

The case against *Monolingual Bias* in Multilingualism

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Driven primarily by globalization, multilingualism has become a topic *du jour* in the field of applied linguistics in general and in critical applied linguistics in particular (May, 2013). Especially in the last decade, the field has witnessed an intensive period of research into multilingualism and multiple language acquisition. A fundamental premise for research in the field is that a multilingual is not the sum of many monolinguals in the same person. Hence an individual with more than one language needs to be studied as a multilingual, with researchers avoiding a so-called “monolingual bias” (Grosjean, 2008). This commentary presents a short description of the so-called monolingual bias, followed by a brief discussion of the critique mounted over this notion from within SLA, and concludes with a brief analysis of the proposed solution for a way out and forward by Ortega (2010).

Grosjean’s (1985) attempt to present the bilingual speaker in a bilingual or holistic approach has influenced the debate on multilingualism. To him, the multilingual speaker can be compared to “a high hurdler who combines the two (or more) types of competencies, jumping and sprinting, in one person” (Herdina & Jessner, 2002, p. 59). Research in second language acquisition (SLA), however, has had a strong psycholinguistic anchoring, often with an emphasis on *nativeness* or *near-nativeness*. Hence, the educated native speaker has traditionally been the locus in achieving communicative competence in a second or additional language. The monolingual bias rests on the assumption that monolingualism is the default for human communication and that nativeness is a superior form of language competence (Cenoz & Gorter, 2011). On the other hand, to Grosjean and his colleagues, the multilingual is a human communicator who has developed sufficient communicative competency for everyday life. Therefore, this communicator is not the sum of two complete or incomplete monolinguals but an individual with a specific linguistic configuration characterized by the constant interaction and co-existence of the two (or more) languages involved. Arguably, then, being an “ideal” native speaker of two or more languages is not only exceptional; the “equal and perfect knowledge” of two languages is, at its very best, a myth (Grosjean, 2010, p. 20). As noted by Cook (2003), this so-called monolingual bias is also poignant in unmasking deeply negative consequences for research and praxis.

The field of SLA, in particular, has been targeted explicitly by many of the critiques against the notion of monolingual bias (e.g., Cenoz, 2013; Sridhar, 2012). Such critiques claim SLA as “suffering in its very core... from the ailments that result from taking nativeness and monolingualism as natural organizing principles” for the study of additional language learning (e.g., Jenkins, 2006, Sridhar, 1994). Of special note, however, are the voices from inside SLA on this issue, in particular, researchers associated with the social turn in SLA. These scholars have identified and critiqued problems that arise in relation with the monolingual stance (e.g., Block, 2003, Firth & Wagner, 1997). At least three well-known critiques exist in the SLA research

showcasing a heightened awareness and calling on the threats involved in adopting a monolingual/native speaker lens (Ortega, 2014). The first of these critiques is a warning by Bley-Vroman (1983) against the comparative fallacy. Put differently, it is the problematic practice of taking the idealized competence of native speakers as the benchmark for investigating linguistic development in a second (or additional) language. The researchers in the field reacted to this warning by proposing new theories and introducing research trends in order to side step the comparative fallacy trap. The second prominent voice is by Klein (1998) who cautioned against the prevalent target deviation perspective that could inhibit the field's potential for having a broader impact on other disciplines that study language ontogeny. The third critique is the notion of multicompetence proposed by Cook (1992) since bi/multilingual users can never become native speakers, comparing them to native speakers sets a standard that is unattainable and undesirable. The last of these while loudly and clearly denouncing the deficit approach dominant in SLA, also addressed head-on the need for a bi/multilingual prism when investigating late language learning.

As a much needed stance to productively confront and solve the monolingual bias problem across the applied linguistics field, underscoring a step towards an additive and interdisciplinary ethos, Ortega (2010) argues that both nativeness and monolingualism should be abandoned as organizing principles in the study of additional language learning. She argues for a strategic theoretical commitment to usage-based linguistics (UBL) as a means of resituating the SLA field. UBL, in a nutshell, encompasses a variety of perspectives sharing the view that grammar is not only a system for producing and understanding language, but is also shaped by those processes during linguistic interactions. It seems that a way forward to her, among others, involves committing to a theory that may be deemed a good fit, especially for linguistic-cognitive SLA. According to Ortega (2014), UBL can help SLA researchers in three important ways: a) by shifting from an “explanatory burden from birth to history and experience” (p. 40); b) by allowing a change regarding “the link between language input affordances and learning success” (p. 41); and, c) by providing “an analytical treatment of linguistic development as self-references, nonteleological, and unfinished” (p. 44). May (2014) agrees that an acknowledgement of inherent monolingualism along with a strategic commitment to UBL is crucial for an epistemic reorientation of the field of SLA. Such an orientation would seek to understand the psycholinguistic mechanisms and consequences of becoming bi/multilingual later in life, away from explaining why bilinguals are not native speakers (i.e., monolinguals).

However, the question arises as to how we might harness these multilingual repertoires, or multicompetences, more effectively for the purposes of both research and praxis (especially pedagogical and assessment practices). Addressing this question requires us to support our growing understanding of the complexity and porosity of multilingual repertoires with the ongoing need for access to standardized language varieties. Multilingualism, in and of itself, is no panacea, and is always bounded contextually for the multilingual vis-à-vis their existing, current, and future language experiences and expectations, as well as the functions their language varieties may play in their daily lives.

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