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## **SAGA: TRANSLANGUAGING AND SUSTAINABILITY**

Pascale Elbaz, Meg Holden, Annika Airas, Kamala Todd, Cedissia About, Salla Jokela, Majken Toftager Larsen, Chloe Repka, Gina Loes, Théo Castagnet, et al.

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# **SAGA: TRANSLANGUAGING AND SUSTAINABILITY**

**A Green Paper to Seed and Grow the Research Project**

**January 2025**

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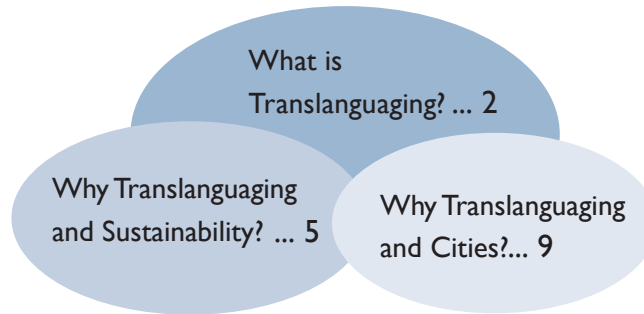
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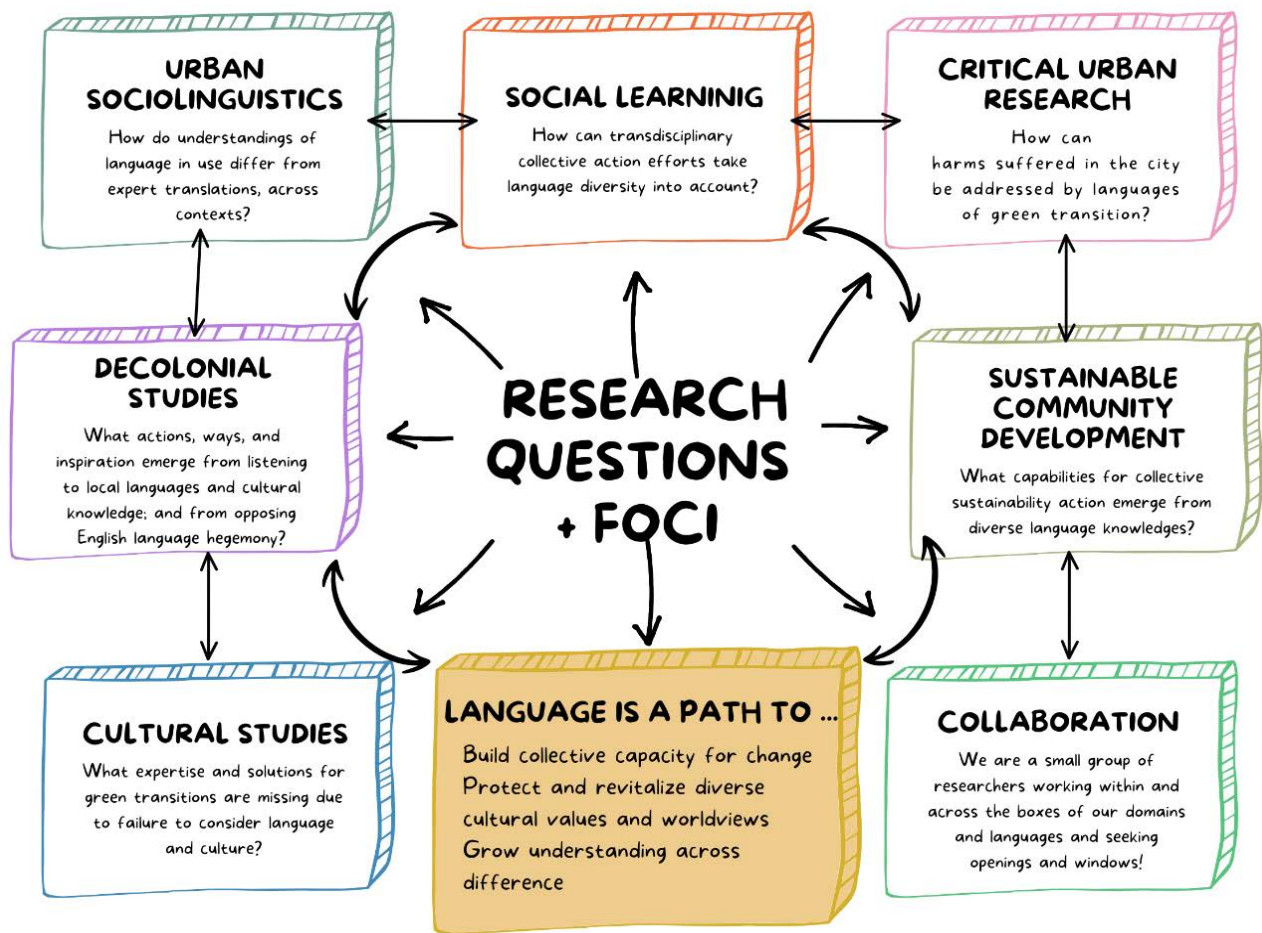


Sauna in Åland Finland. Credit: Veera Uusitalo.

# Introduction

This conceptual overview paper introduces the SAGA: Translanguaging and Sustainability research project. We present the research team’s span of background understandings and the starting points for the primary questions we are pursuing at the intersection of translanguaging, sustainability and cities research.

We present the directions and scope of research that SAGA team members are currently pursuing (see **Figure 1**). For an introduction to the SAGA research team members, please take a look [here](#). Our research assistants are introduced [here](#).



**Figure 1.** SAGA Interdisciplinary research scope

# PART I

**Part 1** presents the nexus of research questions and hypotheses that SAGA engages, shown in **Table 1**. The synthesis in **Part 1** represents a review of interdisciplinary literature and argument that begins to answer the questions that propel SAGA research.

**Table 1.** The SAGA nexus of questions and hypotheses

<b>What is translanguaging?</b>	Growing understanding and motivating social change across languages.
<b>Why translanguaging and sustainability?</b>	Closer attention to diverse language skills and resources is an underexplored means to embed sustainability transition in culturally-relevant change.
<b>Why translanguaging and cities?</b>	Plurilingual, multilingual, and metrolingual cities offer superdiverse sites for understanding the potential for meaning and intentionality in urban change.

## What is Translanguaging?

*Growing understanding and motivating social change across languages.*

The term *translanguaging* represents a newly evolving understanding of language use and language learning. It has recent origins in studies of applied sociolinguistics and pedagogy. As a sociolinguistic theory of language practice, translanguaging emphasizes the process-based nature of learning and using language as a creative and critical effort that occurs in particular sociopolitical contexts (Li 2018). Within pedagogy, the term emerged to describe teaching methods that make dynamic and integrated use of different known languages to resolve questions and build knowledge of unfamiliar languages (Williams 1994).

Translanguaging is distinguished from categorical and analytical approaches to language that consider each language to be a structurally fixed, discrete and bounded configuration of communications tools. This common understanding

**Key terms** that are related to and sometimes overlapping with translanguaging studies that can be found in the research literature include:

- polylinguaging
- polylingualism
- languaging
- multilinguaging
- heteroglossia
- hybrid language practices
- translanguaging practice
- flexible bilingualism
- metrolingualism
- linguistic landscapes

offers up a language that can be abstracted, indexed and inscribed in a series of codes and dictionaries, and acquired by individuals in a linear process (Mazak 2016). An alternative understanding of translinguaging is to view the entirety of language resources as a linguistic pool, analogous to the human gene pool, that is available to be independently learned and transmitted through contextual, social and cultural processes (Nettle 1999).

Instead of viewing language learning as the acquisition of a language as a finished product to be studied to perfection, the notion of translinguaging puts an emphasis on language making and use as continually in process (Ortega y Gasset 1957, Maturana and Varela 1980, Garcia 2009). In this way of thinking, human beings' knowledge of language cannot cleanly be separated from other sets, structures and processes of human relationships and interactions. This puts questions of language use in a key position of power that deserves to be recognized and interrogated when we seek to understand social conditions and crises, including the solutions we recognize, and those that we discredit, due in part to the language we use (see **Box: The “wood wide web”**).



### **The « wood wide web »**

The idea of the wood wide web is Suzanne Simard's play on the tech concept of the world wide web, which propelled the computer science innovations that created the internet. It similarly emphasizes the intelligence generated by and resilience effects of social networks, clustered communications, and transposes these to the context of the many interacting non-human species, structures, and elements of forests. Whereas other scientists had advanced the importance of largely invisible mycorrhizal networks, massive quantities of nutrient and information-sharing filaments that are crucial to the health of terrestrial plants, the “wood wide web” received rocketing growth in recognition of the concept and its correlates, like collective intelligence and repair, plant language, and plant sentience, among an array of scientists as well as fiction writers, social media users, journalists and others. This is one compelling example of alternative ecological metaphors which emphasize mutualism, collaboration and altruism, in ways that are often consistent with Indigenous epistemologies, and bring these to the light of intensified public discourse (Nixon 2021, Simard 2021, Kimmerer 2024).

As a pedagogical stance, translinguaging focuses on the creation of a learning setting where students and teachers draw from their own linguistic and semiotic repertoires in developing, deepening and expanding these repertoires. Normalizing translinguaging in language learning focuses on learning strategies that are fit for bi- and multilingual settings that pay attention to “both language and content knowledge” (Mazak 2016: 2). This stance contrasts with the more conventional ‘code view’ of language teaching and learning that seeks to impart individual learners with new codes and vocabularies. In this code view, the most important language learning is assumed to occur with the early years acquisition of a single mother tongue in a family unit; acquisition of additional languages is considered difficult. Success in this kind of language acquisition comes, implicitly, when a learner obtains the power to switch over to monolingualism in a new language.

A translinguaging approach, by contrast, neither considers monolingualism the norm nor does it consider new language acquisition to be a switching out of one language to abide within another's

Instead of viewing language learning as the acquisition of language as a finished product to be studied to perfection, the notion of **translanguaging** puts an emphasis on **language making and use as continually in process**.

codebook (Mazak 2016). Instead, intentional language learning is seen as a process of becoming something other than monolingual. In this way of thinking, multilingualism is not only about gaining mastery of a new language; insight may come from incomplete and truncated usages and knowledges of different languages, and from growing and interrogating one's ability to engage more effectively in contexts with a richer array of communication competencies. Heteroglossia, code-switching, and semi-speakers are new terms used to refer in different ways to the breaking down of old fashioned expectations that partial knowledge of languages is only a barrier to be discouraged, not also a prevalent phenomenon to be considered carefully.

Within critical pedagogy and critical sociolinguistic studies, translanguaging is also applied to understanding and transforming the social construction of educational and other social systems, structures and practices. This approach understands language as “a multi-scalar organization of processes that enables the bodily and the situated to interact with situation-transcending cultural-historical dynamics and practices” (Thibault 2017: 78). Where teachers, students, and language speakers are viewed as challenging and reinventing socially constructed language codes and systems, structures and practices, they are also opening up possible transformations of orders of discourse and power to serve social justice and linguistic human rights (Garcia and Li 2014).

Translanguaging can be thought of as an instinct to use one's idiolect or full linguistic repertoire to engage to desired ends in any given sociopolitical context (Li 2018). This creative, strategic instinct creates **translanguaging space**, which Li (2018: 23) defines as:

“ a space that is created by and for translanguaging practices, and a space where language users break down the ideologically laden dichotomies between the macro and the micro, the societal and the individual, and the social and the psychological through interaction. ”

Taking a translanguaging approach entails the study of languages in use as a process of knowledge construction and shaping, including cognitive and affective engagement that reach beyond language acquisition and mastery of codes to culture, ideology, politics, subjectivity, connections to place, memory, experience, feelings. It is therefore an area of study that demands attention across social sciences beyond linguistics and pedagogy. Beyond the educational system and formal study of linguistics to other social systems and structures, consideration of translanguaging has the potential to recognize ongoing efforts to “remake the world through language” (Mazak 2016: 5-6). Since its entry into international discourse in 1987, sustainability has become a significant object of interdisciplinary study. The term ‘sustainable development’ originates as a monumental and reasoned compromise between the priorities of delegates to the World Commission on Environment and Development who viewed environmental preservation as the most urgent need and those who viewed human development as the priority (Pezzoli 1997, Mebratu 1998).

# Why Translanguaging and Sustainability?

*Closer attention to diverse language skills and resources is an underexplored means to embed sustainability transition in culturally-relevant change.*

In the final report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (1987), **sustainable development** inextricably ties the priorities of environmental preservation and human development together through its definition as:

“ development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. ”

As a concept born of compromise, the term sustainable development has held a great deal of cross-cultural appeal and staying power at the same time as it lacks any single clear etymology or cultural grounding. Over more than three decades, scholars from diverse backgrounds have continued to examine sustainability theories, frameworks, policies, goals, and understandings across scales, from the global perspective of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals to the ways that sustainability unfolds and is understood and practiced in local contexts. Attention to sustainability has persisted and spread without generating much in the way of definitional or im-

plementation clarity (Holden 2017).

Scholars refer to sustainability as a “magic concept” that is seductively marketable, with abstract, broad and mainly positive connotations (Pollitt and Hupe 2011). Other scholars characterize this feature of sustainability as a meaning that is ultimately empty, a “buzzword” that can be invoked in national and international institutions and policy-making primarily because it does not demand significant political disruption (Bragaglia 2021: 104).

The vagueness and ambiguity of sustainable development has been noted and critiques of it have been levelled in the social science literature, especially in reference to cities (Farley and Smith 2020; Holden 2017; Quastel et al. 2012; Ramsey 2015). According to Hamman, “There is ultimately no single meaning and model of urban sustainability that emerges in the literature”, and terms such as “‘sustainable city’ ... [come] in a wide range of variants according to temporal and spatial contexts, priorities of action and actors” (Hamman 2017: 22). Often, these critiques call out the hypocrisy of making reference to sustainability as an aspiration without demonstrating the ability to bring sustainability closer to reality. Such so-called sustainability initiatives have been called “fake,” “cosmetic environmentalism” (Robinson 2004: 374), greenwashing, unsustainable consumption and branding (Luke 2005; de Freitas Netto et al. 2020; Berglund and Julier 2020).

Farley and Smith (2020: 3) openly question whether there is something inherent to the term sustainability that inhibits meaningful or transformational social change to emerge from sustainability efforts in diverse contexts: “The term sustainability has become a familiar part of our social lexicon yet something keeps this concept from bringing about transformational change.” Other researchers, taking a more pragmatic approach to social change, dedicate their attentions to turning the tide of inaction to generate more sustainable results from sustainability efforts. Van Poeck et al. (2022) refer to this approach as efforts to increase the “inclusive action competence” of sustainability initiatives.

Beyond the definitional debates, our focus on translanguaging identifies the potential of attention to language resources and languaging skills to break the cycle of inaction on sustainability principles, goals and efforts in multicultural and Indigenous urban contexts. We suggest that such attention is an underexamined route to transformational change. From a non-cynical view, at least part of the international appeal of sustainable development is rooted in the consistency of the sentiments of sustainability across diverse human cultures.

Language skills and resources constitute accessible pathways to the deeper cultural values that underlie the continued popularity of sustainable development, although they may be often left unstated. Nikulina and colleagues provide an example of how the UN Sustainable Development Goals require nations to work together, while encountering challenges and possibilities within the multilingualism that is an essential part of today's societies (Nikulina et al. 2019: 3).

Pragmatically stated, communication and persuasive justification of proposed changes is needed across languages and cultures if desired changes are to be achieved. The need recognized by the IPCC in its latest synthesis for inclusion, coordination, communication, leadership, and collective action to advance transformative adaptation implies a need for more attention to the pluri- and multilingual urban reality (Dodman et al. 2022). As such, cities are key sites where a good life within planetary boundaries needs to be rendered a possibility. It would be at least foolish to attempt this without drawing upon and across the resources of every language, and learning from the leadership and cultural knowledge of much more diverse and expansive communities of people. At worst, it would be disastrous, as cities concentrate not only human development opportunity but also structural and operational vulnerabilities that are differentiated in space, and across language and culture (among other dimensions).



xáw's shewáy (New Growth in Squamish sníchim), on E. Hastings St., Vancouver. Credit: T'uy't'tanat Cease Wyss.

The need for explicit attention to cultural relevance and acceptance across contexts in order to advance the implementation of sustainability transitions has also been noted within contemporary international sustainable development processes (see **Figure 2**). This can be seen through minority, but growing, attention in such processes to the need for inclusion, in the sense of change that advances human dignity while leaving no one behind; localization, in the sense of respecting local knowledge and creating enabling conditions for local action in addition to sustainability transitions at national and international scales; and for culture as a component of sustainability innovation,

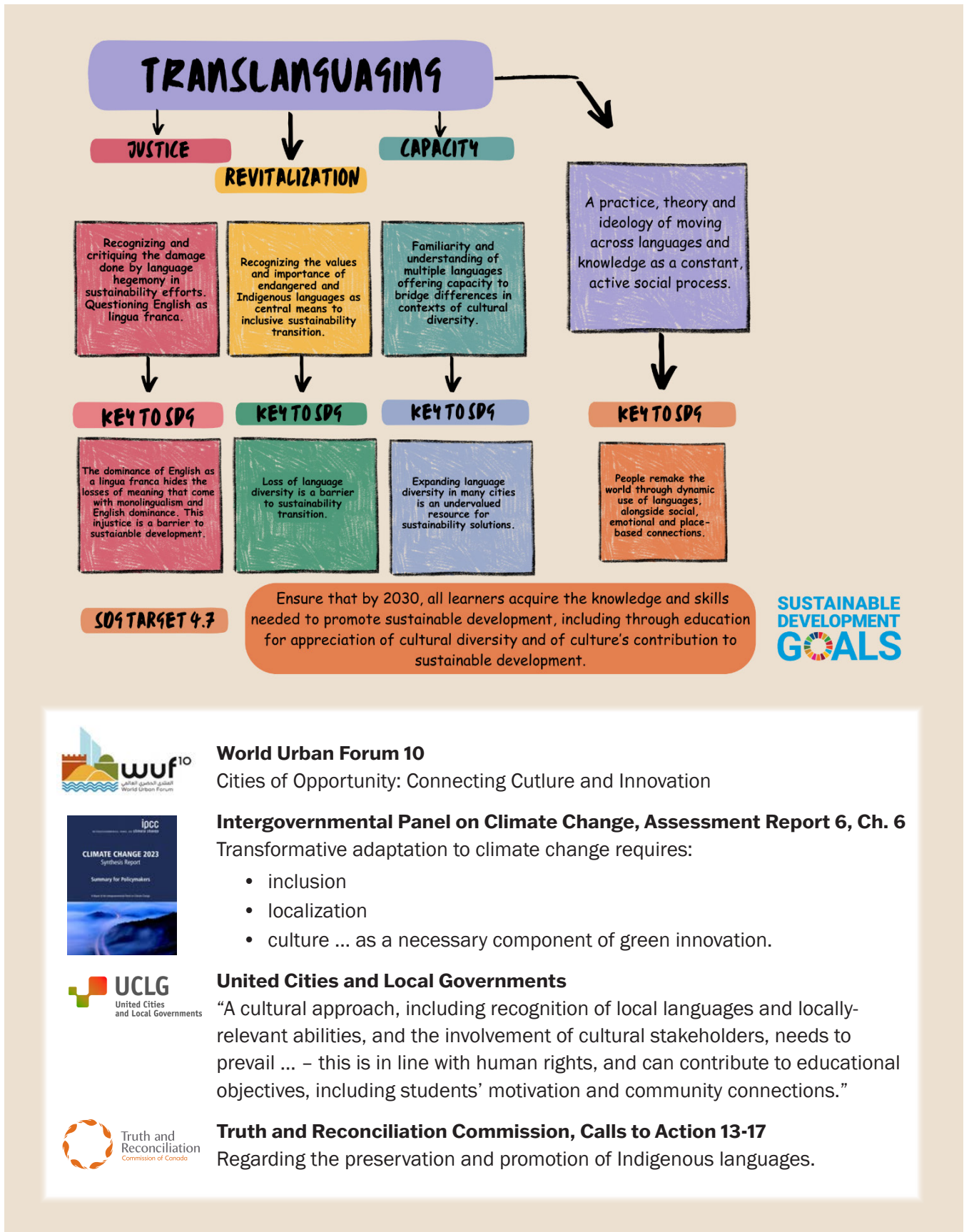
as per the Abu Dhabi Decided Actions of the 10<sup>th</sup> World Urban Forum in 2019 (“Cities of opportunity: connecting culture and innovation”).

These three principles of inclusion, localization and culture are all central to, for example, the IPCC AR6 (Ch.6) and the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Specifically, UN SDG Target 4.7 extends the reference to the need for attention to language skills and resources. Target 4.7 is to ensure that by 2030, all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including through education for appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development, among other things. Because languages are a key means by which cultures are expressed and shared, appreciation of the contributions of diverse cultures to the attainment of sustainable development is available through attention to translanguaging.

The United Cities and Local Governments (2018) guide for local action on culture in the attainment of the SDGs also references the importance of integrating a view of cultural diversity as key to positive motivation to attain sustainable development. The recognition of local languages is explicitly included as a component of this cultural safeguarding and promotion: “A cultural approach, including recognition of local languages and locally-relevant abilities, and the involvement of cultural stakeholders, needs to prevail in the design of curricula at all levels – this is in line with human rights, and can contribute to educational objectives, including students’ motivation and community connections” (UCLG 2018:10).

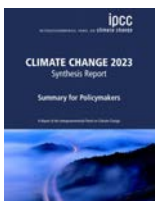


Credit: Eduardo199o9.



**World Urban Forum 10**

Cities of Opportunity: Connecting Culture and Innovation



**Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Assessment Report 6, Ch. 6**

Transformative adaptation to climate change requires:

- inclusion
- localization
- culture ... as a necessary component of green innovation.



**United Cities and Local Governments**

“A cultural approach, including recognition of local languages and locally-relevant abilities, and the involvement of cultural stakeholders, needs to prevail ... – this is in line with human rights, and can contribute to educational objectives, including students’ motivation and community connections.”



**Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Calls to Action 13-17**

Regarding the preservation and promotion of Indigenous languages.

**Figure 2.** Translinguaging and international objectives

# Why Translanguaging and Cities?

*Plurilingual, multilingual, and metrolingual cities offer superdiverse sites for understanding the potential for meaning and intentionality in urban change.*

Contemporary cities are sites of superdiversity. Linguistic diversity and language mixing are important aspects of this. Jaffe and colleagues (2019) note that cities have always been sites where multiple languages meet, co-exist, and emerge, and that urban dwellers are often fluent in more than just one language.

Moreover, superdiverse urban contexts provide more opportunities and needs for contacts between traditions, backgrounds, and language repertoires. Urbanites engage their language repertoires in order to communicate effectively in these diverse settings. The complexity of the contexts and communicative tasks increase the likelihood that urbanites will draw upon multiple language resources. We can also expect people's capacity to draw upon multiple language resources to increase with exposure and experience. Thought of in this way, the urban context offers a great deal of underexplored opportunity for **innovation and creativity** via translanguaging.

"Multilingualism is not just a question of numbers"  
(King 2018: 8)

Not only do urban dynamics render cities increasingly plurilingual and multilingual (Gogolin and McMonagle 2024; Mackey 2005), the concept of multilingualism is inadequate to describe the realities of cities' linguistic landscapes as urban linguistic circumstances change (Mamadouh 2024). King notes how multilingualism is not new, and yet still there is a strong tendency to define "urban multilingualism in terms of the number of languages spoken and used" (King 2018: 8).



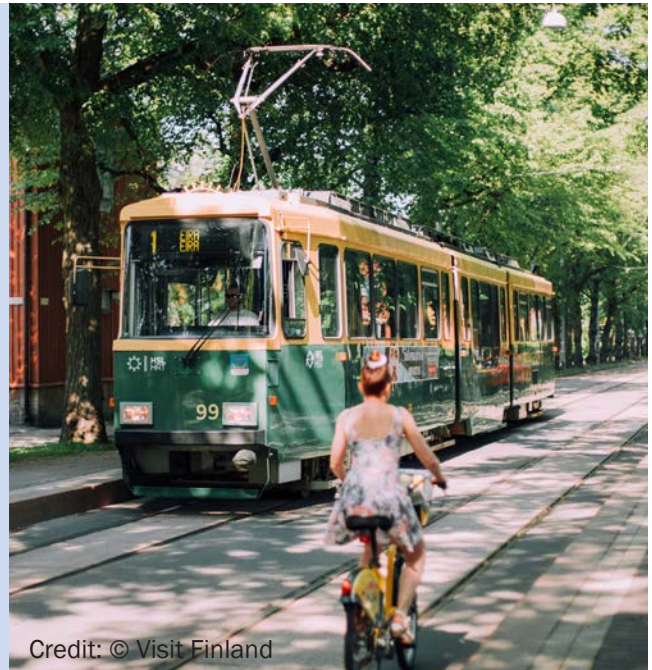
Löyly explanation sticker in Swedish, Stockholm. Löyly is the steam that rises when water is poured into the rocks of the sauna stove, and also refers to the heat in sauna and the spiritual dimensions of sauna. To learn more, see: [Sauna Case Study](#). Credit: Veera Uusitalo.

King importantly notes how multilingualism is often an "invisible" and "unconscious" part of people's daily lives and urban experiences and stresses the different contexts in which languages are used, including within diverse communities and families (King, 2018: 8). Questioning the "headcount of languages" limitation of understanding multilingual dynamics, King notes that "A more valid test of multilingualism might be the extent to which there is interaction between linguistic communities, the degree of public acceptance of and support for linguistic diversity, and the ways in which this 'multilingual capital' is part of the political and economic infrastructure, including in the all-important area of education.



## Urban dialects

Languages shape places, and vice versa. One example of this process is the formation of dialects. For example, in Finland there are numerous dialects that are associated with different geographical areas (Institute for the Languages of Finland 2024). Slang spoken in the City of Helsinki is unique and the vocabulary reflects different stages of place-based history, and human interactions between different language users (Forsberg 2021). For instance, the slang word for tram (“spora”) is familiar to Helsinki residents, but may not easily fit to the vocabulary of Finnish speaking visitors to the city.



Credit: © Visit Finland

Pennycook and Otsuji (2015) use the term “metrolingualism” to denote new forms of mixing in urban linguistic diversity, which can no longer be studied within traditional sociolinguistic methodology because of the diversity within diversity, making established categories no longer “fit the data.” This also calls to mind the city-specific processes by which urbanites generate words with meanings in place that may not translate elsewhere (see **Box: Urban Dialects**).

Sociolinguistics is an essentially urban field of study, emerging alongside the sociological awareness of the scale of social transformation occurring with the rise of industrial urban society. The basic premise underlying sociolinguistics as a field is that variation in language use is not random; nor can the study of language variation be limited to expectations of language use in a given geographic space. Whereas a traditional view of language use relied on defined language areas in bounded geographic space, urban sociolinguists set out to understand the ethnographic multiformity of language in modern society via the discovery that “geographic space was no longer, as for dialectologists it used to be, the most conspicuous and meaningful dimension of diversity because untold linguistic variety, variation and mixture were present in the tiny expanse of the city” (Coulmas 2018: 12).

Variation in language use is not random; nor can the study of language variation be limited to expectations of language use in a given geographic space.

William Labov is considered by many to be the founder of urban sociolinguistics, beginning with his 1966 hallmark study of language diversity or social dialectology in New York City. The study was a hallmark for its starting point that saw the evolving use of English by Black New Yorkers as a phenomenon worthy of careful study, rather than derision and lamentation. Labov developed a narrative sociolinguistic approach to examine the function of language between people as a contextualized process that includes elements of both structure and form.

Taking a normative position in the understanding and valuation of superdiverse cities undermines the ideological position of national and racial purity and singularity.

Smakman and Heinrich's (2018) edited collection on urban sociolinguistics aims to be a globalized expansion of Labov's New York Study, with chapters characterizing the language ecologies of 12 cities around the world. In their introduction, the editors shine a light on the language life or dynamic sociolinguistic systems of large cities, as choices that individuals make in different contexts and settings, to reveal the range and nature of transformations and set the stage for comparisons. They point out the anti-urban bias of linguists: "City speakers have often been ignored, or the fact that they live in the city has been considered less important than their original heritage. They have been brushed aside, treated as deviant or as less relevant for accounts of national sociolinguistic systems" (Smakman and Heinrich 2018: 3).

Given the global predominance of phenomena of urbanization, and given the urgency of change to meet the demands of change, crisis, and transformation, several urban scholars have noted with surprise how little research has been done on "what this plurilingualism involves" (Mackey 2005: 1311). Mamadouh (2019) concludes that "the dynamics between language groups and the representation of urban multilingualism largely remain a blind spot in urban studies." King and Carson note that while language can be discussed in reference to, for example, migration or cultural or ethnic diversity, these are often expressed as a "problem to be addressed" (King and Carson 2016: 4). They note that "there is a lack of serious and sustained research on the relationship between the languages spoken by citizens and the city itself." In spite of this, they go on to recognize that: "The multilingual city provides a test bed for understanding social diversity and complexity" (King and Carson 2016: 4).

“

The dynamics between language groups and the representation of urban multilingualism largely remain a blind spot in urban studies. (Mamadouh, 2019)

”

Numerous points of departure exist for translanguaging in urban studies research. Studies of language life, for example, view cities as places where creative language play is most intense and global phenomena are grounded (see **Box: Street language and hip hop culture**). These studies may include a focus on language play as one way in which urbanites struggle to find their path and identify themselves within urban multiplicity: "Cities are filled ... with diverse and concrete actors struggling to achieve things they deem relevant, while seeking a self-identification they perceive to be rewarding. Language plays a very important role in these activities" (Smakman and Heinrich 2018: 5).



## Street language and hip hop culture

Hip hop language and culture is a powerful example of the many dimensions of urban language life. Rapper and self-professed steward of hip hop culture, KRS One (2009), formulates an authoritative account of the language and culture of hip hop in his book, *The Gospel of Hip Hop*. Street language, the spoken word dialect of the Black urban poor, is one of nine cornerstones of hip hop culture.

KRS redefines street language from its mainstream misperception as incorrect, ignorant ghetto talk to its central role to developing and communicating hip hop as “official international culture for peace and prosperity” (128). He uses the acronym form of ‘language’ to explain: “I am the language that Loves And Never Gets Understanding Amongst Grown-up ducators; I am the utterance of my culture” (7). KRS details hip hop culture’s struggle for self-determination and understanding as “a sophisticated system of code” for poor and Black urbanites facing the situation that “English (for example) does not have enough words or definitions to describe how we (Hiphoppas) feel about the World” (121).

His own irreverent use of word play offers penetrating cultural critique, including the gospel format of the book, expository “overstandings” of aspects of hip hop culture, “refinitions” of hip hop codes of empowerment and knowledge organization, and “endarkenment” of the political, socioeconomic, and cultural meanings and modes of operation of the “inner-city” of hip hop culture. In so doing, KRS One offers up the internal communication of Black, poor, and urban cultural literacy, and his social group’s pleasures, pains, dreams, and creative intelligence, cloaked in inverted meaning and irony. He reminds us through selective history lessons that the evolution of this code is rooted in necessity among Black, poor, and urban people, to permit “a free and open exchange of ideas when such free speech was not permissible or ... unacceptable.” (128)



Brooklyn Graffiti 'overstandings'. Credit: Meg Holden.

Research on urban toponymy ties to thinking about the power of language in cities by looking at place naming as a form of political power, colonial silencing, and the ways in which names can be used to reflect nationalistic ideas (Rose-Redwood et al. 2017), as well as more informal ways of understanding territory, ownership, and place attachment (e.g. Bigon 2020; May and Yakashiro 2023). Language can be a source of urban conflict and an ongoing driver of inequality: linguistic requirements that are communicated through top-down language policies and laws can deepen culture-related divides and pressures to assimilate in cities. The loss of linguistic diversity is rarely seen to count as a negative trade-off of these policies, although it is a result. Language can be used to claim public space and sense of belonging to a place (Jaffe et al. 2019), and language controversies and related ideologies often influence individual and collective urban experiences and claims to justice (Vandenbroucke 2017).



Les Grands Voisins, launch of season 2 in Saint-Vincent-de-Paul, Paris. The sign reads: "Works in progress/Spaces in the works: Spaces of perpetual renewal that host artistic and architectural projects, and above all, a way to take advantage of the glorious summer sun". Credit: © Patricia Lecomte.

Henricson and colleagues (2024) dedicate their recent edited collection to urban field studies in linguistic landscapes, a multidisciplinary field they trace to origins in the 1970s and 1980s with a turning point in the 1997 study of Landry and Bourhi on the visibility of languages and ethnolinguistic vitality. Taking a multidisciplinary and multi-methods scope across geography, sociology, economics, and urban research fields, the book addresses urban linguistic landscapes in cities in Finland, Sweden, Denmark and Italy, in order to characterize the lessons these landscapes offer in terms of urban identities and political priorities. The themes of study include: names and place branding, activist discourses, languages of migration, and responses to COVID-19. The role played by language in both monolingual and multilingual contexts is considered in terms of commerciality, social activism, responsibility and solidarity. The evolution of linguistic landscapes is considered as a reflection of urban planning and development processes, societal discourse, tourism and migration, language contact, and the pandemic aftermath.

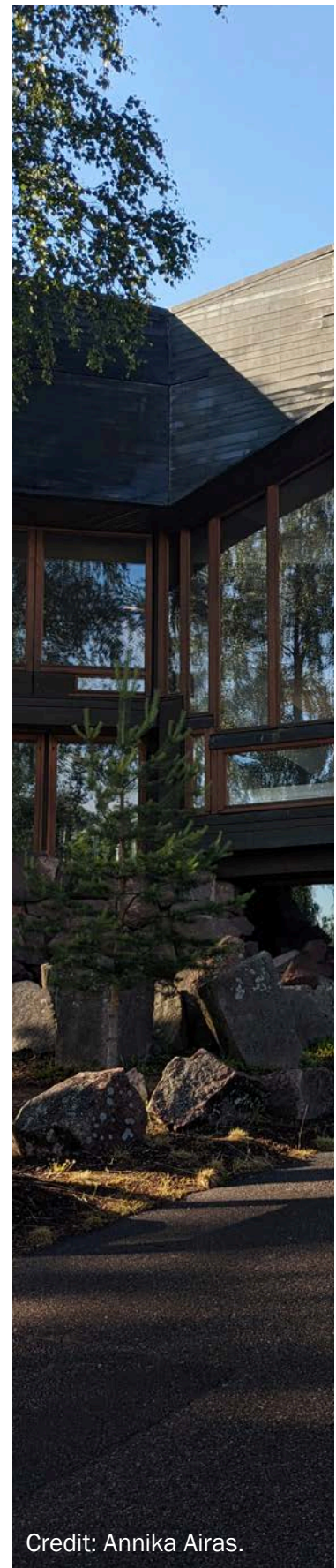
Linguistic expressions of power relationships via hegemonic, national, Indigenous, and minority languages are particularly significant and salient in this deepening of urban translanguaging research. Here, the urban scale and the mixed political nature of urban phenomena offers possibilities that may not be available at the scale of the nation state. In fact, the notion of monolingualism was triggered by the invention of the nation state (Makoni and Pennycook 2007).

Smakman and Heinrich (2018) consider the monolingual national bias in studies of language to be a significant barrier to deeper studies of urban language dynamics; where the biased assumption is that cities are corrupted by improper treatment of languages by minorities and migrants who “disturb” the dominant language-ethnicity-identity ideology” (Smakman and Heinrich 2018: 4). The challenge that an urban translanguaging approach poses to normative monolingualism is also a challenge to the one-nation/race-one-language ideological position (Li 2018). Taking a normative position in the understanding and valuation of superdiverse cities undermines the ideological position of national and racial purity and singularity.

A translanguaging approach is needed in order to deepen learning and action possibilities for ecological restoration and sustainable development in cities through the diversity of knowledge and expertise within the plurality of languages. It is an approach to understanding the city that takes the complexities of language uses, varieties, and sociopolitical relationships in urban spaces as varieties of signs that can be used to better understand the urgent needs and emergent possibilities of urban life. These exist across and between languages, even as language differences, choices, policies and laws drive cultural and socioeconomic wedges (Vandenbroucke 2017).

In other words, the task of understanding the meanings and potential of language differences in play in the city is more than the study of communications and semiotics. Gogolin and McMonagle (2024: 452) appear to suspect this when they conclude: “Urban studies and urban planning can guide the development responses to mobility and integration that go beyond labels and symbolism.”

In urban settings, translanguaging transforms the notion of multiple languages from problem to opportunity, as a chance for learning, behavioral change and appreciation of cultural diversity in understanding the crises we face.



Credit: Annika Airas.

# PART II






## Introducing SAGA research approaches to translanguaging, cities and sustainability

SAGA is a small group of researchers working within our own disciplines and languages and seeking to create space for collaboration and learning across our respective locations and languages. SAGA is committed to an open and constructivist approach to understanding languages in use as offering a variety of less travelled paths to:

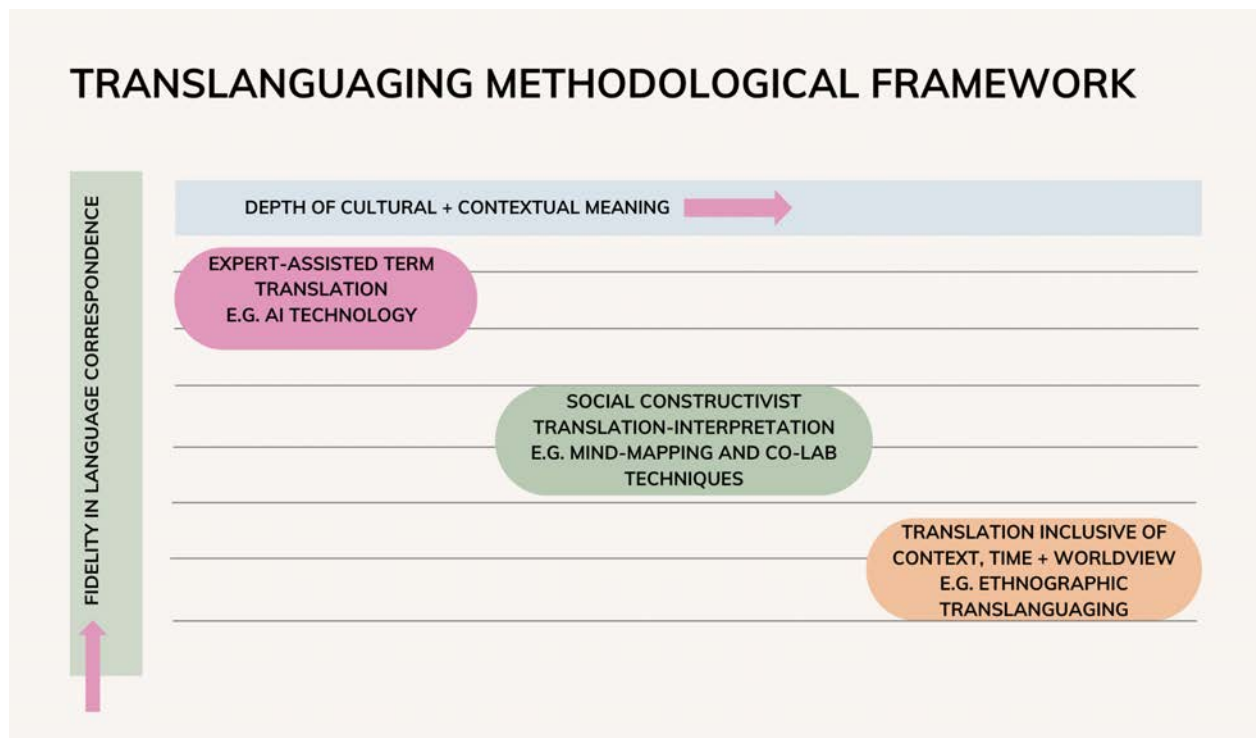
- Build strategic collective capacity for change
- Protect and revitalize diverse cultural values and worldviews
- Grow understanding across difference.

Alongside the research literature described in the first half of this concept paper, the multidisciplinary, international, and multilingual starting points of the SAGA research team guide our selection of five key areas of interdisciplinary research focus. With a broad-brush, these five research areas define distinct types of research questions, pursued via distinct methodologies, that respectively contribute to growing the field of translanguaging, cities and sustainability research.

**Table 2.** SAGA Research Topic Areas

<b>SAGA research topic area</b>	<b>Research case study illustration</b>
 <i>Compiling language resources and repertoires in urban sustainability transition</i>	Socioterminology of green transition
 <i>Alternatives to English as a lingua franca</i>	Tampere, sauna capital of the world Finnish talkoot as a culture-specific answer to the question of the commons
 <i>Vital and revitalizing: endangered and Indigenous languages</i>	The language of sustainability in Skwxwú7mesh and hə́ŋqəmiŋəm
 <i>Translanguaging and what gets lost in automatic translation</i>	Teaching Sustainability beyond Google Translate
 <i>Translanguaging for intentional sustainability transition</i>	Hygge and the prospects of Danish solutions to global urban sustainability challenges

We work from our multiple starting points to complete an array of case studies of terminologies, urban sites, and cultural practices that demonstrate different significant values and features of translanguaging in cities, concepts and acts toward sustainability. We additionally seek to juxtapose and interrogate these case studies together as they may be cross-referenced and may answer emergent questions about the possible solutions space related to cities, translanguaging, and urban sustainability. **Table 2** below presents the distinct research topic areas that SAGA researchers are pursuing, along with initial illustrative case studies of the work underway. Following this, each of these research topic areas is discussed. **Figure 3** presents the spectrum of research methodologies pursued in SAGA where translanguaging is a function of both fidelity in translation and depth of cultural and contextual meaning.



**Figure 3.** A spectrum of methodological approaches to studying translanguaging



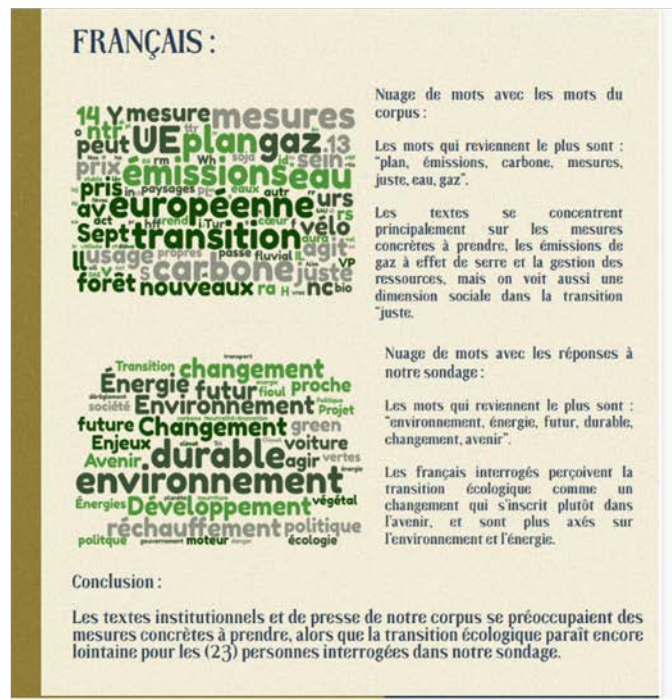
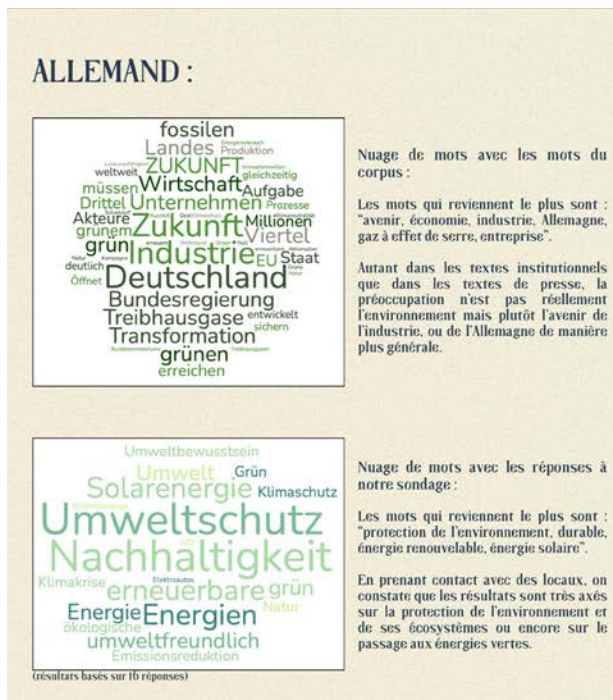
## **Compiling language resources and repertoires in urban sustainability transition**

Classic studies in urban sociolinguistics have compiled corpuses of terms devised and employed in particular contexts in order to circumscribe the state of a given field of shared meaning. An early example of this approach is Williams' (1976/1983) *Keywords* study. The *Keywords* study presents historical changes in the meaning of 109 key words that are critical to cultural understanding of the modern world, with 20 new key words added in the 1983 updated edition. These key words are essential and intangible concepts, such as nature, underprivileged, industry, liberal, and violence. This classic, normative sociolinguistic study brings out not only the changes in meaning themselves (their etymology) but also the significance of the facts of these changes to understandings of the evolution of understanding social progress.

Another classic sociolinguistic study, by Christian Topalov and colleagues, engaged 160 authors and 12 translators over a 15 year period of work that began in 1995 and was completed with the 2010 publication of *L'aventure des mots de la ville*. At 1500 pages, this book contains 264 word entries in 8 languages, covering the corpus in these languages of words that relate to material and descriptive urban identity. The words chosen as entries represent not ineffable qualities as was the case in Williams, but expressions of the material experience of urban life that change over time and across language and context. These words therefore reflect the social and physical heritage of cities that rises above the level of individual interlocutors or language users. As such, the book represents a rich collection of the sociomaterial history of cities.

Within and across the collection of terminological entries, answers to enduring urban research questions can be sought, beginning with big questions like :

- What are the relationships between ideas about cities and the words used to define urban material practices, in different languages and locations?
- How apparent are the roles played by social actors to create and transform the terms that describe and designate urban realities?
- What concepts appear in terms that are more common across different cities and languages, and what concepts are unique to specific cities and languages?



Survey results: word associations with 'green transition,' French and German. Credit: Théo Castagnet.

Topalov and colleagues refer to their project as a plea on behalf of the richness and diversity of languages that are open for interpretation and understanding, within the diverse cultures of multi-lingual urbanity. The authors take a studied approach not to assume the translatability of any of the terms they study; instead, they assume that the inverse is true. They take as a starting point that each language organizes the material conditions of the city in a specific and unique way; and as



Oasis Schoolyard program results. Rue de l'Arbalète (5<sup>e</sup>). Credit: Christophe Belin (Ville de Paris).

a result take up the task not of translating these terms into equivalents in other languages but of specifying and clarifying the urban nature of their meaning in the language of study, and juxtaposing them with others. The desired effect of the work is not to specify equivalences between terms in different languages but rather to demonstrate variation in meanings, using illustrative and contextualized cases of material meanings.

In the tradition of these two different classic studies, SAGA research seeks to contribute to sociolinguistic research including descriptive and normative studies of terminology related to cities and sustainability. Instead of focusing solely on the technical domain, we broaden our investigation to the representations, conceptions and imaginary of the sustainable and resilient city, from a perspective developed in particular by Da Cunha (2023).

The objective of this aspect of SAGA research is to facilitate and smooth the passage between languages in multilingual dialogue and discourse by describing with qualitative and contextualized precision the concepts most relevant to the field of knowledge of sustainable urbanism.

To mobilize this work, SAGA researchers are building and analyzing a corpus of textual and other recorded materials in a set of languages (see **Box: Socioterminology of Ecological Transition**). This corpus will be complemented through engaging with expert and experience participants and through primary survey and observational research in the field of terminological use, to gain insight into the words, terms, and expressions in use in transition efforts to sustainable urbanism.

The approach therefore considers both specialized lexical units related to professional efforts in sustainable urbanism as well as popular understandings, expressions, and phraseology used in community contexts. The analysis is assisted by computerized linguistic tools such as AntConc and Sketch Engine. Emergent neologisms in this rapidly-evolving area of practice may be particularly significant outcomes of this work (see **Box: Seine-sationnelle Games**).

Another intended outcome of this component of SAGA work is the effectiveness of the translanguaging approach on expressions of respect for the language-specific understandings of concepts and practices of ecourbanism.



### **Socioterminology of ecological transition**

*SAGA Ecological transition in your language:* SAGA researchers Pascale Elbaz and Cédissia About are engaged in socioterminological studies of the sustainable city. The first such study was exploratory, seeking to understand how the notion of ecological transition is understood across different languages in use in Europe. Together with their students in a collaborative, practice-based course in terminology at ISIT Paris Panthéon Assas Université, the question posed was: Do the translations and uses of the term “ecological transition” carry the same meaning and significance across different European languages, including French, German, Spanish, Italian and Polish as well as English? They also wondered: If there are differences, what is the nature of these differences and what are their implications for the pursuit of ecological transition? The 17 students in this course compiled a multilingual corpus of terms related to ecological transition, drawing from local, national and international research, policy documents and professional reports, along with media accounts. The team used Sketch Engine to extract recurrent keywords. This fuelled the compilation of a multilingual glossary of key terms co-occurring with “ecological transition,” and terms that are often concurrent with (used instead of) ecological transition. The researchers next prepared and circulated a survey via social media, seeking input into meanings and terms in use, related to ecological transition. The results revealed interesting differences in the forms of language used to refer to notions of ecological transition across languages, differences in the perceptions related to the pace and scale of change implied by ecological transition, and the balance of economic, social, and green values that are prioritized in action.

*Contributing to the French Neology Commission:* In parallel, French SAGA researchers have put in place a commitment with the Delegation on the French Language and Languages of France (Délégation générale à la Langue française et aux langues de France), an office within the Ministry of Culture. This multi-year terminological analysis project operates through an iterative process of: defining a thematic area of focus on terminological evolution; operationalizing an expert-based process of composing a corpus of key terms in the thematic area; and then mobilizing group reflection about the optimal translations of specialized terms. The translated terms are then put forward for adoption by the French Neology Commission as standard vocabulary to be used when writing on this theme. For example, the first iteration of this process focused on the theme "Nature in the city." French experts in agriculture, urban planning, habitat, mobilities and environment engaged with students in the process to propose normalized vocabulary on this theme. The terms analysed include resilient city, sustainable city, rooftop garden, light pollution, soundscape planning, green belt, soil protection, green corridor, blue corridor, and green-blue corridor. Additional rounds of focus are underway on the topic of the “Circular Economy” and other topics related to the sustainable city. Ultimately, this project envisions generating not only descriptive but also prescriptive terminologies within the French context, along with a multilingual glossary of sustainable cities produced by the SAGA project.



## “Seine-sationnelle” Games

The neologism “**Seine-sational**” may have been first uttered into public discourse by International Olympic Committee President Thomas Bach, who used it as a term of reverence and gratitude to the host city of Paris, and to the city’s river, the Seine, in his remarks at the closing ceremonies for the summer 2024 Olympic Games.

The term united the sense of appreciation of the high quality of the performative experience of the Paris Olympic Games, with acknowledgement of the brilliance of the move to feature the River Seine in a multifaceted, starring role throughout the Games. The Seine was one key to the magic of the sensational Olympic event throughout, from playing centre stage in the Opening Ceremonies which featured memorable, stellar performances both in and around the river, to the siting of key sporting events and other fanfare. The reflection of the Seinesational games was made more poignant by contrast with the uncertainty that had surrounded whether the river would be safe for the triathlon event due to pollution, in view of the \$1.4 billion Euros invested in stormwater infrastructure improvements leading up to the Olympics, as well as the security fears and pessimism that had cast a shadow over predictions for the Games’s success beforehand.

Whether the neologism of a Seinesational event takes root in discourse about tourism, arts, athletics and culture in Paris, or in discourse about hosting the Olympic Games in ways that contribute to respect for and understanding of central natural features of specific cities, time will tell. (Le Monde 2024; Cazi & Mandard 2024)



Opening ceremony of the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris. Credit: © Bernadett Szabo, Reuters.



## Alternatives to English as lingua franca

The proliferation of social media, AI, and many international standards and processes in recent decades have tended to result in net gains of English speakers and English communications (Hiippala et al. 2019). This is not a new phenomenon. The attempt to embrace the hegemony of one language was already evident in Europe in Renaissance times, and has grown since the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Lüdi 2015). Countries recognized in contemporary times as colonized Indigenous lands, including Canada, the US, Australia and New Zealand, now contend with the results of this settler colonial violence, as Indigenous families carry the memories and intergenerational trauma of the criminalization of their Indigenous languages (Heller and McElhinny 2017).

Topalov notes that the imposition of a single dominant language is a common strategy of conquest, and not unique to English –there was the appropriation of Greek during the crusades, and of Latin, Chinese, Arabic and Russian, along with French, Portuguese, Spanish, and Dutch, during different time periods and in different contexts. He reminds us that the imposition of all of these languages happened first by force, later by commerce and migration. The pressures of assimilation and language-based marginalization continue to impact many non-English speakers—newcomers and Indigenous alike. In contemporary times, English is the third most spoken native language in the world (after Chinese and Spanish), but the dominance of English as a language of sustainability research publications is disproportionate, assessed as up to 96.6% of all citations (Editorial 2023). English dominates as the language of research and science, and this applies to understanding sustainability studies as well.

The power and opportunity that flow toward the English language are grossly uneven. English language “functions as an academic superpower” (Law and Mol 2020: 265) and the issues with this “asymmetric global language” and the competitive scholarship associated with it are often noted to be unfair to those not born and raised with native understanding of English (Ammon 2012: 342).

The dominant role of English language in international policy and sustainability discourse and in research have been pointed out in critiques of the way in which English operates as a “lingua franca” driving the quest to find solutions for complex societal challenges within and across national borders (Nikulina et al. 2019: 3; Lüdi 2015; Ammon 2012). In the field of urban studies, for example, Bas van Heur notes that “the geography of urban studies research is highly uneven, with English-speaking countries and/or countries with strong connections to Anglo-American academic publication cultures dominating the debate” (van Heur 2024: 74).



The more literal translation of this park sign in Shenzhen, China, is: What a pity to step on the green carpet. Why not take a few more steps? Credit: Yingxuan Chen.

Some decry linguistic diversity as a social problem rather than as a resource (Lüdi 2015). One tactic to address the bias in this challenge, known as the English as a lingua franca (ELF) movement, draws the attention of linguists and pedagogical researchers to the changing needs of learners when it comes to writing, speaking and listening in English in a context predominated by interlocutors for whom English is an acquired, rather than native language (Jenkins 2013; Seidlhofer et al. 2012). Yet some scholars, such as Mol and Law, note instead the unfair setup of academic knowledge production, and the limitations of the singular use of English language, and look to a more hopeful and multilinguistic future by giving value to diverse languages, seeing such languages as learning opportunities and intellectual resources that can enrich knowledge and understanding (Law and Mol 2020). SAGA aligns with this way of thinking about language diversity and diversification. We also recognize that Indigenous, marginalized, and other non-English languages are vital to global conversations about sustainability, particularly at the local scale and in view of human rights related to inclusion and participation noted by UNESCO and other UN and relevant multilateral declarations.

Lüdi notes that in the process of searching for international “best practices”, it is important to keep in mind the “side effects” of monolingual settings and to critically consider that “the price for an ‘English-only’ strategy is very high, including a possible lack of creativity, losses of information, a malaise connected with not being able to use one’s own language and the appearance of break lines between science and society” (Lüdi 2015: 214). Topalov et al. (2010) observe that the side effects of this strategy in international and intergovernmental discourse include an arbitrary silencing of the most authentic or powerful contributions from those without the same knowledge of the dominant language, and that this also tends to obviate changes that occur to the usage and meaning of terms in the dominant language over time.



Summer sauna in the city of Oulu, Finland. Credit: Veera Uusitalo.

This is also the starting point for SAGA research in this area. Examining translanguaging allows a focus on the side effects of normative English monolingual dominance in discourse about urban sustainability. Translanguaging research also opens up study and recognition of the solutions that already exist in different language repertoires of those who are not expert or monolingual English speakers, which may have been overlooked. Methodologically, the approach taken by SAGA in this area of research is to begin with a term of interest, through an exploration of the term's history and etymology. The research then proceeds through place-based, archival and historical accounts of major and minor recorded events providing detail on these usages, and social science research to draw inferences from these usages to explanations based in notions of development, community, sociology, anthropology and political economy studies. The research identifies themes from this research that have particular relevance in contemporary contexts, testing and validating these thematic priority understandings via interviews and other kinds of engagement with experts and/or experience leaders (see **Box: Tampere: Sauna capital of the world** and **Box: Finnish talkoot**). The hope is that a wider constellation of ways of knowing and speaking about sustainability can take shape, affirming the vital importance of many languages to meaningful sustainability transitions in cities.



### **Tampere, sauna capital of the world**

During Jan-May 2024, SAGA researcher Veera Uusitalo conducted thesis research for her BA in urban sustainable development at Tampere University. The research entailed assembling a corpus of 239 local media and promotional materials and interviewing city staff, sauna managers, and urban design and tourism consultants. Veera's research sought to understand the phenomenon of urban saunas in Finland and how Tampere's saunas function in shared visioning for urban development and planning, including the city's Tampere Sauna Capital of the World campaign. Even to many Finns, the connections are tenuous at first blush; sauna typically carries an association with rural, traditional, and wild environments.

Veera's research delved deeper into the language and cultural referents that attach Finnish sauna to deep-seated values of nature, relaxation and equality, socialising and connecting, and voluntary participation. The emergence and popularity of Finnish urban saunas, and their diverse cultural, social, health and well-being, and political economic meanings in a Finnish context, demonstrate the dimensions of sauna that are only available when we look beneath the surface. The further these themes are pursued, the more connections can be made between sauna and sustainable urban development in Finnish language and culture. Click [here](#) to read more.



Credit: Veera Ussitalo.



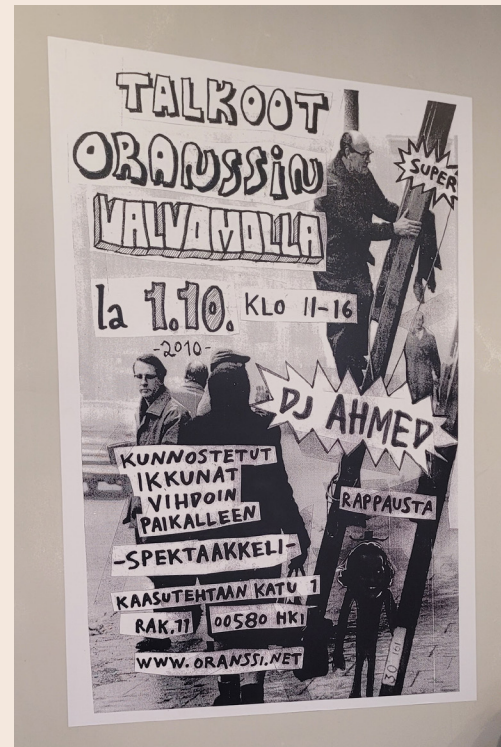
## Finnish *talkoot* as a culture-specific answer to the question of the commons

A case study on Finnish “talkoot,” led by Annika Airas, offers the significance of place-specific understandings and language. Across different generations and contexts in Finland, talkoot refers to collaborative, unpaid work for common benefit, typically accompanied by hospitality offerings. Throughout Finnish history, talkoot has been particularly emphasized during times of scarcity. Due to its long-standing presence in social assistance approaches, talkoot work is commonly understood to benefit the local community. It embodies a particular social organization and design.

While talkoot is also known in other languages, in Finland, it has been readily adapted to urban life and continues to resonate with Finnish speakers as it communicates an unstated understanding of gathering, working, and being together which has been applied to, for example, work to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions driving climate change. As such, Finnish talkoot holds emissions reductions events through the activation of urban commons and commoning, via activities that create mundane opportunities for participation, co-learning, enhancing existing spaces, and cost-saving.

Our talkoot case study provides a unique perspective on commoning beyond the English language. It highlights how this culturally specific practice can inform behaviour change and commoning efforts by emphasizing relational, place specific, and intergenerational knowledge. In this way, talkoot, within its linguistic and cultural context, also underscores the importance of multilingual approaches to sustainability. We view this nature of talkoot in terms of potential for new kinds of dialogue about sustainability in cities. Data collection for this case study included archival materials on talkoot from the early 1900s to the present, sourced from Finnish libraries and archives. Additional materials were gathered from museums and complemented by site visits, dialogues, and consultations with organizations that utilize the talkoot tradition. Data analysis was conducted through thematic coding of documents and transcribed materials, with themes informed by the English language literature on commons and commoning practices.

By examining practices like talkoot, language-specific case study work helps to advocate for a broader, more inclusive understanding of urban commoning, which is needed for sustainability transitions.

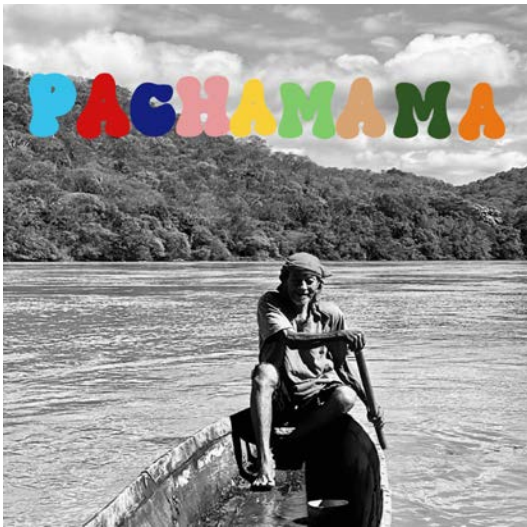


Talkoot poster for the Oranssi organization in the City of Helsinki. Credit: From the "Fix: Care and Repair" exhibit at the Helsinki Design Museum.

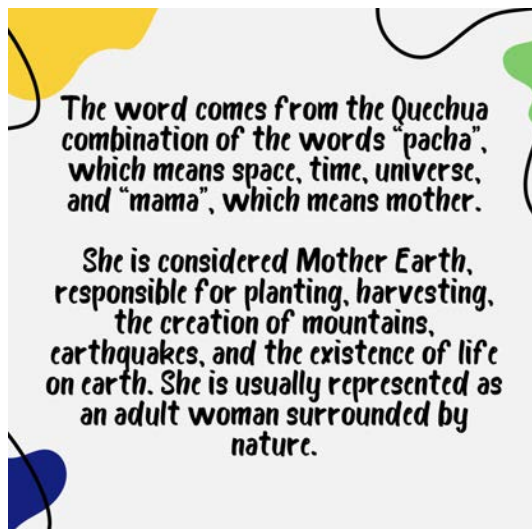


## Vital and revitalizing: translanguaging and endangered and Indigenous languages

Language erasure and dominance through the process of naturalizing the dominant language has long been an important and fundamental part of colonization practices and creation of dominant discourses that endanger Indigenous languages and ways of knowing (Iseke-Barnes 2004: 46; Mitchell 1988; Harris 2002; Ranta and Kanninen 2019). Colonial processes entail purposeful language erasure, forceful assimilation, and exclusion through hostile language policies (Haque and Patrick 2015).



Language loss is an ongoing and devastating result of colonization that Indigenous people continue to suffer from. Efforts to maintain and revitalize endangered languages are older efforts than the urban sociolinguistic tradition that SAGA contributes to. This longer tradition has focused on maintaining and revitalizing language as an important part of identity, culture and rights, and providing counternarratives to dominant stories as a form of resistance and as a contribution to decolonizing and re-Indigenizing expertise and knowledge, including that held within the academy (Fjellheim 2020; Smith 2012). Language revitalization constitutes an important component of many related state and institutional reconciliation efforts (Aikio-Puoskari 2018; Haque and Patrick 2015; Hinton and Meek 2018; Pasanen 2018).



**The word comes from the Quechua combination of the words “pacha”, which means space, time, universe, and “mama”, which means mother.**

**She is considered Mother Earth, responsible for planting, harvesting, the creation of mountains, earthquakes, and the existence of life on earth. She is usually represented as an adult woman surrounded by nature.**

Credit: Estefania Acero Buitrago.

Questions of appropriate translanguaging are important in this work, as Indigenous language leaders, like Lorna Wanosts’a7 Williams (2019), point out. Williams speaks about the importance of Indigenous languages to knowledge production and education, and the challenges of translating Indigenous concepts into the dominant language: “When asked to define the term “Indigenous knowledge,” it is a struggle because of the disruption of the languages and lives of Indigenous peoples due to colonization and the need to discuss the term using another language and worldview. The knowledge of Indigenous peoples is of value today as Indigenous peoples rebuild their lives after near annihilation. All people can learn from this knowledge.”

An apparent tension exists between the translanguaging research approaches described so far and efforts to meaningfully protect individual languages, especially endangered and Indigenous languages. On the surface, the refusal in translanguaging to view a language as a fixed and bounded entity mitigates against moves to protect particular languages. At the same time, there are aspects

of efforts in endangered language revitalization to which SAGA aims to contribute. SAGA offers that a translanguaging approach is consistent with the revitalization of endangered and Indigenous languages as living entities within diverse contemporary contexts. This, we suggest, is consistent with Indigenous people’s work to uphold and exercise language rights which can highlight the range and fullness of the contributions of Indigenous and endangered languages to urban change and sustainability transition, as languages encoded with deep place-based knowledge.

Translanguaging research has decolonial potential to serve an agenda of linguistic justice as post-colonial justice (Gazzola 2023). Some existing work in this direction aims to create more inclusive pedagogical and applied linguistic practices (Wei and García 2022). Wei and García note that translanguaging can be “intended as a decolonizing project, that is, a way to undo the process through which the knowledge base and linguistic/cultural practices of colonized people was obliterated” (Wei and García 2022: 314).

In reference to Indigenous languages, Jeannette Armstrong writes about the importance of land to the language, and notes that “the land as language surrounds us completely, just like the physical reality of it surrounds us” (Armstrong 2017: 144). Armstrong reminds us that “Indigenous peoples’ languages are generated by a precise geography and arise from it. Over time and many generations of their people, it is their distinctive interaction with a precise geography which forms the way indigenous language is shaped and subsequently how the world is viewed, approached, and expressed verbally by its speakers” (Armstrong 2017: 144). This speaks to how languages and the land are tied to one another.

Recognizing these languages, and the expertise of the original stewards and creators of them, is essential to understanding what it means to live in a city and strive to shape more sustainable futures in cities (Todd 2023).

Further, Paul J. Meighan notes: “Indigenous languages are important for many reasons. One major reason that I think about frequently is a unique, relational way of naming, seeing, and relating to the world, which is particular to a specific area, land, and ecosystem. Indigenous languages are like ecological encyclopedias and ancestral guides with profound knowledge cultivated over centuries. If these languages are not passed on, then this wisdom is lost to humanity and the generations to come” (Chiblow and Meighan, 2022: 207).



Credit: Estefania Acero Buitrago.



Sydhavn, Copenhagen. Credit: Meg Holden.

Storytelling is a key component of developing and articulating Indigenous worldviews and the oral tradition of knowledge expansion and transmission. The connotations associated with storytelling in English explicitly discredit this emancipatory potential of storytelling, for Indigenous people. Much more than something that English speakers might refer to as the spinning of yarns, storytelling is a means to record and articulate laws, governance, history, and other aspects of society, and is part of intergenerational communication and knowledge, collective identities and ways of knowing in Indigenous communities (Borrows 2001; Iseke-Barnes 2004; Aikio-Puoskari 2018). As noted by Indigenous law scholar John Borrows, “[t]he transmission of oral traditions in these societies is bound up with the configuration of language, political structures, economic systems, social relations, intellectual methodologies, morality, ideology, and the physical world” (Borrows, 2001: 8).

In short, “Stories are how we learn what we need to know to be a “good human being” (Williams 2019: 35). Without the language resources, skills and repertoires to support storytelling, Indigenous futures are diminished, along with the wisdom and epistemological and experiential opportunity structures that Indigenous futures offer to humanity. Joks, Østmo and Law (2020) explain the action-oriented character of North Sámi language, and with the example of Sámi word *meahcci* showcase the “situated and radically relational ways of knowing” that translations cannot contain, and the alternative possibilities of language learning (Joks, Østmo and Law 2020: 305).

This last point is especially important to remember in the context of Indigenous languages whose threatened and endangered status is indicative of other forms of exclusion and harm. Iseke-Barnes writes that “The importance of learning [an] Indigenous language is not because I hold to the often held belief that multiple languages in the world are important because of some misapplied need for diversity but because learning the language is part of healing the wounds of the colonial past and reconnecting to an Indigenous past and future” (2004: 53) (see **Box: The language of sustainability in Skwxwú7mesh snichim and hən̓d̓əm̓iṇəm**).



## The language of sustainability in Skwxwú7mesh snichim and hə́ŋqəmiŋəm

How are key urban and sustainability terms and concepts expressed, applied and debated differently in Skwxwú7mesh snichim and hə́ŋqəmiŋəm, the two original languages of the place now known as Vancouver?

Collaborating with Skwxwú7mesh snichim and hə́ŋqəmiŋəm speakers, we will look at Indigenous languages and cultural knowledge of stewardship and planning and relate these to English and global understandings of sustainable development and sustainable cities. The recognition that responsibility and relationality are embedded into many Indigenous languages will shape this project stream into a wider conversation of how other Indigenous languages around the world express ‘sustainability’, and compare these concepts to English sustainability terms.

The hope is that the conversations about Skwxwú7mesh snichim and hə́ŋqəmiŋəm sustainability concepts will be shared through a video that can also widen to share terms in other Indigenous languages. This project stream is intended to provide an opportunity to develop more lasting and reciprocal relationships with local Indigenous partners about stewardship planning traditions on their lands and share understanding of the truth and stories of these lands – in a non-exploitative and mutually beneficial way, and in support of Nations’ own language revitalization goals.



hə́ŋqəmiŋəm alphabet. Credit: Museum of Vancouver exhibit on ɕəsnaʔəm, the city before the city.

Research into the contributions of Indigenous languages and terminologies to our understanding of sustainability proceeds with recognition that Indigenous rights include language, and how this all relates to the overriding need for self-determination of Indigenous peoples, including TRC (2016) Calls to Action #13-17 regarding the preservation and promotion of Indigenous languages.



**Truth and Reconciliation**  
Commission of Canada

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007) also affirms Indigenous Peoples' rights to revitalize, use, develop and teach their languages and associated oral traditions, names, writing systems and literatures, rights to establish and control education systems in their own languages, rights to establish media in their own languages, including where these rights require effective measures to be taken by states to protect these rights; as well as rights to their traditional cultural expressions.

Further research in this area of SAGA research may include:

- attention to the use of Indigenous languages and principles in formal urban sustainability and urban development policies, including place names, legal expressions, and stories; studies of Indigenous language revitalization efforts in urban contexts and the return of languages to the land in urban spaces and practices (eg. Plant names on signage in areas of restoration); and
- studies of the experience and implications of moving across languages among Indigenous language speakers.



Signage from the Indigenous Plant Garden at the Museum of Vancouver, designed and planted by T'uy't'tanat Cease Wyss. Credit: Museum of Vancouver.



## Translanguaging and what gets lost in automatic translation

Recent advances in digital and automated communications technologies have decreased the friction of communication across languages. These technologies are growing in importance with growth in diversity of cities as well as rise in AI language tools.



From a translanguaging perspective, however, rapid and ready terminological translation from one language to another is a superficial and relatively uninteresting component of the languaging process. More interesting to SAGA is the study of what meanings get “lost in translation” (Mazak 2016: 2; García 2009).

Credit: Holden and Airas 2024.

Translanguaging analysis in this respect may permit researchers to uncover strategies, intentions, feelings, and other kinds of context that stretch and shift language uses in dynamic and creative ways. SAGA is conducting analyses that compare and contrast aspects of language and meaning that are lost in automatic translation but preserved with contextual attention to translanguaging. In so doing, they aim to invent new possibilities of social and cultural understanding across context by generating understandings across languages and cultures of the embedded social meanings of terms in use.

SAGA research in this area is designing, piloting and reiterating workshops for classroom, community and academic participants engaging in sustainability learning, to create channels for participants to bring their language repertoires more explicitly to their efforts (see **Box: Sustainability beyond Google Translate**). Methodological formats being developed include narrative writing and storytelling workshops, crowdsourcing creative expressions through social media campaigns, and community theatre. Accompanying these workshops are a portfolio of activities we are designing with the intention to centre unique, specific, cultural and contextual understandings and actions related to sustainability, including questionnaires, exercises using qualitative data displays such as word clouds and mind maps, and image and word-based elicitation based on personal linguistic and cultural repertoires, related terms and related concepts.

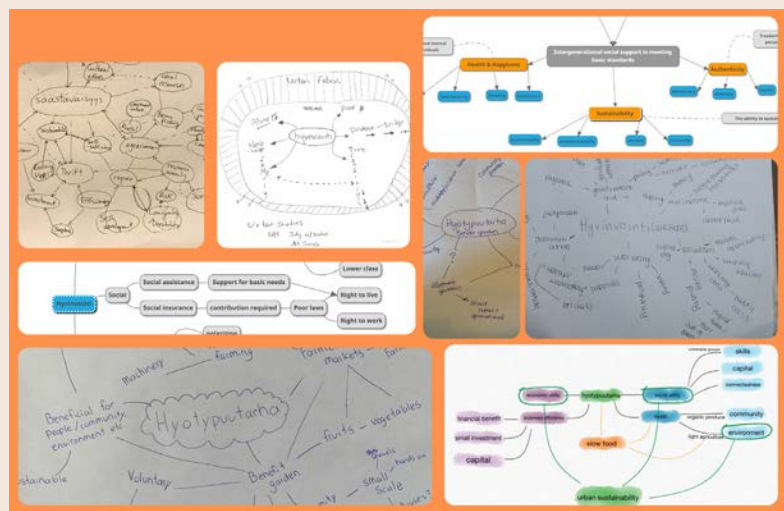
These workshops and workshop tools are additionally being assessed for their learning and sustainability activation effects. Assessment methodologies prioritize individual and group reflections that seek to articulate and demonstrate differences between AI-generated and human-generated translations and interpretations, and the specific values of reflective engagement in social, emotional and place-based connections with sustainability-relevant terms and concepts.



## Sustainability beyond Google Translate

Between 2020-2022, Annika Airas and Meg Holden designed and piloted a multi-phased workshop with interdisciplinary and multilingual students in a course related to sustainability at Simon Fraser University. Students undertook a series of activities centred on introducing and inviting unique, specific cultural and contextual understandings and actions related to sustainability, and explicitly drawing attention to the work of moving across languages. Students were tasked with selecting value-laden words in a non-English language they had some familiarity with, that are positively and negatively related to sustainability. They investigated these terms through family, personal and social networks and created an initial mind map of terms.

Next, students were exposed to sustainability-related terms in languages that were not familiar to any of them: Finnish and Danish. They received expert and contextualized cultural understanding of the terms and had the opportunity to question and engage in these meanings with classroom guests. They constructed mind maps from these languages back to English on the basis of this new understanding and completed the workshop by offering a narrative understanding of the difference that context and culture makes to understanding of sustainability and its operationalization at an individual scale, and by reflecting on their own language repertoire and its value to their learning and action on sustainability (Holden and Airas 2024).



Collage of student mind maps. Credit: Holden and Airas 2024.



## Translanguaging for intentional sustainability transition

This normative research direction for SAGA attempts to analyze, understand and promote the use of translanguaging in order to motivate sustainable city transitions. This is a pragmatic, democratic and social justice research orientation. It accepts as a starting point that sustainability transition is a social change proposition and accepts that viable proposals for social progress in a democratic context demand strategies that offer some perceived value that outstrips the costs and discomfort of change among groups that can be expected to bear some impacts of the changes (Wals 1996; Broto and Westman 2019).

This SAGA research direction is therefore grounded in existing efforts to connect social justice and sustainability movements. The SAGA research in this vein adds the proposition that language constitutes an underexamined but essential means to address equity and justice to motivate sustainability transitions. Amongst the linking efforts between sustainability and social justice movements, language should be taken into account. The intersectionality of languages amongst other dimensions of difference should be considered as a key means of equitably accounting for the winners, losers, and those caught in the crossfire of sustainability transitions.

Cultural norms as well as structural and operational conditions of marginalization and exclusion of people and cultures are key drivers of risk related to the unsustainability of cities and these dynamics obstruct the prospects for sustainability transition. In this way, greater attention to culture in the city can be a key means to mitigate sustainability risk; and a key means to remove barriers to sustainability transition. Even as attention to cultural rights and collective action in relation to sustainable development grows in cities, urban institutions are typically not equipped to even identify vulnerable conditions, let alone remediate them directly. Listening to marginalized voices is most effective when this happens in languages of meaning to those people.



Anti-litter advertisement in Montréal. Each phrase is a mash-up of two terms, crafted to draw attention to the neglect in polluting daily urban practices that are rarely discussed: hand bag/poop bag (discarding one's poop bag on the sidewalk); trash bin/forgetting (forgetting that trash bins exist); cigarette butt/egotism (butting out wherever it lands). Credit: Meg Holden.

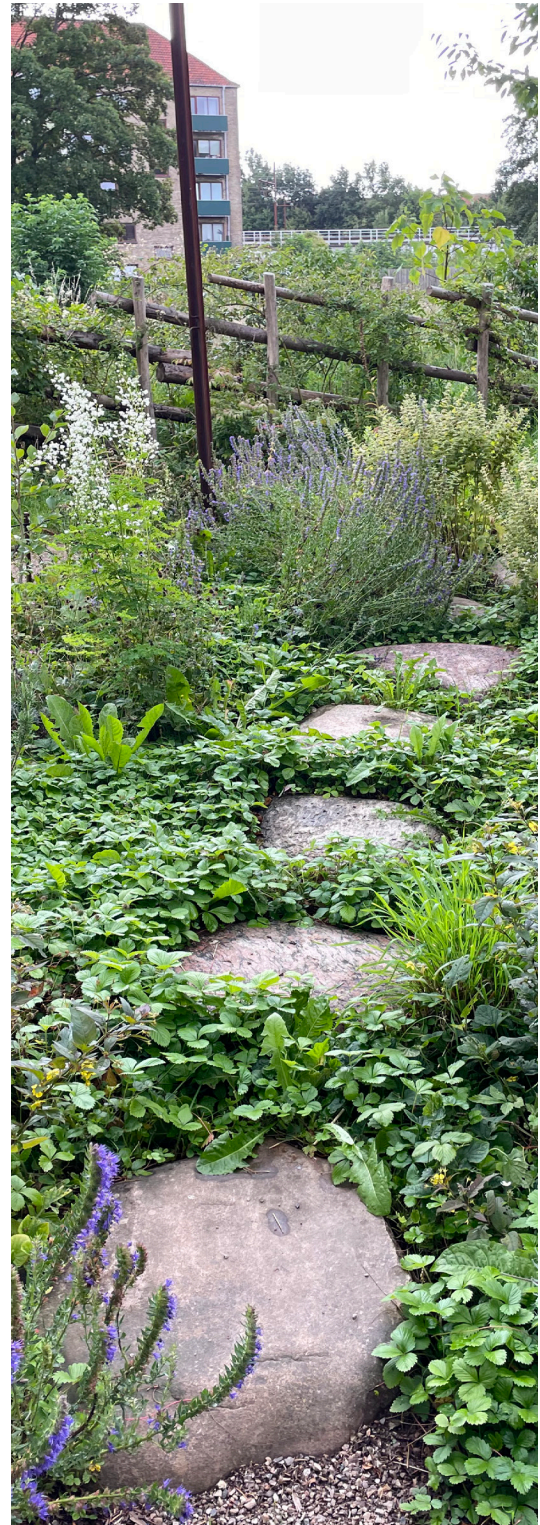
In addition to being part of the cost and benefit equation that needs balancing when sustainability transitions are proposed, mobilizing across language differences is also key to revealing and operationalizing the implementation of sustainability transition. Sustainability transitions research recognizes the crucial importance of local, nonexpert engagement; however there exists a range of opinions and models of how this engagement should happen. Some characterize the role in terms of critical agents, offering essential and distinct insights, many of which are invisible to international processes. Some think of the role in terms of the networks that people belong to and carry messag-

es and influence within. Some consider people’s role in political activism and protest movements, especially those led by Indigenous, youth, and communities of difference, to be paramount. People’s role as social learners – identified as learning that straddles multiple social entities and ways of knowing – works across these postulated routes to transition (Dodman et al. 2022).

SAGA research in this dimension recognizes that, when it comes to engagement in sustainability transition and urban transformation, language carries the bulk of what people know and share with one another. Methods including social learning, community engagement and the construction of real world lab environments, making more effective use of the language repertoires available, will be deployed in order to develop new ways to reduce the risk and increase the motivation for transition across different groups.

SAGA research in this area will pursue convention theory analysis to articulate the dynamics of justifications employed in different languages in climate action policy. This research will proceed from the top down, examining international climate policy discourse and documents to examine the justification of net zero cities definitions, goals and targets across multiple languages, as well as from the bottom up, examining the policy definitions, goals and targets for climate action crafted by and in cities, in multiple languages. Participant observation and interview-based research will be used to understand whether and how actors in sustainability transitions spaces use language repertoires to close the gap in meaning between international and local processes. We will test the hypothesis that attention to translanguaging efforts made by actors in international and local sustainability transitions spaces can explain a significant component of making meaning and motivating action toward urban sustainability transition, and that these translanguaging efforts create significant tension and pressure across scales and sustainability agendas.

Attention to translanguaging elucidates the interplay of language, culture and practice conventions, particularly where these are intricately related to deeper shifts in locus of culture, meaning, and value in the envisioned and aspirational sustainable city (see **Box: Hygge: Danish cool and global urban sustainability transition?**).





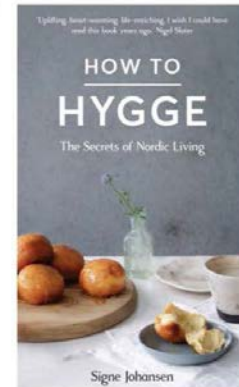
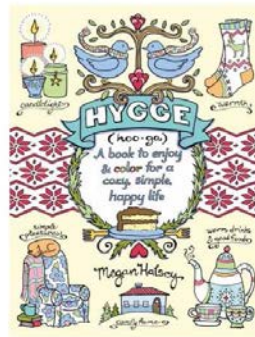
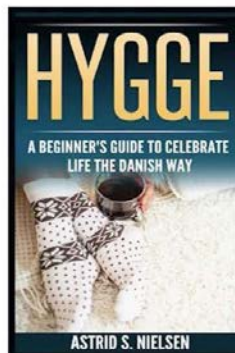
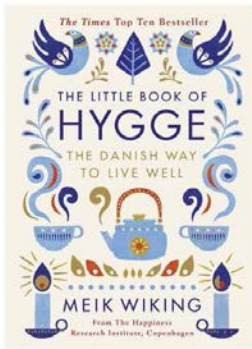
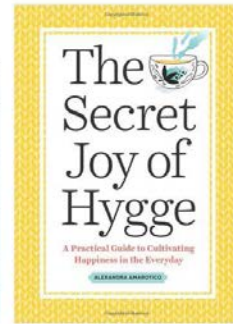
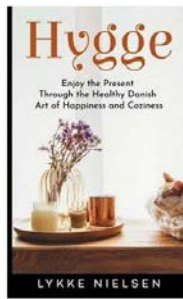
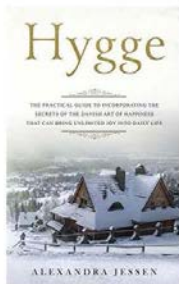
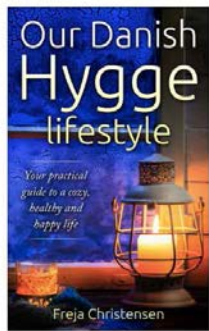
## Hygge: Danish cool and global urban sustainability transition?

Majken Toftager Larsen explores the Scandi-cool “hygge” trend, focusing on its historical and cultural dimensions within Denmark. Hygge has evolved into a cultural keyword that captures a Danish perspective on positive sociality (Borish 1991) that can be expressed in different Danish social domains from recreation and sport, to politics and national identity, architecture and interior design (Levisen 2012).

This case study highlights the role of hygge as a culturally specific concept that shapes everyday routines and cultural norms. Challenges of cross-cultural comparisons arise, particularly regarding the risk of imposing Anglo-centric interpretations of coziness, which may dilute hygge’s nuanced and deeply rooted meanings. These interpretations often ignore the dynamics pertaining to the sociality of hygge. This includes attention to aspects such as the exercise of social control where the aspiration for comfort within the group means avoidance of conflicts and differing opinions and aspirations (Linnet 2011).

This case study connects hygge to egalitarian values in Denmark, and, for instance, its significance in evaluating urban space quality, particularly within urban planning strategies that prioritize livability. Ultimately, hygge serves as a lens through which social activities in urban environments can be understood and enhanced. Hygge offers a unique, and not easily translatable expression of Danish sociality.

# THE HYGGE TREND



Credit: Majken Toftager Larsen.

# CONCLUSION

## *SAGA: The texture of the road ahead*

This paper presents the conceptual framework for SAGA Translanguaging and Sustainability research and an open invitation to join us in addressing these questions. As the SAGA project moves forward, SAGA is seeking research projects that contribute to each of these described research foci within translanguaging and sustainability. SAGA is also interested in opportunities to deliver customized workshops on these themes in formal educational, community, and expert settings.

Across the foci sketched here, SAGA has a collection of survey questionnaire and other similar assessment tools that we will develop continuously. We encourage SAGA researchers to use these tools wherever possible in order to gauge the evolving level of interest and relevance of a translanguaging approach within sustainability research. As part of this, SAGA is seeking input to the project's repository of terms and definitions of interest that we will compile as a glossary of culturally-relevant sustainability terms and concepts, across languages.

SAGA is at the same time advancing conceptual and theoretical grounding for our approach, including the pursuit of interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks and arguments best suited to justify and structure our constructivist, multi-method and partnership-oriented methodological approach, and the pursuit of research into ideological and philosophical bases for motivating sustainability transition in cities, with a pragmatic orientation.

SAGA is interested in growing existing and new partnerships, inside the academy and beyond. Meaningful partnerships should contribute to: understanding the terminology and socioterminology of sustainability, across languages, the unique and site-specific history and cultural grounding of languages and terminologies in sustainability transitions work in cities and international practice, and attracting the attention of practitioners and non-experts to the role of language and working across languages in sustainability positions and actions.

SAGA seeks to advance an ethical and collaborative approach to research. The project's Data Management Plan is a living document that elaborates on the ways in which SAGA researchers communicate, collaborate, collect, store and use data, present, publish and mobilize knowledge. We are guided by the Canadian Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethics involving Human Participants (TCPS2), by the ethics policies and practices of our research partners, and by a commitment to distinct treatment of respect and priority to the role of indigenous languages in a context of Truth and Reconciliation.

We hope that this starting point conceptual paper has introduced the scope of research interest within SAGA. We also hope that it has raised additional questions for you and we invite you to be in touch with SAGA to pose these questions, propose a partnership or an opportunity for a workshop to deepen and pursue these investigations.

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Website: <https://www.sfu.ca/sustainabledevelopment/research/saga-project.html>

Take a look at SAGA's online [Snapshot](#) infographic.

## Some SAGA Research Questions for Further Consideration

- What are the relationships between ideas about cities and sustainability, in the words used to define urban material practices, in different languages and locations?
- How do particular social actors create and transform the terms that describe and designate urban realities, in relation to sustainability objectives and visions?
- What concepts appear in terms that are shared among different cities and languages, and what concepts are unique to specific cities and languages?
- What changes in meaning and usage of key terms across languages, and in different cities, are meaningful to sustainability transitions and sustainable futures?
- What are the effects of English neologisms in sustainability and climate discourse? What are their ties to ancient and non-English wisdom?
- How do different expert, community, and student learning settings and efforts affect translanguaging efforts and contributions to urban sustainability transitions?
- What terms and concepts defy direct translation? What can be done to improve shared understanding across languages and cultures, in these cases?
- How can we facilitate and smooth the passage between languages in multilingual discourse about sustainable urbanism?
- What is the effectiveness of the translanguaging approach in terms of respect for the language-specific understandings of concepts and practices of sustainable cities?
- What opportunities exist for resistance to English domination as the language of research and science in sustainability? What are the trends and counter-trends?
- What role exists for the use of Indigenous languages and principles in formal and informal urban sustainability and urban development agendas, including place names, urban design, laws, rights and regulations, and stories?
- How are Indigenous language revitalization efforts in urban contexts returning languages to the land in urban spaces and practices?
- How is moving across languages experienced among Indigenous language speakers participating in urban sustainability efforts?
- What windows to understanding sustainability transition are opened by attention to different languages in context? What windows have been closed by inattention to and erasure of language differences?
- Can we change sustainability transition dynamics through attention to translanguaging dynamics? Are there trade offs or drawbacks?
- Can attention to translanguaging in sustainability transitions spaces explain part of the meaning and motivation for action toward urban sustainability transition?
- Can translanguaging efforts create discursive potential to generate or transform sustainability agendas?
- How can greater attention to language and culture in the city mitigate sustainability risk; and act as a key means to remove barriers to sustainability transition?

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