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Multilingual Typicality vs. Speech-language Disorder

2010 December 16

tags: [bilingualism](#), [multilingualism](#)

by Madalena Cruz-Ferreira



Photo by minka6

Any assessment involves a comparison. For assessment purposes, we use comparison always one way. We compare X to Y, never Y to X, because we have satisfied ourselves of two conditions: first, that Y is a reliable benchmark, which specifies a particular *norm* of behaviour, including linguistic behaviour; and second, that the behaviour of X can be fairly assessed through the use of that benchmark.

Reliable benchmarks are norm-referenced and standardised for particular populations. Since different populations use different languages and different varieties of the same language, we seek to provide ourselves with developmental and/or clinical assessment instruments which are

normed accordingly. We know that it would be as unfair to test, say, users of Korean with instruments normed for Portuguese as to test users of Canadian French with instruments normed for Belgian French. Although we still lack normed instruments for most languages and language varieties, limitations imposed by assessment in these less than ideal conditions are well understood. In monolingual settings, with monolingual clients, clinical practices take them into account.

Concerning multilingual clients, however, the situation is quite distinct. In what follows, I take the words *multilingual* and *multilingualism* to refer to users/uses of more than one language, that is, to include *bilingual(ism)*, *trilingual(ism)*, and so on.

One first observation is that multilinguals stand for a disproportionate number of referrals to both special education and speech-language therapy, compared to monolinguals. We may start by asking ourselves why multilinguals are consistently compared to monolinguals, but not the other way around. The reason is that monolingualism has been assumed as a norm of linguistic usage, which has besides become synonymous with cognitive, social and linguistic health. The reason for this, in turn, is that the first researchers who addressed multilingualism were monolingual, or subscribed to monolingual approaches to language, or both. The tradition of thought that they initiated almost one century ago lingers on, and shapes the many misconceptions surrounding multilingualism. A few examples follow, showing how these misconceptions are interrelated and entail one another:

- “*Multilinguals are special.*” In monolingual countries and settings, multilingualism is viewed as the special case of language uses. Clients who are multilingual are labelled as such, whereas clients who are monolingual are not labelled as monolinguals. Given that multilinguals outnumber monolinguals worldwide, it cannot be the case that the majority of the world’s population is “special”. The century-old tradition that takes multilingualism as special started by also taking it as the correlate, and sometimes even the cause, of diverse cognitive, social and linguistic shortcomings. The current emerging trend, that lauds multilingualism as unquestionably positive, simply perpetuates the (mis)perception that multilinguals are “special”.
- “*Multilingualism means equivalent proficiency in all languages.*” This assumption is better described by a term that I coined, *multi-monolingualism*, to label the underlying belief that a multilingual equals several monolinguals. This is not what multilingualism is. If multilinguals could (or should) use all their languages in exactly the same way, they would not need several languages: one all-purpose language would be enough. “One all-purpose language” defines a monolingual, not a multilingual. Multilinguals use their languages in different ways, with different people, in different situations, for different purposes. This is why their languages develop differently and cannot therefore be made equivalent.
- “*Ability in one language reflects language ability.*” Clinical findings about one of the languages of a multilingual client are often taken as a reliable reflection of the client’s overall language ability. “Language ability” concerns the whole of an individual’s linguistic repertoire, not ability in a particular language. Taking the one for the other means taking a multilingual for a monolingual. The full linguistic repertoire of a monolingual does consist of a single language, but the full linguistic repertoire of a multilingual does not.
- “*Multilinguals can be fairly assessed through monolingual instruments.*” The assessment instruments that are available to us so far are monolingual, and naturally reflect monolingual norms. In addition, multilinguals tend to be assessed either in mainstream languages, or in languages for which assessment instruments have been standardised, neither of which may accurately portray the clients’ linguistic ability. In the absence of normative guidance about multilingualism, skewed findings about multilingual behaviour are to be expected. False positives, where typical multilingual behaviour is mistaken for disorder, account for the disproportion of referrals mentioned above. But, equally seriously, false negatives mistake disorder for typical multilingual behaviour, and so fail to identify disordered multilingualism.

Ideally, then, we should provide ourselves with standardised instruments devised for multilingual uses of language, based on *multilingual norms* of usage. These norms are not, as I hope to have made clear above, “multi-monolingual”: there are typical behaviours among multilinguals, just like there are typical behaviours among monolinguals. The difference is that we have failed to pay attention to the former, because we have taken the latter as the benchmark of linguistic behaviour across the board. The issue here, as always, is that without knowing what is typical, we cannot tell what is deviant.

Current developments, which take a fresh look at multilingualism, from a multilingual perspective, already show promising results. One example concerns mixes, the use of features of several languages in the same utterance or exchange. Mixes have been stigmatised as instances of “semilingualism”, whereas they are a multilingual norm of usage. The regularity of mixed patterns in typical multilingual speech has been found to aid in the diagnosis of SLI (specific language impairment), in multilingual children whose mixing patterns deviate from the norm.

Another development concerns the use of what is known as dynamic assessment, in clinic. Dynamic assessment methods involve teaching and testing linguistic items and structures that are independent of particular languages, and that therefore probe for *language* ability, not ability in particular *languages*.

Growing awareness about the lack of multilingual norms also impacts the clinicians themselves. To the best of my knowledge, professional training of SLPs does not include information about languages other than the language of intervention, or about multilingualism itself. This is so even for multilingual SLPs, or for those who plan to practise in multilingual settings. Many SLPs thus encounter multilingualism for the first time in clinic, where the “special” status accorded to multilinguals may well shape expectations about multilingual clients. There is of course no requirement that SLPs become multilingual. Being multilingual does not mean understanding what multilingualism is: misconceptions about multilingualism are shared by monolinguals and multilinguals alike. The requirement is that SLPs, and the rest of us, become familiar with what multilingualism is, so we satisfy ourselves that, while we wait for the standardisation of multilingual norms, we are giving multilinguals a fair assessment chance.

Multilingualism is not about what several languages can do to people, it is about what people can do with several languages. The same can be said about monolingualism and a single language: the number of *languages* that people happen to need to use in order to function appropriately in their everyday environments has little to do with their *language* ability, just like the number of musical instruments that one plays has little to do with one’s musical ability.

One final note: I have discussed multilingual assessment in my blog, which is geared to a general audience, in a post titled [The fight for a fair deal](#). For more specialised research and findings on multilingual typicality, my book [Multilingual Norms](#) may be of relevance.

[Madalena Cruz-Ferreira, PhD](#) in Linguistics and Phonetics (University of Manchester, UK), researches multilingualism and child language. One section of her book [Multilingual Norms](#) addresses multilingual clinical assessment. Her blog [Being Multilingual](#) deals with the use of several languages at home, in school and in clinic.

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1.



Isaac Sia [permalink](#)
December 16, 2010

That’s a rather insightful piece you’ve written! I was immediately brought back to the trying environment that we have to endure back home in multi-ethnic Singapore. Yes, indeed multilingualism is not multi-monolingualism and I feel that indeed we need norms for every multilingual region, or combination of multilingualism individually. That should be exciting for every multilingualism researcher!

[Reply](#)

2.



[Gal Levy](#) [permalink](#)
December 19, 2010

A very good article ! Well done !
Gal

[Reply](#)

3.



[Madalena Cruz-Ferreira](#) [permalink](#)
December 20, 2010

Thank you for your comments, Isaac and Gal! I am very glad you found the article of

interest.
Madalena

[Reply](#)



4. [Paul Deputy](#) [permalink](#)
December 31, 2010

I have been thinking of my monolingualism of late. I grew up in East L.A. and Spanish was very familiar to me. I decided to learn more Spanish later in life. I am to the point where I can communicate some things in Spanish speaking countries. It isn't elegant, but I could tell hotel staff in Leticia Columbia (no english), "My bathroom doesn't work. Too much water". They got the point and came up right away to fix and overflowing toilet. Through our participation in the China International Conference in Speech Therapy, and the UMD program for hosting Chinese Scholars, I began learning Chinese. I can say enough sentences to express specific things and in a limited way communicate some basics (tested by trying my learning on Chinese speakers). I learned in my college days that children could learn multiple languages at once. I wondered if that applies to adults and preliminary research indicates that adults can learn more than one language at once. Why don't they? I suspect simply because they think they can't. I decided to think i can, and I'm in the process of adding Korean and Ojibwe (American Indian language) to my efforts. I admit I learn languages easily. I run into adults all the time that claim no ability to learn another language. I suspect that there is a measurable aptitude toward learning multiple languages.

I have an idea for you. The URL above highlights our preparation for the third annual Chinese Conference on Speech Therapy. Proposals are due January 12th. So, Madalena, my blog response idea for the day is why don't you work your insights up into a proposal and come with us to China this July. We want to expand our American participants and your topic would be well received.

[Reply](#)



5. [Madalena Cruz-Ferreira](#) [permalink](#)
January 13, 2011

Thank you, Paul! I read your comment too late to be able to put together a proposal to a conference, but I am very glad that my post stirred the thoughts that you present here. I will certainly re-visit the URL that you give for updates on the work at the conference. I fully agree with what you say about adults' persuasions of their own inability to learn languages. We need look no further than among widespread theories about brain shutdown after a certain (undefined) age to find the source of these beliefs. You may be interested to look at a number of posts in my blog, as above, where I deal with precisely this issue. Do keep in touch. I am always keen to learn what is being done to make proper sense of multilingualism!
Madalena

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