculate effect sizes.

### **Findings and Discussion**

Across three decades of work in education, health care, law, migration and digital systems, a simple pattern shows up: monolingual policies sort people inside institutions. They help users of the dominant language and create layered barriers for others. History and ideology explain how these rules become “common sense” through beliefs about the standard language and tools like curricula, tests and official forms (Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994; Shohamy, 2006; Blommaert, 2010). In schools, tying teaching and testing to one prestige variety mixes content knowledge with language skill, causing misplacement, holding students back and tracking multilingual learners into lower paths (Cummins, 2013; Thomas & Collier, 2002; Hornberger, 2003; Baker & Wright, 2017). These effects reach beyond grades: they shape participation, identity and later chances in job markets where language prestige matters (Lippi-Green, 2012; May, 2012).

In public services, monolingual defaults turn language into a risk. Studies repeatedly link the lack of professional interpreters to errors, weak understanding and unfair outcomes and they show benefits from structured language access (Flores, 2005; Karliner et al., 2007; Flores et al., 2003). In courts, research shows how interpreting practices and monolingual courtroom norms affect credibility and due process (Berk-Seligson, 1989, 2017). Migration systems add more gates by using citizenship and residency tests that treat the standard language as proof of “integration,” often poorly matched to real communication needs (Shohamy, 2006; Extra et al., 2009; McNamara et al., 2019).

Sociological studies also show how monolingualism connects to race and class, so even near-standard speech can be judged as lacking when spoken by racialized people (Flores & Rosa, 2015). Experiments confirm accent-based credibility penalties that later affect jobs and housing (Lev-Ari & Keysar, 2010; Tenzer et al., 2014; Souza & Markman, 2016). In families and communities, monolingual schooling speeds language loss across generations and weakens linguistic citizenship (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000; Heugh, 2011; Piller, 2016). New evidence also shows algorithmic monolingualism in content moderation: high-resource standards are favored, while dialects and low-resource languages are misread or punished (Blodgett et al., 2020; Sap et al., 2019; Xia et al., 2020; Haddow et al., 2022).

The paper below, shows how monolingual policy builds lasting social inequalities across institutions and technologies.

### **Educational Access and Achievement: The “Standard” As a Moving Target**

Monolingual teaching and testing often confuse language skill with subject learning. The gap between everyday talk and the harder language of school explains why students labeled “fluent” still do worse on monolingual academic tasks (Cummins, 2013). Large, long-term studies show bilingual and dual-language programs match or beat monolingual ones—evidence that ignoring students’ full repertoires wastes learning (Thomas & Collier, 2002; Lindholm-Leary & Hernández, 2011; Baker & Wright, 2017). Ecological views link these results to policies that allow only one code, narrowing classroom talk and slowing biliteracy (Hornberger, 2003). Translanguaging research shows learners use integrated repertoires to make sense of ideas, but monolingual rules shut this down (García & Wei, 2014; Otheguy et al., 2015). Together, the studies show a moving target: standards tied to middle-class prestige varieties shift with context, making “catching up” hard and renewing classed and racialized hierarchies (May, 2012; Flores & Rosa, 2015).

### **Health And Legal Harms: When Rights Become Conditional on Language**

In health care, monolingual barriers create real safety risks. Reviews link professional interpreters to better communication, service use and outcomes; ad hoc interpreting by family or untrained staff causes frequent, serious errors (Flores, 2005; Karliner et al., 2007). Emergency and inpatient studies record misinterpretations that affect diagnosis, medicines and consent when professional help is missing or late (Flores et al., 2003). In law, ethnographic and experimental work shows how interpreting and register shifts shape juror views and credibility, challenging the idea of a neutral, “translated” monolingual courtroom (Berk-Seligson, 1989, 2017). In both systems, the basic problem is structural: getting health care or justice depends on using the standard language.

### **Migration Governance and the Politics of Gatekeeping**

Language and civics tests turn the prestige standard into a gate for belonging. Research across countries shows that test topics, scoring and fees often serve politics more than real communication needs, placing extra burdens on working-class and racialized applicants (Shohamy, 2006; Extra et al., 2009). From a testing view, these exams often fail basic fairness—clear link to the skill, good access and transparent rules—yet they still decide legal status and rights (McNamara et al., 2019). In practice, monolingual gatekeeping becomes law: inclusion depends on brief, test-center performances in the dominant variety, even when daily life is multilingual.

### **Stigma, Identity Conflict and Racialization**

Monolingual norms spread the idea that multilingual repertoires are a problem, creating stigma, silence and identity conflict. Raciolinguistic theory explains why even near-standard speech by racialized speakers is judged as less appropriate: language judgments are mapped onto bodies (Flores & Rosa, 2015). Experiments find the same statements are rated less credible with foreign or stigmatized accents because of processing difficulty and bias (Lev-Ari & Keysar, 2010; Tenzer et al., 2014). Sociolinguistic work shows accent becomes a stand-in for worth in jobs and housing, keeping wage penalties and exclusion in place (Lippi-Green, 2012). Fear of being judged for “wrong” language leads to code-switching fatigue and self-censorship in schools and offices (García & Wei, 2014; May, 2012). The result is structured disempowerment masked as neutral “standards.”

### **Family Language Shift and Community Cohesion**

Monolingual schooling and services speed language loss across generations by

treating home languages as problems. Research shows pressure toward the dominant language interrupts transmission, weakens elder–youth communication and erodes community institutions (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000; Heugh, 2011; Piller, 2016). When schools prohibit bilingual materials or translanguaging, many children stop using their home languages to meet school demands. This reduces cultural capital and lowers civic participation (Hornberger, 2003; May, 2012). The deeper, relational problem is that monolingual policy weakens linguistic citizenship and the social networks that sustain well-being.

### **Teacher and Frontline Strain: Discretionary Governance under Scarcity**

When policy assumes a single language, teachers, nurses, clerks, and caseworkers must bridge gaps on their own. Studies describe improvised translation, asking children to interpret, or narrowing services to fit the dominant language (Karlner et al., 2007; García & Wei, 2014). Because these fixes rely on personal judgment, similar clients receive different treatment across sites and shifts, reproducing street-level inequality. In classrooms, test-driven accountability tied to monolingual metrics adds pressure: teachers must hit standardized targets even as students' repertoires are officially off-limits as learning tools (Baker & Wright, 2017; Cummins, 2013). This produces moral distress when staff know what equity requires but lack the tools or authority to deliver it.

### **Digital Infrastructures: Algorithmic Monolingualism at Scale**

Monolingual bias now sits inside data and code. Reviews show datasets and tests focus on a few high-resource languages and prestige varieties and that common models perform worse on low-resource languages and dialects (Blodgett et al., 2020; Haddow et al., 2022). Content moderation systems over-flag vernaculars like African American English, creating racially uneven false positives and muting legitimate speech (Sap et al., 2019; Xia et al., 2020). These tools carry monolingual assumptions into automated decisions in hiring, customer support and public information where errors are hard to challenge. The core issue is opacity: algorithms favor standardness without naming it, turning linguistic difference into “noise.”

### **Ideology, Data Blind Spots and Policy Fragmentation**

Deeper problems involve ideas and information. Standard language ideology treats certain prestige norms as natural, justifying policies that sort people by language (Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994; Blommaert, 2010). Many places also fail to collect basics like preferred service language, multilingual proficiency, or outcomes by language, which

hides inequities and blocks accountability (Hornberger, 2003; May, 2012). Without shared data standards and cross-ministry coordination, pilots do not scale and lessons stay siloed (Shohamy, 2006; Piller, 2016). The lasting issue is governance: institutions keep reproducing monolingual legibility while their publics become more multilingual.

Overall, the studies show one logic. Monolingual policy turns prestige norms into benchmarks of merit and civility and embeds them in daily systems for schooling, services and membership. Because judging language often means judging people, these benchmarks carry racialized and classed stereotypes, creating patterned harm even for highly skilled multilinguals (Flores & Rosa, 2015; Lippi-Green, 2012). The material results include mismeasurement in schools (Cummins, 2013; Thomas & Collier, 2002; Baker & Wright, 2017), documented safety risks in health and law (Flores, 2005; Karliner et al., 2007; Flores et al., 2003; Berk-Seligson, 1989, 2017), legal conditionality in migration (Shohamy, 2006; Extra et al., 2009; McNamara et al., 2019), faster family language shift (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000; Heugh, 2011; Piller, 2016), frontline strain (García & Wei, 2014) and algorithmic enforcement of prestige norms online (Blodgett et al., 2020; Sap et al., 2019; Xia et al., 2020; Haddow et al., 2022). Ideologically, the monolingual frame lasts because it promises simple administration and national unity (Blommaert, 2010), while its harms remain undercounted and under-governed (Hornberger, 2003; May, 2012). In short, the main problem is not that individuals fail to master a standard, but that institutions are built for monolingual rule in a multilingual world.

### **Implications and Future Directions**

The evidence is clear: one-language policy is not neutral. It is a policy choice that benefits speakers of the prestige variety and makes access harder for everyone else. Looking ahead, rules should fit real multilingual life while still protecting fairness and rights. Three linked steps can guide action: (1) redesign standards and tests to measure knowledge, not simple conformity to one language; (2) make language access a core part of public services; and (3) build data systems and technologies that serve multilingual publics. These steps work together across schools, hospitals, courts and digital platforms.

### **Redesign Standards and Assessment**

Schools often judge learning through one prestige language. This mixes “what a student knows” with “how a student writes or speaks in the standard.” Decades of research show bilingual and dual-language programs match or beat monolingual ones, so excluding other languages wastes learning (Thomas & Collier, 2002; Lindholm-Leary & Hernández, 2011; Baker & Wright, 2017). Work on academic language shows why a student who seems fluent in daily talk can still struggle with dense school texts when only one variety

is allowed (Cummins, 2013). Translanguaging research shows learners think and learn better when they can use their full repertoire, not just the school's prestige code (García & Wei, 2014; Otheguy et al., 2015).

Standards and tests should separate content from language form. Tasks can include bilingual glossaries, options to respond orally or in writing, dual-language prompts and scoring that focuses on correctness of ideas and intelligibility—not only perfect fit with one standard (McNamara et al., 2019). High-stakes decisions—placement, graduation, scholarships—should allow multiple modes and give clear rubrics and appeal routes when language blocks measurement of the intended construct (McNamara et al., 2019). These changes do not “lower” standards; they improve validity. Over time, they can reduce stigma and silence in monolingual classrooms (Flores & Rosa, 2015; May, 2012) and slow harmful language shift by treating home languages as assets (Hornberger, 2003; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000).

### **Make Language Access Core Infrastructure**

In health and justice, the evidence is strong and practical. Professional interpreters and plain-language materials improve understanding, safety and outcomes; ad hoc interpreting by family or untrained staff causes frequent, serious errors (Flores, 2005; Flores et al., 2003; Karliner et al., 2007; Flores et al., 2003). In courts, the presence, quality and training of interpreters affect credibility and due process (Berk-Seligson, 1989, 2017). So language access must be treated like other non-negotiable safety systems—like infection control in hospitals or chain-of-custody in courts.

Health systems should guarantee professional interpreters on demand (in-person and remote), record preferred language in the electronic record and provide consent, discharge and education materials in plain language and key community languages. Courts should fund and certify interpreters, record language needs at first contact and track timelines and outcomes by language (Berk-Seligson, 1989, 2017). Public agencies should set readability standards and publish multilingual service menus as defaults, not pilots. Because frontline strain often comes from policy gaps, pair these steps with workforce training: teachers, nurses, clerks and caseworkers need guidance on language ideologies, translanguaging-informed practice and working with interpreters (García & Wei, 2014; Baker & Wright, 2017). Where immigration and citizenship tests exist, apply basic fairness—construct relevance, transparent scoring, affordable fees and accessible preparation—so legal status is not made contingent on performative monolingualism (Shohamy, 2006; Extra et al., 2009; McNamara et al., 2019).

### **Build Multilingual Data and Technology**

Monolingual rules persist partly because institutions cannot clearly see their effects. Many systems do not track language in consistent ways, which hides inequities and blocks improvement (Hornberger, 2003; May, 2012). At the same time, digital tools often work best for a few high-resource languages and prestige varieties, reinforcing exclusion online (Blodgett et al., 2020; Haddow et al., 2022). Content-moderation systems also show higher false-positive rates for vernaculars such as African American English, suppressing legitimate speech (Sap et al., 2019; Xia et al., 2020).

Administrative datasets in education, health, courts and public services should include a small, consistent set of language indicators—primary language, preferred service language, language of instruction/assessment and language-disaggregated outcomes—with strong privacy protections (Hornberger, 2003; May, 2012; Piller, 2016). Public dashboards can then track access, wait times, graduation, readmissions, case outcomes and complaints by language to guide resources (Piller, 2016). For technology, buyers and builders should require performance reports by language and dialect, publish representative evaluation datasets and create remediation plans where gaps appear (Blodgett et al., 2020; Haddow et al., 2022). Open, community-governed corpora and partnerships with minority-language media can expand coverage for under-resourced languages. Tools for education and services—speech recognition, machine translation, writing helpers and plagiarism checkers—must be tested and proven for multilingual users. If not, these “smart” tools become new sorting machines that disadvantage many.

These steps reinforce one another. Fair, valid tests reduce pressure to police language in classrooms. Guaranteed language access makes services safer and more equitable, and normalizes multilingual delivery. High-quality multilingual data and regular audits help systems expand successful changes and remain accountable. They also weaken the habit of treating a single standard as equivalent to civility or merit (Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994; Blommaert, 2010). This is not a minor add-on. It is a redesign that treats language as a public design choice, not a private problem. Institutions should: (a) redesign standards and assessments to measure knowledge fairly; (b) make language access mandatory across services; and (c) build data systems and technologies that reflect real multilingual publics. Strong evidence from education, health, law, and migration supports these steps. Aligning policy with multilingual practice is not a “favor to diversity”; it is the foundation for valid measurement, safe services, and democratic inclusion.

### **Limitations**

This review uses only published sources. Excluding grey literature and internal reports may bias the picture toward contexts that are more often studied or easier to publish.

The evidence is uneven by region and sector: Global North schooling and clinical settings appear more than labor, housing, Indigenous governance, or low-resource systems. Designs and measures also vary widely, so “monolingual policy,” “language access,” and “standard language” are not defined in one way, which prevents meta-analysis.

Language of publication likely skews the corpus toward English and certain journals and presses, so important work in other languages may be missing. Many studies are cross-sectional or descriptive; strong causal claims are limited and long-term effects are often inferred. Technology also moves quickly. Findings on “algorithmic monolingualism” can date fast as models and data change.

Outcomes often mix language proficiency with other constructs (for example, content knowledge), which can misestimate effects. Finally, **this** synthesis needs judgment: choosing themes, weighing evidence and selecting examples involves interpretation. Although choices were guided by breadth and clarity, other reviewers might stress different mechanisms. These limits suggest caution with generalizing exact effect sizes but the repeated patterns across many studies support the main claim: monolingual policy acts as a sorting system with social costs.

### **Conclusion**

Across education, health care, justice, migration and digital life, studies show a simple pattern: monolingual policy turns one privileged way of speaking into a gate for participation. In classrooms, linking teaching and testing to one prestige code confuses knowledge with language form, limits talk and pushes multilingual students into lower tracks. In hospitals and courts, using only the dominant language makes safety and rights depend on speaking that language. This leads to avoidable mistakes and uneven justice. In immigration, language tests act like gates. But their design and price often don’t match real-life communication needs. In daily life, people face stigma and raciolinguistic judgments: an accent or dialect is treated as a sign of a person’s value, honesty, or right to belong. At home and in communities, these pressures make children drop family languages faster and weaken people’s sense of language rights. Online, the same pattern scales up: digital systems favor big, well-resourced languages and often misread smaller or minority varieties.

This shows monolingualism is a policy choice, not something natural. The harms—poor measurement, unfair access, damage to identity, pressure on frontline staff and exclusion by algorithms—are predictable when institutions are built around one “correct” code. So, we should redesign systems to fit the multilingual world we already live in. Three linked steps stand out:

1. Redesign standards and tests to measure what learners actually know, not how closely they match one variety.

2. Make language access a core safety-and-fairness feature in health, legal and government services.
3. Build data and technology that make language equity visible and checkable while adding real support for under-resourced languages and dialects.

These are not “special favors.” They make school results more valid, services safer and fairer, stigma and silence smaller and trust and participation stronger. In short, moving beyond monolingualism is a practical way to reach equity and effectiveness. Institutions that center multilingual reality can produce more reliable measures, safer decisions and a more inclusive public life.

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