The complex simpleness of being bilingual: A rejoinder to ‘Theorizing the speaker and speakerness in applied linguistics’

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Introduction

When my older son started his reception year at age five in Tynemouth in the northeast of England, the school automatically classified him as an EAL (English as an Additional Language) pupil without asking us. The school knew us well, because I was Head of School of Education at Newcastle University, a member of a governing body of another local school and children’s centre, and we lived literally one street away from the school. They knew we spoke English and that our son was born in Newcastle, had never lived outside England and had grown up with English around him. Nevertheless, English was regarded as an additional language to him because he is Chinese by ethnicity and his parents also speak Chinese. I did not object to the school’s classifying our son as an EAL pupil. The school would get a little bit of additional funding for the number of EAL pupils they had, which was meant to be used to provide additional support to those who needed it. I did try to use the term ‘bilingual’ for my son wherever I could, but people took little notice of it and continued to use the term EAL.

I have recalled this story several times over the last 16 years since my son was a reception-year pupil. He is now a final-year law student at university. He does speak good Chinese, but English is his primary language. Yet he
continues to be labelled as an EAL speaker and is often taken as an overseas student from China. His younger brother who is just starting his university degree has had almost identical experience with his speaker identity. In the meantime, both our sons are treated as foreigners when we visit China as far as their speaker identity is concerned. Their accent in Chinese sounds foreign and their vocabularies and choice of expressions are not colloquial enough to be regarded as those of native speakers of Chinese. People in China also tend to regard them as lacking proficiency in Chinese due to their low Chinese literacy level. They are at best ‘heritage’ speakers of Chinese.

I have chosen to talk about my sons’ experiences rather than my own, because I grew up with only one language, Beijing Mandarin, even though my family’s ethnicity should have given us a different language, that of Manchu. English, which is my primary working language now, was a foreign language that I learned in a classroom context. Whilst I would very much prefer to be called simply ‘a bilingual’, I know that ‘speaker of English as a Foreign Language’ is the category I am assigned to.

To me, the best label for people like my sons, and myself too, remains ‘bilingual’ or ‘multilingual’. But we linguists are very good at inventing clumsy terms such as ‘additional language speakers’, ‘heritage (language) speakers’, ‘new speakers’, and then critique them ourselves. We have created an industry for ourselves. Don’t get me wrong; I know that these terms and labels are created for good reasons, in specific social conditions. Most of them have in fact served good purposes, to good effects, not least raising people’s awareness of the differences between groups of speakers of the same named languages – for example, heritage speakers of Spanish versus foreign-language learners of Spanish. And I myself have often emphasized the importance of recognizing the diversity amongst bilingual and multilingual language users and of moving away from regarding bilinguals and multilinguals as one category to be compared with so-called monolinguals. But the fact that we have all these different terms and labels means that there are some fundamental issues about speaker identity that need to be addressed systematically.

Pujolar and O’Rourke’s position paper is a very timely and important contribution to the debate over speaker identity. By invoking the concept of ‘speakerness’, they are asking much-needed critical questions as to who in society has the authority to assign, claim or deny themselves and others the status of legitimate speaker; the historical, political and material conditions that lead to the assignment, claim or denial; and the consequences of such assignment, claim and denial for the individuals concerned and for society as a whole. In the following I will comment briefly on three issues: the completeness-based models of speakerness, the special status of the English language and its speakerness and the sociolinguistic ideologies of ‘languagelessness’.
The completeness-based models of speakerness

As Pujolar and O’Rourke point out, the nationalist and evolutionist ideologies that supported the articulation of nation states and colonial rule during the nineteenth century are also behind the conceptualization of the ‘native speaker’. Yet, despite extensive critiques, the concept has persisted over generations. Indeed, the ‘native speaker’ continues to be a shadowy figure in the background of the proliferation of new, alternative terms such as ‘heritage speakers’ and ‘new speakers’, luring comparisons to it. As my interests are primarily in bilingual and multilingual language users, I have always struggled with the apparent assumption that the ‘native speaker’ of a language must be a monolingual in that language. It seems that only a monolingual can have the complete grasp of the language. In the domain of foreign language teaching, many overseas job adverts still categorically require ‘native speakers’ as a basic qualification. But bilinguals and multilinguals are rarely taken as native speakers, because they know bits of different languages, not the complete knowledge of any one language – flashback: ‘semilingualism’.

When it is spelt out like this, one can easily see that the monolingual ideology in the form of one-language-only or one-language-at-a-time is at work. But leaving aside the ideological discussion for a moment, the idea that one could have the complete knowledge of any language strikes me as weird. I am reminded of the Blackadder episode ‘Ink and Incapability’, where the character Dr Samuel Johnson presents to George, the Prince Regent, his Dictionary, ‘the very cornerstone of English scholarship’ that ‘contains every word in our beloved language’. Edmund Blackadder, who is present as a servant, says, ‘In that case, sir, I hope you will not object if I also offer the Doctor my most enthusiastic contrafibularatories’. Johnson shows annoyance and perplexity, and so Blackadder than adds, ‘Oh, I’m sorry, sir. I’m anaspeptic, phrasmotic, even compunctious to have caused you such periconbobulations’.

Of course one might say that ‘native speakers’ are the ones who are capable of being creative with their native languages: they are the ones who generate new vocabularies and sentence structures, and other, non-native speakers will just have to follow and learn. Imagine a non-native English speaker coming up with the words that Blackadder did in the above scene: they would be regarded as nonsensical mistakes, not clever, humorous inventions. Yet history shows that languages, including English, evolve by mixing with and borrowing from other languages. Language contact and bilingualism are the key to linguistic innovation and change. Elsewhere (Li Wei 2020) I have shown that creative translanguaging and transcripting practices of bilinguals and multilinguals defy the Circles of English categorization and challenge the completeness-based conceptualization of speakerness.
The point is that nobody can claim complete knowledge of any language, even if one wants to claim to be a native speaker of the language. So notions of ‘incomplete learning’ of a language and ‘insufficient/imperfect input model’ in heritage language acquisition are founded on erroneous assumptions of linguistic knowledge. Language learning is a socialization process. We learn what the social conditions and community environment allow, and this results in the fact that speakers of the same named language, for instance English, speak it and write it in various different ways. The varieties, or Circles, of English are outcomes of social conditions and socialization processes. Being a ‘heritage speaker’ or a ‘new speaker’ is a social outcome of a language socialization process, not a linguistic construct or anything that has to do with the speaker’s linguistic knowledge.

**English as a special language and its speakerness**

Looking at history and at a global scale, English has been a major contact language and an immigrant language. It is also in different contexts a minority language, a foreign language, a heritage language. Practically all the terms and labels that have been created for other languages can be applied to English; but they rarely are, and to me that poses a rather interesting question. I still remember the shocked faces when I attended one of my first conferences in the US where people were talking about ‘immigrant’ and ‘heritage’ languages and I asked, rather too naively, ‘why is English not included in the list?’ And the response, unsurprisingly, was that ‘English is an international language, a lingua franca for humankind. How can it possibly be regarded as anything other than the dominant language?’! If you are not fortunate enough to be a native speaker of English, then you would better learn it, in order to get a decent job or even to survive in this ever so turbulent world.

But we need to pause here – not everybody can claim to be native speakers of English, even if they may have been born in an English-speaking country and acquired it from birth. It needs to be hereditary: are your parents native speakers of English? And it needs to be the only language that one acquires from birth, because – remember the story of my sons – if your parents speak other languages to you at home, you can only be categorized as an English-as-an-additional-language speaker.

At the heart of the issue is the ownership of English, or, in Pujolar and O’Rourke’s terms, who can claim what kind of speakerness of English. Despite the fact that there are more speakers of English who are bilingual and multilingual and who have learned English at different times in their lives and in different social conditions for different purposes, the ownership of English seems to be firmly assigned to a minority of monolinguals who also happen to
be white and representative of so-called ‘Anglo-Saxon’ heritage. Democracy is not a concept that springs to mind when it comes to the ownership of English; hegemonic dictatorship may be. This has impacted on the way English is taught as an additional language all over the world and the way proficiency in English in bilinguals and multilinguals is assessed and by whom. The struggle to decolonize English-language teaching and learning is a real and long-term one. And, as Pujolar and O’Rourke cogently argue, the struggle cannot be won by focusing on the purely linguistic and descriptive aspects of the Circles of English and avoiding the political and ideological issues. The focus on speakerness and the historical and political dimensions of the concept is absolutely crucial.

Raciolinguistic ideologies and ‘languagelessness’

Turning to the political, we must be very aware of the pitfalls of defining speakerness through the apparent linguistic practices of individuals and groups, because, as Flores has pointed out, hegemonic modes of perception can shape the way linguistic practices are described and interpreted.1 In critiquing the notion of ‘appropriateness’ with regard to the linguistic practices of minoritized and racialized bilingual leaners in education, Flores and Rosa (2015) use the term ‘the white listening subject’ to describe an ideological position ‘who hears and interprets the linguistic practices of language-minoritized populations as deviant based on their racial positioning in society as opposed to any objective characteristics of their language use’ (Flores and Rosa 2015: 151). This ideological position rejects the legitimacy of the linguistic practices of racialized bilinguals on racial grounds rather than empirical linguistic grounds, leading to ‘languagelessness’ by calling into question their speakerness altogether. It is the raciolinguistic ideologies of the white listening subject that are underpinning the completeness-models of linguistic knowledge and the categorization of people like my sons as EAL- and Chinese-as-a-heritage-language speakers, rather than, simply, bilinguals and multilinguals. Again, being bilingual is not simple. It is an ideological battle that we have to fight throughout our lives. It is a battle for equity and social justice.

I end this short reflective piece with an anecdote: one of the reviewers for our manifesto addressing this issue (García et al. 2021) suggested that we should provide English translations for the Spanish words in the text. So in our final revision, we tried our best to do so. But our lead author, Ofelia García, could only see one such word. Ricardo Otheguy and the others managed to find six altogether: tortilla, masa, corriente, de la nada, herida and entre mundo. It is a reflection of how bilinguals who are engaged in translanguaging practices in their everyday life thought of these words and items. It reminded us of the video the author Daniel José Older made to explain why he did not italicize
Spanish in his book *Long Hidden* and other works. It is very well worth watching.²

**Endnotes**


2. ‘Why We Don’t Italicize Spanish’, video uploaded to YouTube by Daniel José Older, 4 August 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=24gCI3Ur7FM

**About the author**

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**References**

