

Who's Afraid of Multilingualism? Language and Intersectionality

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Abstract

This contribution to the special issue addresses questions of social justice in the field of applied linguistics through the optics of multilingualism and intersectionality and from the standpoint of language teachers and learners. In monolingualist ideology, the multilingual speaker is transformed from the normal condition to the linguistic other, especially those without a clearly identifiable L1 or whose L1 does not conform to their presupposed linguistic identity. Linguistic theory contributes to this result by assigning an almost mystic quality to the “mother tongue” and its “native speakers,” when these questions can be and are quite fluid in our multilingual world. This article suggests the need for paradigm shifts in three areas. First, the too-frequent focus on how to best promote learning in the target language needs to make way for how to best promote multilingual proficiency up to advanced knowledge of several languages. Second, it is time to demystify the “mother tongue” or “native” or “first” language. Finally, the field needs to conceptualize “non-native speaking” teachers for their essential qualities—their *multilingual proficiency*—to form a better valuation of their actual language teaching skillset.

Keywords: language policy; equity; monolingual ideology; multilingual proficiency

I particularly welcome Anna Kristina Hultgren's invitation “to query our own epistemological baggage and reflect on the presuppositions in our field.” I, like the other contributors, am interested in places where our profession might inadvertently reinforce inequality. But let's set out definitions and presuppositions, starting with the field itself. What (and principally who) do we include under its umbrella? I would tend to define it quite broadly, including not only scholars, but practitioners—language teachers of all kinds). If the World Bank is even approximately correct in its estimate of more than 80 million teachers worldwide (Roser, 2019), and if we arbitrarily (but rather conservatively) take one fifth of them to be involved in language instruction in its broadest sense, that gives a figure of 16 million applied linguistics professionals. To be really democratic about it, in keeping with a social justice perspective, we should also include language learners—perhaps on the order the 1.5

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billion school-aged children at a minimum, though at least *potentially* every human being is a language learner and an indefinite but large proportion of them are engaged in language learning of some kind.

I don't say this merely for reasons of analytical rigor. It is the collective practice of all of these people that will determine the answer to the kinds of broad questions that Hultgren raises. Even if we take the term *applied linguists* as exclusively referencing scholars in the field, I conceive one of and perhaps *the* central mission of the field of applied linguistics to be training language educators and producing research that informs their practice. I will, then, examine this question primarily from the standpoint of language teachers and language learners and the social institutions—schools—where a large part of their work takes place.

The school is a place where applied linguists in the narrower sense unquestionably have influence. Few of the state functionaries who serve as the principal architects of language policy in the schools probably read the writings of applied linguists. But the orthodoxies we create reach them in other ways. Since the vast majority of us are educators, we have an outsized impact through the language teachers who pass through our classrooms and thus become consumers of the fruits of scholarship in the field—and with it the “epistemological baggage” that may come with it.

Let me take a concrete example, in the person of a second grader, who I will call “Adrianna,” a student in a dual language Spanish-English bilingual school in a large midwestern city in the US (Brutt-Griffler, 2019). She is just one of the dozens of such students who participated in a recent large-scale study conducted by a team of researchers I headed, convened at the request of the school's principal, looking into questions of curriculum and closing the so-called “achievement gap.” We collected data by a number of means, including school records, test scores, classroom ethnographies, and survey instruments. But what I found the most interesting were the interviews with the kids themselves, especially the second and third graders.

Few had more to say, or were more emphatic or enthusiastic about saying it, than Adrianna. And never was she more insistent than when she was challenged on her identity in the following exchange among her, a fellow second grader and two interviewers:

Interviewer 1: Do you guys listen to music in both languages?

Adrianna: I like music in English.

Manolito: I like Spanish.

Interviewer 2: Because you consider yourself Puerto Rican, right?

Manolito: But Adrianna is not Puerto Rican!

Adrianna: Yes, I do! *Yo soy puertorriqueña*. ["I am Puerto Rican."] (Student Interview, May 24, 2017)

It was typical of the interviews we conducted. The students were given their choice of language by the bilingual interviewers. Even though they chose English, these two, like the others, switched seamlessly back and forth between the two languages according to what they had to say. It was not, however, accidental that Adrianna should have chosen to do the interview in English. Though born in Puerto Rico and having started school there, she had since moved to the mainland US and, in her view, acquired another identity expressed in another language. "I like English and Spanish because I want to speak English and Spanish." She added later in further explanation, "My brother speaks English and Spanish. I wanna be like him." Still, teasingly challenged as to her identity, Adrianna could only express what she wanted to say in Spanish. After having begun her answer in English—"Yes, I do [consider myself Puerto Rican]"—she affirmed her identity in the language she attached to it (Student Interview, May 24, 2017).

She is not the only one to think so. The school system also classifies Adrianna and the vast majority of her schoolmates as Puerto Rican—or at least Spanish-speaking. In talking to the kids themselves, however, you quickly discover that the reality is a little bit more complex. For instance, consider this dialogue between two third graders and an interviewer.

Interviewer: Would you prefer to have more of your learning take place in Spanish or in English or is it about the same?

Mia: Um...Spanish.

Interviewer: You want more Spanish. Because?

Mia: Because I already know, like, a lot of English. I want to move on to Spanish. Uh!

Camilo: You'll be Puerto Rican.

Mia: Yeah. I'm half Puerto Rican.

Interviewer: You're half Puerto Rican?

Mia: Yeah.

Interviewer: What's your other half?

Mia: Um, American.

Camilo: I'm half American, but I was born in Puerto Rico.

Mia: My mom was born in Puerto Rico.

Camilo: Because mom, my mom is like...she's from Boston, Massachusetts, but she don't speak English. No, she don't speak English. That's why we're more Spanish. She was...she acts like she was born in Puerto Rico because that's where she grew up. (Student Interview, June 7, 2016)

Mia reveals that she prefers to speak English. Asked why, she answers "Because I was born in the U.S.A." So, although she wants to learn Spanish, she, like not a few of her classmates, admits that she struggles to speak, understand, read and write the language. Camilo, on the other hand, says, "I'm comfortable in the classroom with English, but, like, Spanish is my language." Still, he would prefer that more of the school content were given in English. "I like learning in Spanish, but...I already know that—that much Spanish." He wants to learn English, but he says he doesn't want English "all the time" "because I feel comfortable with Spanish too." He adds, "I can't live without Spanish," to which Mia remarks, "Me neither" (Student Interview, June 7, 2016).

The kids can playfully tease one another about their rather fluid identities because of their ready familiarity with each other's strengths and weaknesses in both Spanish and English. They are so familiar with each other's language proficiencies because they not only interact throughout the school day but help one another to get through, the strengths of some balancing the weaknesses of others. Ironically, however, the vast majority of the students at the school are, according to the classifications of the school system itself, Spanish speaking—or in the usual parlance first language speakers of Spanish and second language learners of English. The name given to the curriculum in Spanish language and literacy says it all: "Native Language Arts."

For both Adrianna and especially Mia, such outward ascriptions of identity and language come with the social space they occupy. If we view them through the lens of intersectionality (Cho et al, 2013), we recognize that they face multiple layers of oppression in mainstream American society: their ethnicity/race, gender and class. But there is another component that we cannot afford to overlook: their linguistic identity as Spanish speaking multilinguals—or, to put it inversely, as non-monolingual English speakers. Even at the age of 7 or 8, the students of this bilingual school show their acute awareness of how they are marked off by language. Asked what language his family uses at home, Manolito poses his own question, "Here or in Puerto Rico?... Here I speak English...because here everyone speaks English, in this state."

Adrianna corrects him. “But some people speak Spanish” (Student Interview, June 7, 2016).

She is, of course, perfectly right. In the American state to which Manolito refers, home to both of them and the school they attend, about one in five residents speak Spanish as a mother tongue (the same percentage that French speakers comprise in Canada). According to the Instituto Cervantes, the US is already the world's second largest Spanish speaking nation with more than 50 million speakers (Instituto Cervantes, 2015). The US Census Bureau projects that that number will rise precipitously in the years to come, by one estimate possibly rivaling Mexico as the largest Spanish speaking nation by mid-century (Ryan, 2013). The US is a multilingual nation in its linguistic practice.

The language speaking choices made by the students of bilingual schools like the one Adrianna and Mia attend will help decide just how large a Spanish speaking nation the US ultimately becomes. So where do their classmates like Manolito get the quite false notion that they live in a monolingual nation, associating “American” with speaking English despite Adrianna's quite apt observation that so many speak Spanish? He is aware that the dual language program he attends only goes through grade 6. There is no corresponding dual language program past that grade into which he or his classmates can transition. The effect is not only that their Spanish will fall behind their English but that they will in all likelihood never develop the advanced proficiency that only comes through schooling in a language. This is a terrible waste, a detriment both to the students and to society. Educational policy, even where it includes dual language education professing as this one does to produce “fully” bilingual, biliterate and bicultural students, far too often in effect becomes one designed to replace the first language.

Here is where, however we understand the ultimate origins of the prejudices involved, ideologies associated with language are powerful social vectors in their own right. The students of this bilingual school are only too aware of the consequences. They are expressed educationally in their relegation to a segregated inner-city urban school at which 90 percent of the students are classified as Latinx (with the other 10% African American) and at which the vast majority of the students receive free lunches, an index of their socioeconomic status in the American context.

It would be as wrong to ignore linguistic identity as a component of the intersectionality of girls like Adrianna and Mia as to confine our analysis to questions of language at the expense of other categories of social existence. The notion of intersectionality postulates that each of the components that comprise it is significant and necessary to an understanding of the whole (Cho et al, 2013). We can't take discrimination on the basis of language spoken lightly. We can't ignore the impact of language ideologies as social forces in their own right. Whatever their origins and whatever other purposes they serve, monolingualist ideologies, including those that have infiltrated linguistic theory, have taken on an independent life and can only be combatted by drawing specific attention to them. Certainly, we as applied linguists must have the same ethical and professional responsibilities as climate scientists, who have not only presented to the world the scientific evidence for climate change but have added to it their professional assessment of what should be done to avert planetary catastrophe.

In the case of applied linguistics, the professional responsibility may be clear, but the scientific consensus found in climate science is often absent. There is abundant evidence of the endangerment of many of the world's languages. There is nevertheless nothing like any definitive understanding of its causes or remedies. As a field, we lack consensus on many questions, from our understanding of the process of the second language acquisition that we study to the underlying theory of language on which we rely. Moreover, as Hultgren rightly postulates, we cannot as easily separate the scientific from the political as climate scientists. Because our field lacks the scientific consensus found in climate science, political advocacy will continue to look like political advocacy and not "what the science says."

Here is where we very much need to be the "empirically committed scholars" that Hultgren describes us as. The most prevalent conditions throughout recorded history as well as today have been those of multilingualism; monolingualism always has been and remains the exception. That is an important condition of the problem. It tells us, for instance, that it's not so much dominant languages that threaten endangered ones as the suppression of multilingualism. Ecologies of cultures and languages have always included and incorporated the lingua francas that come and go (inclusive of supranational lingua francas like

Swahili and national languages such as Hindi or Urdu). So, who is afraid of multilingualism?

I have elsewhere pointed out (Brutt-Griffler, 2006a) that, considered empirically, it is not in its capacity as a world language (a language of multilinguals) that English threatens endangered languages. It is rather the national languages (or subnationally, dominant local languages) that are acquiring more and more native speakers at the expense of smaller languages. In that sense, as Hultgren notes, nationalists are some of those who engage in scare tactics about the alleged dangers of multilingualism. It is nevertheless true that nationalism thrives in various circumstances, not all or even most of which are monolingualist.

Nationalists actually stake out two alternative, mutually exclusive positions. The first can be described as “one nation, one language,” such as the notorious “English only” proponents in the US. So commonly misunderstood as endemic to nationalism is this monolingualist version that it is not unusual to find the adoption of a “common language” as numbering among the essential components of the development of the nation. Consider the description of the emergence of the English nation in the 1300s by historian Robert Colls in his *Identity of England*, which included “a distinctive sense of territory and ethnicity, an English church, a set of national fables, and a clear common language and feeling that certain things could be said only in that language” (Colls, 2004, p. 18). Despite the predilection of theorists of nationalism like Colls for the centrality of a national language in a largely monolingual context, that is very far from being the exclusive—or even the dominant—condition of nations in our world.

If anything, the principle of “one nation, many languages” is more prevalent. As in the case of South Africa, with its 11 official languages, or Switzerland with its four, or Luxemburg and Belgium with their three each, or Canada with its two, it may be enshrined in its constitution. That multilingual national principle may also take the form of a codified lingua franca which few speak as a first language, like Bahasa Indonesia, Pilipino (Philippines), or Swahili (Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda). In other cases, principally in postcolonial contexts, it is an elite lingua franca like English or French with the expectation that the vast majority in the nation speak many and locally different languages. Some nationalists oppose the use of *certain* languages, usually for their colonial heritage—such as Ngugi Wa Thiong’s well-known opposition to English or, as is

more common, the anti-French sentiment in some of France's former colonies. But few if any advocate the monolingualist ideology that represents something entirely different. Even nations with a strongly entrenched national language spoken by nearly all citizens, like the Republic of Korea or Saudi Arabia, pursue state-sponsored policies of ensuring multilingualism by the early introduction of English, in which they discern no threat to either the nation or its national medium.

The monolingualist principle of "one nation, one language" is not the simple reflex of nationalism, not the inevitable result of the division of the world into nations (and cultures). As language scientists, we have the responsibility to expose the false claims of monolingualist ideology. In doing so, we should leave certain endeavors to the political project of nationalism rather than providing them the cover of scientific legitimacy, as for instance with indexing nationality to language(s) spoken, attempting to determine who is a "native speaker" of a given language, or stamping words with the seal of approval of "belonging" to a particular language. Using languages spoken, especially "natively" or as "mother tongues," as an indicator of nationality is too often associated with an anti-migrant outlook, meaning it easily slides into xenophobia and racism, in common with the related boundary maintenance of identifying people who "don't look like they belong" to a given nation (Brutt-Griffler, 2006b). At its worst, such policing of national borders degenerates into the actions of the vigilantes in the US who "patrol" airports along the US-Mexican border accosting people they deem to look Latinx and demanding that they supply the proof of citizenship that many Americans do not carry and are not required by law to possess. Dividing speakers into the "native" and "nonnative," in large part a legacy of European colonialism (Brutt-Griffler, 2002), falls into the same category. All too often it is used to differentiate the citizens of a nation into different categories of "belonging"—closely akin to the notion of "optional identity" that white Americans enjoy as opposed to the required hyphenated status of those positioned as nonwhite (Brutt-Griffler, 2006b).

To that end, even where states and supranational institutions like the EU stake claim to multilingualism, not all languages are always treated equally. According to 2012 Eurobarometer data, and looking just at the 15- to 34-year-old demographic to get a forward-looking measure, Russian, Turkish and Arabic are the 13th, 18th, and 21st most spoken

mother tongues within the EU, in the same range, for instance, as Swedish (15th), Danish (16th) and Finnish (19th). Using those same parameters, Arabic speakers comprise 5.74% of Belgium's population (compared to the 5.69% of Finns who speak Swedish).¹ The corresponding figures for France and Sweden are 3.52% and 2.62%. Turkish is spoken as a mother tongue by 5.8% of that demographic in Bulgaria, 4.75% in Belgium,² and 4.59% in Germany. An additional 9.01% of Germans of that age are mother tongue Russian speakers. In comparison, in only two EU nations (Poland and Sweden) do more than 2% of 15 to 34-year olds claim to be mother tongue speakers of English (2.48% and 2.45%) (<https://languageknowledge.eu/>).

Less obviously, perhaps, attempting to determine which words belong to which languages is of a similar nature. It is as contrary to the nature of human language development as the claim once mooted that English is particularly suited to be a world language because its vocabulary is largely comprised of "foreign borrowings." Speakers of many languages, for example, have adopted the word *smartphone* into local usage, including the French, much to the chagrin of the Enrichment Commission for the French Language. That august body has proposed, so far with no success, the alternative *le mobile multifonction* (Signoret 2018). Consider, however, two words equally dispersed across many of the world's languages: *algebra* and (slightly less ubiquitously) *zero*. Their origins lie in Arabic (not accidentally, but as a result of their discovery and global spread by some of the earliest scientists, those in the Arabic-speaking world during Europe's "dark ages"). Any attempt to distinguish "foreign borrowings" in the realm of science quickly runs into the realities that languages constantly come into contact and change as a result.

That some in our field nevertheless concern themselves with these manifestations of "verbal hygiene" evinces the influence monolingualist ideologies manage to exert in our incontrovertibly multilingual world. So does the discourse of "native language arts" and "first" and "second" languages that utterly fail to capture the far more complex realities of the language use of Adrianna, Mia and many of their multilingual peers. The consequences on them can be profound. For instance, Adrianna, Mia and

¹ Using just the 15-24 demographic, Arabic speakers account for 9% in that same 2012 survey.

² 7% of 15-24-year-olds.

their classmates are consigned to their segregated school rather than the more prestigious nearby school with a dual Spanish-English language program, in this case for both “English dominant” and “Spanish dominant” pupils. Though it is not part of the explicit justification, the latter program housed in a school in an affluent, English-speaking neighborhood’s is sized in accordance with the small demand for such a Spanish-English bilingual program in a society that does not prioritize multilingualism. It may thus “import” a handful of Spanish-dominant students from other areas of the city, but cannot by its nature begin to offer a real educational alternative for the larger numbers of students like Adrianna and Mia. In real terms, then, affluent parents who want a bilingual education for their children get away with securing for them privileged access to a dual language program that effectively excludes the kids who go to Adrianna and Mia’s school because their needs as L1 or heritage language speakers are not catered for—insofar as segregation in the American schools ever needs justification.³ Here the categorical misrepresentations of linguistics founded on a monolingualist ideology that consigns bilingual education to the margins of the best-performing schools lend credence to what is really a social injustice—the preservation of privilege.

In monolingualist ideology, the multilingual speaker is transformed from the normal condition to the linguistic other, especially those without a clearly identifiable L1 or whose L1 does not conform to their presupposed linguistic identity. Linguistic theory contributes to this result by assigning an almost mystic quality to the “mother tongue” and its “native speakers,” when these questions can be and are quite fluid in our multilingual world. If we are going to be empirical, then we can’t ignore the language using experience of Adrianna and Mia, nor privilege that of the monolingual English-speaking child on the other side of the segregating divide in the American school system. That is especially true where it is done in deference to purely ideological considerations that come out of the “one nation, one language” perspective. In their concrete

³ The segregated schools in this public-school district derive from a complicated set of underlying ethnic and class realities that mostly obviates the need for any overt forms of exclusion, though ethnically and class segregated residential patterns lie at its basis. While there are aptitude-based admission criteria for select schools and programs, parental familiarity with the system (especially in the case of migrants) and transportation-related factors play an even greater role.

circumstances, the key questions applied linguists should ask are not why Adrianna or Mia know or don't know more Spanish than English or English than Spanish. It should be how do we best help them attain the highest possible levels of multilingual proficiency (Brutt-Griffler, 2017) they both seek.

Any empirical approach will have to conclude that language policy, whatever its limitations, has been historically and remains a powerful instrument—especially in the hands of the state. One of the places that the language policies of states are most effective comes in determining the presence or absence of multilingual proficiency among the children who pass through their school systems. Some nations ensure it. Others, like the US, combat multilingual proficiency even where its attainment should be easiest, as with kids like Adrianna and Mia.

Since the affluent can purchase multilingual proficiency and access to any language of parents' choice, the state exerts its most powerful impact in this respect on the non-affluent global majority. A social justice perspective would seem to require us to at least acknowledge that condition, even if we (distinctly undemocratically) approve its results where they are consonant with our own ideological predilections. Despite their parents sending them to a bilingual school, their desire to achieve multilingual proficiency and their hard work to attain it, as well as their teachers' dedication and resourcefulness, many of Adrianna and Mia's classmates are still experiencing language attrition. Or, to be more accurate, their Spanish is failing to keep pace with their rapidly developing English proficiency. And that is all happening in the institutional expression of the field of applied linguistics. That failure begins with us. What is the problem?

Attention to political issues is not enough. As with climate scientists, we need to get the science right. We need to fully understand our subject matter. And to do so, we do indeed need, as Hultgren suggests, to interrogate our own assumptions and "epistemological baggage." To take the standpoint of language learners, as I am advocating, means recognizing that in their infinite diversity that otherwise makes generalization treacherous, they do have one underlying commonality. All are working toward the objective of multilingual proficiency. An applied linguistics democratically built around them should take as its central purpose to aid them in their quest. All the less, then, should it

embrace monolingualist ideologies that are in conflict with language learners' multilingual aspirations and realities.

For starters, I suggest that we urgently need a paradigm shift in three major areas. First, we need to get our field to shift from a too-frequent focus on how to best promote learning in the target language to how to best promote multilingual proficiency up to advanced knowledge of several languages. Second, it is time to demystify the “mother tongue” or “native” or “first” language. Despite the significant body of scholarship on the limitations of the native speaker paradigm it remains firmly entrenched in part because we still as yet lack a comprehensive alternative linguistics not at least partially built on the centrality of learning language natively. We cannot expect to teach our students linguistics and applied linguistics built on the centrality of learning languages natively and nevertheless imagine that we will succeed in dethroning the native speaker from its place of privilege.

Doing so this will help to get school systems to focus not on which language a child learned first but in which does she have the highest level of proficiency, taking into account shifting “first” languages, language attrition, or cases in which there is no clear division into “first” and “second” languages. The demystification of the native speaker would also help get school systems to recognize that advanced language proficiency requires schooling throughout the child's educational career—so that the first language is not neglected once basic literacy has been imparted.

It is a problem that goes far beyond the US. Sometimes lost in the critical assessment of America's language policy is that it actually pretty closely mirrors that found in most of Europe. While it almost uniquely lacks a designated official language, the US does recognize what the EU calls regional languages. Spanish is official (together with English) in Puerto Rico, a US territory, as Chamorro is in Guam. In Puerto Rico, public schooling is in Spanish. English is reserved for those who can afford (and desire) to pay for it.

Though Puerto Ricans are US citizens, their experience with language would nevertheless be familiar to people relocating to EU nations, whose educational systems, despite the EU's policy of multilingualism, also too frequently aim to replace the first language with the national language. If the EU's multilingualism is to be about more than spreading a few dominant languages (not just English) across

the continent and promoting national languages and a few regional languages at home, it needs to pay considerably more attention to such languages as Arabic and Turkish. The statistics I cited above demonstrate that they are every bit as much the mother tongues of Europeans as Swedish, Danish and Finnish. The linguistic discrimination faced by so many speakers of Spanish in the US and Arabic and Turkish in Europe are some of the worst linguistic effects of the colonialism of the US in Latin America and Europe in Asia and Africa. The focus on the effects of English on European national languages can serve to mask these far larger-scale linguistic injustices.

The third need for paradigm shift follows from conceiving our field in its broadest professional dimensions: the dozens of millions of teachers who most closely interact with learners. The global spread of English in which Hultgren grounds her discussion serves as a reminder that a substantial proportion of them teach that language. Given the demographics of our field, it is important to remember that only a small percentage of them are so-called “native speakers” of English. A democratic, social justice perspective should alert us to the particularly pernicious influence of one virtually invisible tenet of monolingualist ideologies: the privileging of native speakers of English through the politically-driven narrative that they make ideal teachers/language modelers, even if they are monolinguals or do not speak any of the other languages of their students. If, instead, we conceptualize the “non-native speaking” teachers for their essential qualities—their multilingual proficiency—we form a better valuation of their actual language teaching skillset. As a field whose teaching practice is in large part devoted to training language teachers, we need to rethink the question of what skills a teacher/language modeler needs to best promote multilingual proficiency. In that sense, all of the contributors to this issue have played a positive role. And where I think we might find common ground, despite the diversity of views we represent, is around challenging monolingualist paradigms.

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