

The Tavistock and Portman  
Leaders in mental health care and education

## Tavistock and Portman Staff Publications Online

### JOURNAL ARTICLE

**Original citation:** Burck, Charlotte (2011) *Living in several languages: Language, gender and identities*. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 18 (4). pp. 361-378

© Charlotte Burck, 2011

This version available at: <http://repository.tavistockandportman.ac.uk/>

Available in Tavistock and Portman Staff Publications Online

The Trust has developed the Repository so that users may access the clinical, academic and research work of the Trust.

Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in Tavistock and Portman Staff Publications Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute the URL (<http://repository.tavistockandportman.ac.uk/>) of Tavistock and Portman Staff Publications Online

This document is the published version of '*Living in several languages: Language, gender and identities*'. It is reproduced here with the kind permission of Sage. You are encouraged to consult the remainder of this publication if you wish to cite from it.

## **Living in several languages: Language, Identities and Gender.**

Charlotte Burck  
Tavistock Clinic, London, UK

### **ABSTRACT**

Living in several languages encompasses experiencing and constructing oneself differently in each language. The research study on which this paper is based takes an intersectional approach to explore insider accounts of the place of language speaking in individuals' constructions of self, family relationships and the wider context. Twenty-four research interviews and five published autobiographies were analysed using grounded theory, narrative and discursive analysis. A major finding was that learning a new language inducted individuals into somewhat 'stereotyped' gendered discourses and power relations within the new language, while also enabling them to view themselves differently in the context of their first language. This embodied process could be challenging and often required reflection and discursive work to negotiate the dissimilarities, discontinuities and contradictions between languages and cultures. However, the participants generally claimed that their linguistic multiplicity generated creativity. Women and men used their language differences differently to 'perform their gender'. This was particularly evident in language use within families, which involved gendered differences in the choice of language for parenting. This was despite the fact that both men and women experience their first languages as conveying intimacy in their relationships with their children. The paper argues that the notion of 'mother tongue' (rather than 'first language') is unhelpful in this process and for the importance of considering the implications of living in several languages for systemic therapy.

**KEYWORDS:** bilingualism, gender, identities, performativity, parenting, systemic therapy

People who move cultures and countries often have to take on living in a new language. Many of the processes involved in migrating are reflected in issues of language speaking and use, and are often interconnected with questions of identity and loyalty (Falicov 2002). Language and culture are intertwined, so that languages can be conceptualised as 'culture soaked', incorporating different concepts and usage, even though culture and language are not reducible to each other. Translation studies have identified that the work of translation in the 'in-between' (of languages, cultures, and their possible representations), involves the interrelationship of language, experience and the social

world (Steiner 1998). This points to possible similarities in the processes involved as people 'translate themselves' when they move between their languages.

There is now a substantial body of literature that shows that language use, and so the experience of living in several languages has significant implications for an individual's subjectivity and identities (Kanno 2000, McKay & Wong 1996, Miller 2000, Mills 2001, Norton 2000, Pavlenko & Blackledge 2003). A number of studies in linguistics have found striking differences when people speak their different languages. They have, for example, been found to hold different values and recall events differently depending on which language they are using (c.f. Ervin 1964, Grosjean 1982, Javier 1996, Pavlenko 2006, Pérez-Foster 1998). Perhaps the most dramatically reported difference comes from neuropsychiatry, where it has been found that it is possible for an individual to be simultaneously psychotic in one language and coherent and reflective in another (Hughes 1981, de Zulueta 1984, de Zulueta et al 2001).

Decades of linguistic research on the impact of living in more than one language have challenged previous negative constructions of bilingualism. Yet, it continues to be commonly linked to dominant societal discourses of 'linguistic schizophrenia' (Pavlenko 2006). The image of the Tower of Babel (Abley 2003, Amati-Mehler et al 1993), a story traced to early Judeo-Christian and Islamic sources, which conveys the idea that a diversity of languages is a punishment and a problem, is frequently drawn on in references to multilingualism. In Britain, such negativity is combined with language policies which privilege assimilation. For example, since 2004, language learning in schools has been made optional for those over 14 years, with the result that there has been a marked decrease in the numbers of school student learning languages (Hawkins 2005). In addition, new English language requirements for immigrants have emphasised the learning of English in ways that appear to devalue other languages.

Languages carry social and symbolic meanings (Fishman 1996). The meanings given to language speaking in the wider context is related to the power relationships and institutionalised practices within which individuals are embedded. This informs individuals' sense of themselves and their positioning in their languages. Norton (2000), for example, found that language learning was affected by people's positioning in power relationships, in that this affected their opportunities to speak and claim legitimacy as speakers in the language they were learning. That positioning has been found to be mediated by gender and other social and economic relations (Pavlenko 2001) as well as speaker status and language status (Piller and Pavlenko 2004). Language choice and language switching have also been shown to be used in the claiming of personal and political identities (Cromdal 2000, Sebba and Wootton 1998). This suggests that an intersectional approach to research on living in several languages, recognising that language use intersects with other social categories in which people are positioned, is likely to be fruitful.

While other literature, particularly in linguistics, considers the implications of positioning in several languages without problematising bi-/multilingualism (e.g. Pavlenko, 2001; Piller, 2002), this paper contributes a psychological and systemic psychotherapy perspective. It is informed by a study of people's experiences of living in more than one language, conducted in London, the most multilingual city in the world, where over 300 languages are spoken in schools (Baker and Mohielden 2000). The study was driven by a wish to redress the lack of attention paid to bilingualism in my field of systemic psychotherapy, where differences of language appear to be crucial in the therapeutic process and for family relationships, but are generally not attended to or researched. The resulting study did not focus on people who were receiving family therapy but, instead, was designed to allow a consideration of the implications for systemic psychotherapy from analyses of accounts from a sample of adults living life in more than one language. This paper examines questions of identity for individuals who are bi/multilingual, through an analysis of their accounts of their experiences in and of their languages.

The paper first presents the methods used in the study, then considers the ways in which bi/multilingual people from a range of languages experience their sense of self and emotions in different languages before considering how they perform themselves in their different languages. It then examines how, for this sample, language use intersects with unequal power relationships of colonialism and international relations. The final analytic section focuses on the research participants as parents and the ways in which language is central to parenting. In doing so, it illuminates issues related to language use that call for attention in families and in systemic psychotherapeutic practice. The paper examines both commonalities and differences in gendered constructions of language use within family relationships.

### *Method and theoretical framework*

In this study I set out to explore with individuals themselves questions of how they have constructed their experiences of living in several languages, and their selves. I wanted to examine the meanings given to speaking more than one language and the relational and familial issues identified.

The study is situated within a social constructionist paradigm, drawing on the notion that our ways of knowing are negotiated through social interactions over time, in relation to social structures, contexts and resources, including social-historical conditions, which support or suppress these (Shotter 1993). I consider language as constitutive, performative, and comprised of discursive practices which produce meanings and values as well as having material effects, and as context within which individuals position themselves and are positioned. I employ a theorisation of the 'self'

as relational and discursive, dynamic and multiple (Henriques et al 1984), and of 'identity' as claimed, but never attained (Benjamin 1998) and as an ongoing 'project' (Connell 1987). However, theorisations of the self and of identity often overlap and, for this reason, I sometimes use these terms interchangeably. In employing the notion of gender as socially constructed, I draw on Butler's (1990) notion of gender as performative, and Frosh et al's (2002) ideas of 'doing gender', which also allows for the possibility that individuals will occupy different gendered subject positions within their different languages and cultures (Pavlenko 2001).

I conducted semi-structured research interviews with 24 bilingual or multilingual individuals recruited through snowball sampling since there is no readily available means of identifying a representative sample of those living in more than one language. I set out to explore the circumstances in which individuals learned and spoke their languages, mapping where and how they used them, and their beliefs and perceptions of the effects of living in several languages. The research participants were heterogeneous since the aim was to recruit participants from a variety of language groups. The final sample comprised people from different ethnicities, cultures, racialised identities and language-learning contexts. Half the participants had grown up with more than one language, and half had moved into a new language as an adolescent or adult. All had family histories of migration (some chosen and some forced), their own or that of a previous generation. The group were selected to allow consideration of gendered differences and commonalities. Half were, therefore women and half were men.

The use of insider accounts made it possible to analyse the place of language speaking in individuals' constructions of self and to consider questions of identity and the meanings they gave to speaking several languages within family relationships as well as within the wider context. These accounts are viewed as productions in the context of the research interview, within which individuals are constructing and reconstructing their memories from their present perspective in the light of notions of the future (c.f. Bruner 1986). Self narratives are seen as ongoing projects, rather than as transparent accounts of what individuals had 'really experienced'. I considered language as referential and as performative (Taylor 2001) in order to make sense of why people constructed the account they did and to examine the process of construction.

Alongside the interviews I analysed a small number of autobiographies, chosen because language featured centrally in these written accounts of childhoods lived in two languages and cultures. Autobiographies are more consciously worked accounts than those produced in the flux of an interview, and are constructed for different purposes. As there were significant commonalities between these and the interview accounts, I analysed extracts in the texts pertinent to the research question. Two were written by women, Katrin Fitzherbert (1997) and Eva Hoffman (1989), the text that inspires the title

of this special issue, and indeed prompted this study and three by men Ariel Dorfman (1998), Edward Said (1999), and Luc Sante (1998).

I conducted three types of analyses in order fully to address the research question. A grounded theory approach enabled me to identify and construct key categories and concepts, some of which benefited from further analysis and deconstruction. That further analysis was conducted using analytic concepts from narrative theory (Bruner 1986, Ricoeur 1984) and narrative analysis (Riessman 2001), which enabled consideration of the constructions of these self accounts and identity claims (Linde 1993). In addition, a discourse analytic approach was employed to examine how identity claims were constructed, and how identities were situated and accomplished through discursive practices (Wetherell 1998).

### *Experiencing different senses of self and emotions in different languages*

As noted above, previous research suggests that people experience life and themselves differently when they speak different languages. In keeping with this, there were striking similarities across the research accounts and autobiographies as well as across gender, in the way the sample reported that they experienced and constructed themselves in their different languages. Although they discussed this in a variety of ways, referring to identity, personhood or embodiment, all research participants and autobiographers, reported that the language they spoke differentiated their experiences of self.

Wasan: It's more of a sense of maybe having a different sense of identity in the different languages.

Renata: When I was speaking German I was a slightly different person than when I was speaking English.

Bernard: I've got a different behaviour, even with body movement. I probably use my hands, and my whole body would be a lot more lively and expressive than when I speak English

These different senses of self, however termed, incorporated different emotional expressiveness. This is in keeping with Pavlenko's (2006) study where the majority of individuals responding to a web-based questionnaire reported feeling differently when using their different languages. In the study reported here, this was most apparent when there were considerable differences between languages and cultures. Di-Yin, who had grown up in mainland China and moved to live in English as a young adult, for example, described her experience of her different languages as naming and indeed, 'allowing' different emotional states.

Speaking English helps me be more aggressive [...] Angry, yes, also in English. Especially in Chinese culture, being angry you should suppress it. So it's much easier to express it in English. So even if I don't need to express it, sometimes I keep it to myself, nevertheless I feel it in English.

The experience of one's emotions, as well as one's sense of self, being contingent on the language one is speaking was not gender differentiated in that it was equally reported by women and men.

Different experiences of self, dependent on which language they were using, had implications not only for the participants' identities, but also for their relationships. Living in different languages was constructed as embodying discontinuities and contradictions which had to be negotiated without invalidating one or other of their languages and without replicating inequalities between languages. The sample participants used a variety of means to do this. Those who had grown up speaking a minoritised language at home recounted that they had mainly kept their languages and 'worlds' separate as children. Those who had migrated also constructed discontinuities in a number of ways. For example, Estelle referred to having a child's life in one language and an adult's life in another. Changing languages and countries had been experienced as disruptive of both individual and family narratives and posed challenges of how to connect different narratives of self, located in different languages and places, alongside the difficulties/ impossibilities of translation. The expected storylines of cultural templates for gender-appropriate behaviour were also sometimes disrupted. In her memoir, Hoffman exemplifies this eloquently when reflecting on a return visit to a friend in Poland: 'Danuta's features and mine carry within them different ideologies of femininity, different loci of restraint and expression.' (1998 p236)

These negotiations of difference required discursive work to negotiate contradictions and dissimilarities. Developing strategies of hybridisation, being able to generate other perspectives for oneself not available to others, and having a capacity to present oneself ambiguously were all seen as resources. For example, some individuals reported that their multiple perspectives produced creative, and sometimes even radical, change. The awareness of the contingency of their sense of self on the language they were using, allowed research participants to be able to make use of their different languages in self-reflexive ways. This could also allow play with different gendered stereotypes. Thus, Di - Yin spoke of using her two languages within her Chinese relationships as a rhetorical strategy.

There's a lot of good things in Chinese and a lot of bad things in Chinese. And I like to get the good things, and I don't like to get the bad things, and in order to get the good things I speak Chinese with them, and in order to avoid the bad things I speak English with them. So that's how I do it. Yes. So for instance, in Chinese,

usually women are looked down upon, so if I'm dealing with Chinese male friends and I don't want to be looked down upon, I speak English. (Laugh). [ . . . ] So, and also Chinese are very, very friendly. They are very, very willing to do something, because it's like a kinship type of thing, and sometimes, um, also, they feel like to help women as well, so sometimes when I need help (indistinct) then I speak Chinese. (Laugh)

Di-Yin's account suggests that she uses her two languages to make different identity claims, challenging gendered interactions through the use of her new language, and performing and inviting friendly, helpful, gendered responses in her first. Her explicit use of a second language to gain a different gendered position is similar to that found in other research (Burton 1994, Pavlenko 2001) as, for example, when Iranian women use their second language to speak in front of men, when they are not able to do so in their first language (Tual 1986).

The privileging of coherence in narratives and the lure of culturally 'canonical narrative forms' invite particular constructions of self, and can be said to contribute to the challenges of sustaining the fissures and fragmentation which these individuals experienced. This raises questions about what the limitations may be of the cultural narratives that are available for crafting self-accounts. Some narrative and feminist critical theorists have identified demands for coherence in the permissible forms narrative can take (Irigaray 1985, Linde 1993, Kristeva 1986, Ricoeur 1984). However Rose (2001) and Said (2001) among others have also identified how individuals and communities easily erase contradictions and fissures and attach themselves to the myth of unitary identity, in order to maintain a sense of coherence and continuity. In the mental health field there is also a privileging of coherence in narratives (Fonagy et al. 1996) and so a downplaying of more complex and multiple lives.

Many of the research participants and autobiographers made claims that linguistic multiplicity generated creativity in the process of interlinking their differences. How then can these claims be reconciled with notions that coherence is crucial to identity construction? One possible route through this tension might follow from Sermijn et al's (2008) formulation. Sermijn and colleagues recently proposed that it would be helpful to consider selfhood as a rhizomatic story, drawing on Deleuze & Guattari's theorisation.

Unlike trees or their roots, the rhizome connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature; it brings into play very different régimes of signs, and even nonsign states. The rhizome is reducible neither to the one nor the multiple... It is composed not of units but of dimensions, or rather directions in motion. (Deleuze & Guattari 1980/2004)



Here selfhood is viewed as a multitude of stories each of which potentially leads to different and new constructions, with the result that the concepts of a long-term plot or continuity in time and space are no longer necessary. This theoretical formulation fits well with the contradictions and multiplicities of the bi/multilingual individuals.

### *Gendered performances of self in a new language*

Acquiring a new language at an age when they were aware that they were learning language allowed individuals to reflect on the process. This was often because entering a new language stripped them of the familiar and meant that they were conscious of 'doing' new identities in the new language (c.f. Butler, 1990). Ihsan described doing new identities in his new language, English, as a process of conscious imitation.

... There was always something new to discover and go through and sometimes you get tired because you felt you were acting and pretending and such like, that's how I felt. [ . . . ] Yeah, English person, I am very good at it and end up having same sort of gestures and hand movements, and like always sort of monitored people in this.

As Ihsan makes clear, those consciously learning a new language had to learn to behave differently and became aware of the ways in which they were constructing themselves. A discourse of performance, of 'performing' oneself differently in this different language, was drawn on in various ways by both men and women. While there were, as discussed above, many commonalities across genders in the process of learning and speaking more than one language, some consistent gendered differences were reported in the interviews. In entering a new language, many individuals were rendered inarticulate for at least some time and this held different meanings for children and adults since adults (women and men) are generally accustomed to communicating fluently enough. This shift in communicative competence and practices was interlinked with socially constructed gendered differences in the meaning of communication. In the study reported here, men often reported concern with establishing themselves in ways that can be said to be 'masculine', which could involve showing that they were effective and 'tough'. In contrast, inarticulacy often led women to put a great deal of effort into establishing themselves as fluent in the new language. This gendered difference is exemplified below in quotations from Cato (a man) and Renata (a woman), each of whom became refugees from Hungary as young children with their families. Each recounted the effects of taking on a new language in a different country, as a result of difficult circumstances.

Here is Cato's account of how he had presented himself at school.

But having come out of Hungary and tanks and all that stuff, I thought [. . .] I thought I was a bit hard, and these weedy English kids, what did they know? [. . .] And I got into quite a lot of fights and I wasn't exactly a bully, but I was hard for a while. And it started to, it's funny actually, as, I do remember this, as I started to speak English more, I started to make friends, and make connections you know, and be able to sort of talk about myself and I suppose, a bit talking about vulnerabilities and stuff, so then, the kind of hard, tough, kind of "you can all piss off" sort of mentality that I had, started to, started to erode away. So actually, yeah, yes, I think I felt, I felt more connected and sort of softer as I started to understand people and being able to speak.

Cato's ability to perform toughness did not require much language, and translated easily across cultures. It has been noted that displaying toughness is part of a gendered performance which attracts kudos from boys at school (c.f. Frosh et al 2002). Bentovim (1997) among others has proposed that this is a way of positioning themselves that boys who have undergone trauma or witnessed violence sometimes take up, as a welcome change from a sense of powerlessness. Cato credited his growing articulacy with enabling him to develop a range of positionings in his relationships.

Renata also constructed being made a refugee as "pretty traumatic", involving an unpredicted, sudden and all-encompassing change in her life, in which her family gave up a middle class lifestyle for one in a refugee camp, and lost all their possessions. She spoke of becoming extremely motivated to learn the new language.

I remember making some really stupid mistake and being laughed at, you know. I remember things like that, and later on I remember being made fun of because I made mistakes. I felt very isolated. [. . .] Very, very fast, I was fluent in writing and speaking.

Renata's experiences of humiliation in her new language at school had fuelled her desire for fluency, rather than fighting. She linked her remembered sense of 'absolute frustration and despair' to her inarticulacy, an inability to express herself or stand her ground. "It wasn't just the language. It's very difficult to disentangle. [. . .] But I think the loss of language was also quite a big thing."

These constructions in the research interviews can be considered to be gendered performances both in the past and in the present. Renata conveyed the emotionality of her account vividly. Her recollection of despair at her 'loss of language' is in contrast to Cato's performance of hardness. Renata's expectations in relating to peers relies more on verbal interactions, and thus fluency, than does Cato's. This connects to complex cultural and societal beliefs about language learning and gender. Very few male teachers teach languages at schools and many fewer boys than girls learn them in

Britain (Nuffield Language Inquiry 2000). While the meanings of language teaching and learning are no doubt multilayered, they are also accompanied by notions that learning languages are regarded as conventionally 'female' occupations. Other gendered notions about the use of language were evident in the findings of a study of Arab adolescents in Canada where young women declared that they wanted to learn the new language in order to integrate into Canadian society, while young men's goals for their language learning were less social (Abu-Ravia 1995). This can be viewed as demonstrating students' multiple engagement with 'doing gender' (Frosh et al 2002).

Differences in gendered performance were also apparent in the ways individuals made use of their second language for emotional expressiveness. On the whole research participants and autobiographers connoted their second/subsequent language as bringing more social distance to their interactions. This sometimes allowed the expression of what would have been more intimate in their first language without the same intensity. Henka, who came to the UK as a young adult, described the change she experienced in expressing herself as follows:

I might be more intimate in certain things in English, because they would feel so uncomfortable. It's a foreign language. [ . . . ] It's kind of artificial. In Polish it would be very disclosing. [ . . . ] in English, it is this artificialness that the, the, the, that I've learned the meaning of the word, that gives me, you know, more of eh, um, gives me more courage to use it. I'm not really detached from it, emotionally, but in a way I am. And as if, in Polish language I grew up with those words, they got, you know, like a flesh and body and soul meaning, in a way, you know so, not just to me but all the other eh, Poles.

Henka constructed herself as taking more risks in expressing herself in English. Using the social distance English produced enabled her to perform intimacy in ways that she had not been able to do in Polish. Therese, a Belgian woman, also recounts how the new language created more intense emotional relations for her. This, however, entailed an exhausting communicative process.

Emotionally you were more intense in trying to understand each other and there would be more effort to listen while the communication was difficult, and it was extremely tiring too.

The reports of the members of the sample indicated that the social distance accorded to them by their second language was informed by gendered ideas concerning emotional expressiveness. This is also apparent in the sample of autobiographical writing. For example, Luc Sante, who had moved to the USA with his family as a boy from Belgium, constructed a different experience in his autobiography, by using the distance of his second language as a protection: 'No one will ever break his heart with English words' he writes pithily (1998 p238). In contrast, he describes his first language as being able to

evoke his sense of vulnerability. The move to a new language arguably allowed Sante to 'do' masculinity as emotional toughness more than he had previously been able to.

Language speaking was thus used as a signifier in the construction of gendered identities. It was also the case that racialised, ethnicised and cultural identities impacted on the sample's positioning and performance as speakers.

### *Language and intersecting power relationships*

The performance and construction of the self were also impacted by the meanings of languages forged within unequal power relationships, most vividly evident in accounts of languages and colonisation. Thomas, who was educated in English in Zimbabwe when it was still Rhodesia, but had grown up speaking a number of languages, gave such an account.

Personally I began to feel that English was superior to Shona, therefore, there was some degree of cultural imperialism going there, I was aware of that, and also, the more fluent I became in English, the more I wanted to speak English to people I knew didn't speak it. [ . . . ] Almost as a way of showing off. [ . . . ] It becomes very much like internalised racism where you actually become ashamed to speak Shona.

Thomas drew on discourses of postcolonialism and identified the learning of the colonisers' language as an insidious part of colonising and racialising processes. The focus on performing himself as an English speaker had involved Thomas in occupying a position he now constructed as complicit in its insidious construction of him as a colonised individual. The desire to become a fluent speaker, which was explicitly connoted as the only way to get on, overrode ways to subvert and resist the positioning offered. Thomas was reflective about the effects of the historically unequal relationships between his languages, alongside other racialisation processes, on his different senses of himself, ("the impact was very clear"), but this did not altogether mitigate its continued influence. One present challenge was that his loss of fluency in Shona due to living mainly in English in the UK, led other Zimbabweans to read this as a continuation of this earlier positioning.

Another way in which colonialism was referenced in relation to language is represented in Edward Said's (1999) autobiography. A Palestinian whose family emigrated to Egypt, Said attended an English colonial school and as he became fluent in English he became aware that he referred to himself not as 'me' but as 'you'. Said constructs a memory of how his performance of his subject position as the colonised 'other' was played out grammatically.

The intersections of racialisation and language performance were also evidenced in Britain. In the study reported here, speaking a minoritised language acted as a marker of difference for all sample members. However, white participants noted that it was their accents that functioned as markers of difference, while for other research participants, racialisation intersected with language to impact on their acceptance and sense of belonging in the UK. Quinlan, for example, moved to Britain from Hong Kong with her family aged five years, and reported that she had always had her identity, her sense of belonging and her fluency in both her languages contested throughout her growing up. 'Doing'/performing a linguistic identity is therefore a relational process relying on others' invitations and responses, as well as one's own ability to take up positions. What became apparent in this study was that a focus on learning how to make sense in a new language meant stepping into and being invited into a limited number of discourses, including gendered discourses.

The participants referred to the ways in which they drew on the stereotyped notions they held of the new language and its speakers to inform the ways in which they became speakers of the new language. Lena, from the former Yugoslavia, for example, acknowledged, "it's probably just one of my biases and prejudices. I think I'm more polite and kind of (indistinct) careful in doing things and relating to people. [ . . . ] And I suppose I try to be like the English." Onno reflected in a similar manner: "I think it's about my preconceived ideas about English people [ . . . ] and I know those things are stereotypes but . . ." Individuals often did not know the many sets of discursive practices within their new language (Miller 2000). As Bakhtin explains:

The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes 'one's own' only when the speaker populates it with his (sic) own intention, his (sic) own accent [ . . . ] adapting it to his (sic) own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language [ . . . ], but rather it exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions; it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own [ . . . ] [But] expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one's own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process. (Bakhtin 1981: 293-4)

Learning a new language inducted individuals into somewhat 'stereotyped' discourses and positionings in power relations within the language. This in turn, enabled them to view themselves differently in the context of their first language, where such processes had been invisible to them previously and had appeared 'natural'. They were thus able to reflect on the broad processes related to their various languages.

*Mothering, fathering and language: the impact of 'mother tongue'*

A further significant context in which language use and performance were explored was that of intimate relationships. All research participants now lived mainly in English, but the construction of their family relationships produced particular issues. Only a few research participants had moved to England with partners who had the same language, so most had formed relationships with someone who did not share their first language. Although some partners had attempted to learn this language, these relationships were mainly, or wholly, conducted in English, the dominant language. This meant that, regardless of gender, the partner for whom English was not the first language was expected to adapt to the other's language.

Whatever the language use within couple relationships, when the sample became parents, new issues arose in relation to language for parenting. Seventeen of the 24 research participants (ten women and seven men) were parents and thirteen of them had parented in their first or childhood language for at least some of the time. Aspects of language use within families were interlinked with gendered constructions, particularly in relation to the choice of language for parenting.

Although the sample was culturally heterogeneous, most women talked about language use differently from most men. Almost all the women described speaking to their babies from birth in their first or childhood languages. The only two mothers who had not done so seemed to feel they needed to defend this choice, with one noting that she had mistakenly privileged assimilation at the time. A prevalent construction drawn on by women was that of the 'naturalness' of using their first language. Saskia said: 'I talked German to my son naturally when he was a baby.' Ffionn had found herself 'having' to talk Welsh to her baby and said, 'I just couldn't speak to her in English and I still can't.' This connected to the way that mothers talked about their first languages as allowing them to employ tender playfulness much 'more naturally' than they could in English. Here constructions of first and childhood languages as 'intimate' and 'emotionally expressive' echoed the way first languages became constructed more generally in the context of a dominant language, and were said to enable access to aspects of the self not available in English. Not speaking my first language 'would be like losing a part of myself in my relationship with my children', said Estelle.

Alongside the discourse of the 'naturalness' of one's first language for mothering, many of these women also drew on a discourse of 'language as work'. They noted that speaking to their children in the context of a different dominant language needed commitment and continual attention, particularly when their children got older.

Fathers connoted their first languages differently for parenting. For example, Naadir was the only one of the seven fathers to speak his first language with his children from birth and his wife shared the same language. Naadir constructed his language, Arabic, as central to relaying religious and cultural knowledge to his children. Four fathers had

shifted to speaking their first language to their children when they were older, for some of the time, but did so by invitation. Ihsan switched to speaking Farsi with his daughter at the encouragement of his wife, but did not see this as very easy. Thomas began speaking Shona with his daughter when she asked him to teach her, and he did not speak this with his son, who had not made such a request. Bernard only read to his children in French:

We never actually spoke French. Um, except for reading, which we read with a loud voice and I would, well I was teaching her French, yes, but we didn't speak French in normal conversation. We had our little sessions, but I never forced that on to the children. It was not a natural thing to do in a way, like the mother tongue. A mother who is, say, born in France and come to England and marry and had a first baby, she might tend to speak French to her children when they were babies. [...] I didn't feel very comfortable speaking it to my babies in the language in the context. For me it was out of context in a funny way.

Bernard refers to his use of his first language with his children as educational rather than relational. He also frames the context as constraining, as does Gustav in explaining his choice of the language in which to parent.

Czech didn't come into it, because my partner doesn't speak Czech and I thought it was just ridiculous to speak Czech because there was no kind of context for it anyway.

This construction of a 'lack of context', which these fathers used stands in contrast to the women's accounts. However the context they refer to here may not be the wider society but that of their partner's relationship with their children. There is evidence that many fathers come to rely on mothers to provide the context for their own fathering relationship (Burck and Daniel 1995). If mothers as wives and/or partners were speaking English to the children, fathers were less likely to speak their own first language with the children. When men did switch to speaking their first /childhood language with their children, after initially parenting in English, they experienced this as conferring intimacy. 'It brought us closer together,' said Venjamin. It also signified a cultural connectedness with them, and as Thomas put it, brought with it a sense of home away from home, and brought forth other aspects of themselves. The reported effects of fathering in one's first language were very similar to those reported by mothers, but most of the mothers claimed an entitlement to speak their first language with their children.

One reason for this is related to the conceptualisation of the first language. The term 'mother tongue' is in common usage in everyday speech and in the literature and it operated as an implicit idea drawn on by both women and men. The women's construction of the 'naturalness' of mothering in their first language draws on this

notion. As mothering itself has predominantly been constructed as 'natural' (unlike fathering), despite feminist work to challenge such constructions, (c.f. Phoenix and Woollett 1991) these overlapping ideas of 'naturalness' work together to construct the appeal of 'mother tongue'.

The use of 'mother tongue' constructed in the study is that the language mothers were mothered in is the one they use to mother. Using the 'mother tongue' was considered to facilitate the drawing on of one's own experiences of being mothered in order to parent. One mother who had chosen to parent in her second language experienced this as protective--protecting her from replicating the difficult parenting to which she had been subjected as a child. However, the notion of 'mother tongue' was understood as excluding fathers and was explicitly referenced by Bernard. 'Mother tongue' was not, therefore, constructed as helping men to father. It is also possible that men were constructed as not learning to father from their mothers. Fathers described their use of their first language with their children for education and for signifying cultural and religious identity. These echo constructions of fathering which emphasise role rather than relationship. However when men did shift to speaking their first language with their children, this was experienced not only as enabling intimacy, but also as sustaining minority language speaking and recognition of multiplicity within families. The fact that 'mother tongue' as a discursive formation has such strongly gendered effects on familial linguistic dynamics provides a strong argument to unsettle the notion of 'mother tongue' and challenge its usage, in order to enable a different consideration of language use by fathers.

However the notion of 'mother tongue' may do work at other levels. It may be drawn on by women to warrant their change from the language practices established in the family to date. On becoming mothers, women can lay claim to their first language, which may have been lost within their couple relationship. As Estelle put it, 'I probably talked French to him because I had no one else to talk to.' Mothering could thus serve to keep a woman's first language alive when mothers feared its loss. Choosing to mother in one's first language may be considered an identity claim at a time when definitions of self are experienced as changing. It was when Saskia became a mother that she said she 'got really homesick' and this raised questions for her of identity and belonging. For women, the taken-for-grantedness of a 'mother tongue' can also function to position their husbands in a less powerful relationship to language and to rebalance their own experience in the dominant language. The idea that it is 'natural' to use one's first language to mother and of the importance of the 'mother tongue', makes this language choice difficult to challenge and perhaps privileges mothers' relationships with their children in yet another way.

On the other hand, when women migrate with their families they have often been expected to be 'guardians of culture', which would include responsibilities to ensure



that the children speak their first language and retain loyalty to their cultural values (Lau 1995). It has been argued that women are theorised as the symbols of the nation or collectivity (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992) and as keepers of the language (Piller and Pavlenko 2004). The notion of 'mother tongue' may then contribute to keeping women marginal to the new language and culture, serving to lessen their opportunities and thus enabling their husbands to maintain traditional gendered roles (Lau 1995). This is, however, less likely where women are able to speak the dominant local language, which was the case for all the women in the study reported here.

Choosing to parent in English, the dominant language (which only two of the twelve mothers, but most of the men did), was warranted as an identity claim for their children and for their success at school, which was connoted as particularly important in order to challenge racism and discrimination. However these choices could contribute to the loss of language and multiplicity and were perhaps over-organised by the ongoing negativity associated with bilingualism and societal pressure to assimilate.

The study demonstrates that individuals performed themselves differently as parents depending on which language they used. Both women and men performed greater intimacy with their children in their first language. However parenting in a second language allowed individuals to use the 'distance' afforded by the language in ways they experienced as helpful. Ursula, for example, considered that it helped her feel safer from the fear of repeating the abusiveness she had experienced in her own growing up, and thus able to be closer to her child. Zack described its effect as making him, 'more careful about what I say', thus introducing a gap between an immediate emotional response and speaking, whereas in his first language he would just be 'firing from the hip'. Thomas felt that speaking in English enabled him to stay more closely connected to his children's values and beliefs.

Language speaking also functioned as an identity claim for the parent as well as the child and raised issues of alliances, inclusion and exclusion in families. The men who shifted to speaking their first language with their children had partners who actively supported this. Some of the women moved to privileging inclusion of the father when speaking with their children in his presence over sustaining their minority language, or indeed gave up their first language in the father's presence altogether for this reason. Maria's description of the language use in her family, despite her husband having learned her first language, provides an example: 'Now that created some dilemmas for us, because it meant when I was talking to my son, it excluded my husband. And so the rule we evolved was that I would speak Spanish with my son when I was on my own with him [...] My husband understands everything, but he pretends he doesn't.' It was women who 'worked' the relationship to language use. For the English-speaking women partners of sample members, this meant supporting the research participants as fathers to speak their first language to their children. For those women who had a different first

language, it meant curtailing their own first language usage if their partners indicated that they felt left out; another performance of gender within the family. This indicates the complex interrelationship of the dominant language partners' stance and gender in sustaining or downplaying bilingualism within the family. What was very striking in this study was how easily a language can be lost within a family, a finding corroborated for many languages around the globe (c.f. Abley 2003).

### *Conclusions*

This study has highlighted the ways in which individuals experience themselves differently, and accomplish different things, in their different languages, confirming findings from previous research. Linguistic contexts make 'a difference that makes a difference' (Bateson 1979) for individuals and, because these differences are often more explicitly noted in the move from one language to another, the sample recruited for this study allowed an exploration of the effects of living in more than one language on identity and relationships.

An important finding from the study was that being positioned in two or more languages called into question an individual's relationship to language itself, in ways that are similar to those experienced by translators (c.f. Steiner 1998). The ability to have a view of oneself in language from the position of another language makes explicit one's sense of contingency in the linguistic context. What this entailed for both women and men, was an awareness of their performance of themselves, including their gender performances, which are so often un-noticed and taken for granted within one language. The study showed how both women and men used the difference their new language brought, (commonly constructed as bringing distance), to 'do gender'.

Butler (1990) has argued that the realisation that gender is performative is key to opening up ways to expand, elaborate and subvert gendered positions. Perhaps not surprisingly it was women who made the most use of these possibilities. But while the study found that being bi/multilingual offered individuals possibilities of using their different relationship to their gender and to language creatively, they were also inducted into stereotyped discursive positions on entering a new language, informed by their gender, racialisation and the power relationship between their languages and cultures.

An ability to sustain their self- and relational reflexivity (Burnham 1993) enabled individuals to gain a discursive nimbleness and carry out discursive work to use their multiplicities in ways they found helpful. Tensions here related to the shortcomings of traditional narrative forms and the societal privileging of coherence, which were associated with a lack of societal support for speaking languages other than English.

The advantages of bi/multilingualism were claimed by all in the study, despite the constraints of the societal context. However, ensuring that bilingualism is sustained within families was considered to be challenging. The discourse of 'mother tongue' was found to inform fathers' lower use of their first language to parent. I have argued that its emotional appeal deserves to be deconstructed, and its assumptions challenged, since both mothers and fathers constructed their first language as enabling them to perform intimacy with their children. However women (but not men) could make use of this discourse to revitalise their first language within the family and to claim linguistic and cultural identities for their children. On the other hand, in other circumstances the 'mother tongue' discourse is employed to curtail women's opportunities to enter a new language (Lau 1995). What this indicates is how important it is for individuals to be able to make use of discourses that enable empowering action (Heilbrun 1988).

We cannot make assumptions about what their languages will mean to bilingual and multilingual individuals, or what a language will evoke or encode. It is clear, however, that an individual's languages encode different power relations and that individuals experience themselves differently as they translate themselves between their languages. This study brings to our attention the ways in which men and women use their differences differently, and how important it is to explore this further.

Acknowledgements: I owe a great deal to the editors, Ann Phoenix and Kornelia Slavova, and to the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments, and particularly to the research participants who were so interested in discussing these issues with me. A version of this paper was first presented at a conference for the ESRC-funded professorial fellowship, 'Transforming Experience: Reconceptualising identities and non-normative childhoods'.

## References

Abley, Mark (2003) Spoken Here. Travels Among Threatened Languages. London: William Heim Heinemann.

Abu-Ravia, Salim (1995) Attitudes and Cultural Background and Their Relationship to English in a Multicultural Social Context: The Case of Male and Female Arab Immigrants. Educational Psychology. Vol 15. 3: 323-336.

Amati-Mehler, Jacqueline, Argentieri, Simona & Canestri, Jorge (1993) The Babel of the Unconscious: Mother Tongue and Foreign Languages in the Psychoanalytic Dimension. Madison, Connecticut: International Universities Press Ltd.

- Anthias, Floya & Yuval-Davis, Nira (1992) Racialized Boundaries: Race, Nation, Gender, Colour and Class and the Anti-Racist Struggle. London: Routledge.
- Baker, P. & Mohielden, Y. (2000) The languages of London's schoolchildren. In P. Baker, P. & J. Eversley (eds) Multilingual Capital: London. Battlebridge Publications.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail Mikhailovich (1981) The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays. (edited by Michael Holquist). Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Bateson, Gregory (1979) Mind and Nature. A Necessary Unity. Toronto: Bantam
- Benjamin, Walter (1973/1992) Illuminations. London: Fontana Press.
- Bentovim, Arnon (1997) Trauma-Organised Systems. Systemic Understanding of Family Violence: Physical and Sexual Abuse. London: Karnac.
- Berko, Jean & Ely, Richard (2001) Gender Differences in Language Development. In Ann McGillicuddy-De Lisi & Richard De Lisi (eds) Biology, Society and Behaviour. The Development of Sex Differences in Cognition.
- Bhabha, Homi K. (1994) The Location of Culture. London: Routledge
- Bruner, Jerome (1986) Actual Minds, Possible Worlds. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Burck, Charlotte (2005/7) Multilingual Living. Explorations of Language and Subjectivity. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Burck, Charlotte & Daniel, Gwyn (1995) Gender and Family Therapy. London: Karnac.
- Burnham, J. (1993) Systemic Supervision. The Evolution of Reflexivity in the Context of the Supervisory Relationship. Human Systems, 4, 349-381.
- Burton, Pauline (1994) Women and Second Language Use. in Pauline Burton, Ketaki Kushari Dyson & Shirley Ardener (eds) Bilingual Women. Oxford: Berg
- Butler, Judith (1990) Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. London: Routledge.
- Cromdal, Jakob (2000) Code-Switching for All Practical Purposes. Tema Barn, Department of Child Studies. Linköping Universitet. Sweden.

Deleuze, Gilles & Guattari, Felix (1980/2004) A Thousand Plateaus. Translation. Brian Massumi. London and New York: Continuum.

Dorfman, Ariel (1998) Heading South, Looking North. A Bilingual Journey. London: Hodder & Stoughton.

Ervin, S. (1964) Language and TAT Content in Bilinguals. Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology. 68: 500-7.

Falicov, Celia (2002) Migration, ambiguous loss and resilience through rituals. Tavistock Centre Scientific Meeting. Tavistock Centre. Feb 11 2002.

Fishman, Joshua A. (1996) What Do You Lose When You Lose Your Language? In G. Cantoni (Ed.) (1996), Stabilizing Indigenous Languages. Flagstaff Centre for Excellence in Education. North Arizona University. NCBE Home Page.

Fitzherbert, Katrin (1997) True to Both My Selves. London: Virago.

Fonagy, P., Steele, M., & Steele, H. (1996). Ghosts in the nursery: An empirical study of the repercussions of parents' mental representations on the security of attachment. Psychiatrie-de-l'Enfant, **39**, 63-83.

Frosh, Stephen, Phoenix, Ann and Pattman, Rob (2002) Young Masculinities. Understanding Boys in Contemporary Society. Hampshire: Palgrave.

Grosjean, François (1982) Life with Two Languages. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

Hawkins, E. (2005), Out of this nettle, drop-out, we pluck this flower, opportunity: re-thinking the school foreign language apprenticeship. Language Learning Journal, 32, pp 4-17

Heilbrun, C.G. (1988) Writing a Woman's Life. New York: Ballantine Books.

Hoffman, Eva (1989) Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language. London: Minerva.

Hughes, G.W. (1981) Neuropsychiatric Aspects of Bilingualism: A Brief Review. British Journal of Psychiatry. 139: 25-8.

Irigaray, L. (1985) The Sex Which is Not One. Ithica, New York: Cornell University Press.

Javier, R.A. (1996) In Search of Repressed Memories. R Pérez Foster, M. Moskovwitz & R.A. Javier (eds) Reaching Across Boundaries of Culture and Class: Widening the Scope of Psychotherapy. Norvale, NJ: Jason Aronson.

Kanno, Yasuko (2000) Bilingualism and Identity: The Stories of Japanese Returnees. International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism. 3. 1: 1-18.

Kim, K.H., Relkin, N.R., Lee, K.M. & Hirsch, J. (1997) Distinct Cortical Areas Associated with Native and Second Languages. Nature. 388: 171-174.

Kristeva, Julie (1986) The Kristeva Reader. (ed) Toril Moi. Oxford: Blackwell.

Lau, Annie (1995) Gender, Power and Relationships: Ethno-cultural and Religious Issues. in Charlotte Burck & Gwyn Daniel (1995) Gender, Power and Relationships. London: Routledge.

Linde, Charlotte (1993) Life Stories: The Creation of Coherence. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

McKay, Sandra Lee & Wong, Sau-Ling Cynthia (1996) Multiple Discourse, Multiple Identities: Investment and Agency in Second-Language Learning Among Chinese Adolescent Immigrant Students. Harvard Educational Review. 66. 3:577-608.

Miller, Jennifer, M. (2000) Language Use, Identity and Social Interaction: Migrant Students in Australia. Research on Language and Social Interaction. 33. 1: 69-100.

Mills, Jean (2001) Being Bilingual: Perspectives of Third Generation Asian Children on Language, Culture and Identity. International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism. 4. 6: 383-402.

Norton, B. (2000). Identity and language learning: Gender, ethnicity, and educational change. Harlow, England: Longman/Pearson.

Nuffield Languages Inquiry (2000) Languages: The Next Generation. The Final Report and Recommendations of the Nuffield Languages Inquiry. The Nuffield Foundation. <http://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/languages/inquiry/>

Pavlenko, Aneta (2006) Bilingual Selves. Chapter 1 in Aneta Pavlenko (ed) Bilingual Minds: Emotional Experience, Expression and Representation. Cleveland: Multilingual Matters Ltd.

Pavlenko, A. and Blackledge, A. (Eds). (2003). Negotiation of identities in multilingual contexts. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Pavlenko, Aneta (2001) Bilingualism, Gender and Ideology. International Journal of Bilingualism. 5(2) 117-151.

Pérez Foster, RoseMarie (1998) The Power of Language in the Clinical Process. Assessing and Treating the Bilingual Person. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc.

Phoenix, Ann & Woollet, Anne (1991) Motherhood: Social Construction, Politics and Psychology. In Ann Phoenix, Anne Woollet & Eva Lloyd (eds) Motherhood. Meaning, Practices and Ideology. London: Sage.

Piller, I. (2002), Bilingual Couples Talk: The Discursive Construction of Hybridity, (Studies in Bilingualism No. 25) Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing.

Piller, Ingrid & Pavlenko, Aneta (2004) Bilingualism and Gender. In: Tej K. Bhatia & William C. Ritchie (eds) The Handbook of Bilingualism. P489-511. Oxford: Blackwell.

Ricoeur, Paul (1985) Time and Narrative . Vol 2 . Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Riessman, Catherine, K. (2001) Analysis of Personal Narratives. In J.F. Gurbium & J.A. Holstein (eds) Handbook of Interviewing. London: Sage.

Rose, Jacqueline (2001) Response to Edward Said. Freud and the Non-European. The Freud Museum Lecture. December 6, 2001. London.

Said, Edward W. (2001) Freud and the Non-European The Freud Museum Lecture. December 6, 2001. London.

Said, Edward W. (1999) Out of Place. A Memoir. London: Granta Books.

Sante, Luc (1998) The Factory of Facts. London: Granta Books.

Sebba, M & Wootton, A (1998) We, They and Identity. Sequential versus Identity-related Explanation in Code-Switching. In P. Auer (ed) Code-switching in Conversation: Language, Interaction and Identity. London: Routledge.

Sermijn, Jasmina, DeVlieger P., Loots, Gerrit (2008) The narrative construction of the self: selfhood as a rhizomatic story. Qualitative Inquiry, Vol.14, 4: 632 - 651

Shotter, John (1993) Conversational Realities. Constructing Life through Language. London: Sage.

Steiner, George (1998) After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation. (3rd ed) Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Taylor, Stephanie (2001) Locating and Conducting Discourse Analytic Research. In Margaret Wetherell, Stephanie Taylor & Simeon J. Yates (eds) Discourse as Data. A Guide for Analysis. London: Sage & Open University.

Tual, A. (1986) Speech and silence: Women in Iran. In L. Dube, E. Leacock & S. Ardener (Eds.), Visibility and power. Essays on women in society and development. Delhi: OUP.

Wetherell, Margaret (1998) Positioning and Interpretative Repertoires. Conversation Analysis and Post-Structuralism in Dialogue. Discourse and Society Vol 9 No 3: 387-412

de Zulueta, F. I. S. , Gene-Cos, N. & Grachev, S. (2001) Differential psychotic symptomatology in polyglot patients: Case reports and their implications. British Journal of Medical Psychology. Vol 74 Issue 3: 277-292.

de Zulueta, Felicity (1984) The Implications of Bilingualism in the Study and Treatment of Psychiatric Disorders: A Review. Psychological Medicine. 14: 541-57.