

# Funny-lingualism

Using a label as a tool

BY MADALENA CRUZ-FERREIRA

## Dominant *Multilingual...*

When applied to multilinguals, the word dominant doesn't describe a personality trait (as in "My neighbour speaks four languages and bullies anyone who says she's semilingual"), but a rank order among your languages (as in "My neighbour speaks four languages and has no idea which one is his best language").

It is sometimes claimed that multilinguals must have a Mother Of All Their Languages (this is not to be confused with 'mother tongue', which comes later in this article series). This is often said to be the default language in which you spontaneously swear, or dream, or even the language in which you do your maths. But I'm sure I'm not alone in having heard all the multilinguals I know, including myself, utter fluent profanity in all their languages, depending on what catches their ire or their big toe and depending, of course, on the language they are using or thinking in when the offending incident takes place. Likewise for those multilinguals with whom I have intimate enough contact to hear them dreaming: my family mumble and grumble in all their languages in their deepest sleep. The math argument doesn't work either. Math is something that you don't learn unless you're specifically taught, and whoever teaches you must speak to you in some specific language(s), which thereby will become your maths language(s). So if you can't decide which of your languages is your dominant one, don't worry: you don't have to have one single dominant language, because having a single dominant language is a typical monolingual condition, and multilinguals are not monolinguals.

Research on language dominance aims to ascertain a hierarchical ranking among the languages of multilinguals according to various qualitative and quantitative criteria. For example, multilinguals fill in questionnaires about which of their languages they feel more comfortable using for what, when and why, or they are experimentally timed when asked to name different pictured objects in their different languages, respectively. This



This column discusses the rationale for a proposal. I propose to change six different labels which have been used to describe multilingualism to the single label funny-lingualism. The reason is that these labels, in my view, are used in very funny ways indeed. Dominant multilingual is the third label I chose to illustrate my point.

research takes of course into account that responses will vary wildly, not only among different experimental populations, but more interestingly also within the same population or the same individual, depending on variables like

the language being used to give instructions, whether the informants have just spent (how much) time using one or the other of their languages, etc. So the findings are that there are shifts in language preference according to myriad factors like time, place, interlocutor, activity, mood, etc.

This reflects what multilinguals experience as their linguistic repertoire evolves, but what is really funny is that, by doing so, these findings are not findings about language dominance in the absolute Mother-Of sense but about plain, everyday, humdrum multilingualism itself. Since today is Monday and I'll be teaching the whole morning, I'll be dominant in English by lunchtime. When the kids get home from school, they will be dominant in English but I will have shifted dominance to Portuguese in order to talk to them, which will cause the usual cross-dominance multilingual glitches at snack-time. In the evening, when daddy comes home, everyone will be dominant in Swedish and Portuguese, to recount the day's happenings to everyone else at the dinner table. And so on. This is what multilingualism is about, alternating language preference according to all the factors that make language choices appropriate. Just like you wear different clothes on different occasions for similar reasons of appropriateness, with no questions raised about dominant outfits. ❖

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