



L1, L2, L3, ..., Ln Speaker

I have so far discussed three technical terms commonly used to talk about multilinguals, namely, language-mixer/code-switcher, semilingual and dominant multilingual, all of which were shown to leave much to be desired as far as their precise meanings are concerned. As if in acknowledgement that labels expressed in words can be very baffling, the literature on multilingualism also abounds with numerical identification of languages -- not least, I suspect, because numbers have always sounded more intimidating and therefore more profound in their hidden implications than mere words. The neat-looking labels in this heading refer to the order of appearance of different languages in the life of an individual.

My discussion of the label dominant multilingual reached the conclusion that this label reflects an implicit expectation: multilinguals must have a dominant language. We saw that this expectation arose because monolinguals obviously have a dominant language too, which is their one and only language, and because multilinguals continue to be treated like funny variants of monolingual individuals. When you label the languages of a multilingual by means of numbers, no such expectation is implied: instead of pulling rank among your languages, you serialise them.

Numbering languages in this way first became popular to account for typical school-learning situations. Typically monolingual learners were said to speak an L1, which is their first (and only) language. When they learn a second language, this language then becomes their L2. They may later learn other languages, which are then consecutively labelled accordingly. So far so good, but things started getting really funny with the generalisation of these

Funny-lingualism

Using a label as a tool

BY MADALENA CRUZ-FERREIRA

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. L1, L2, L3, ..., Ln speaker is the fourth label I chose to illustrate my point.

labels to other kinds of multilingualism besides the well-behaved 'After-You' one that they were meant for.

Take simultaneous multilinguals, those who start life with several languages, or who later acquire several languages at the same time. A simultaneous bilingual will have two L1s (pronounced 'El Ones'), both labelled '1' because they both come first in acquisition, as the numbers are meant to describe. So that makes two languages. Since calling the next language an 'El Two' might be perplexing for this reason, this person then acquires an 'El Three' instead. In case no other languages follow, these multilinguals will then have two L1s and one L3, with the number '2' nowhere in sight among their 'Ls'. In addition, 'L3' doesn't now mean 'the language acquired in third place', but the one acquired in second place, which is after L1, and which therefore is different from an L3 acquired after an L2 which in turn follows an L1.

Mind-boggling, I agree. In a very funny twist to the usually unambiguous nature of numbers, each of these numerical labels in fact turns out to add to the confusion, by referring to at least two different things, the chronological order of acquisition of one particular language and the number of languages of a multilingual at any one point in time. ❖

*Madalena Cruz-Ferreira, a native of Portugal, is the author of **Three is a crowd? Acquiring Portuguese in a trilingual environment, (2006)**. She is currently a Senior Lecturer at the National University of Singapore. She has lived in Singapore for over 10 years with her Swedish husband and their three trilingual children.*

Coming in the next issue: "Balanced Multilingual"