

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. “Native-like user of language” is the sixth and last label I chose to illustrate my point.

Native-like user of language...

Have you noticed that multilinguals are never said to be “native speakers” of their languages? The only instances where you see the word native collocated with the word multilingual are when multilinguals are deemed to have shown, or failed to show, ‘native-like’, ‘near-native’, ‘near native-like’, and so on, uses of language. The word native, short and sweet, is simply not used to account for multilingual uses of language.

The reasoning behind this strange state of affairs must be that multilinguals and native speakers are assumed to be different kinds of human beings. This is confirmed by the large amount of research which sets out to investigate, black on white, the uses that “multilinguals” make of their languages as compared to “native speakers” of the same languages. This sounds very funny to

me, because native means ‘born into’, and so a native speaker must be someone born into some kind of surrounding language. Surely multilinguals are also born into communities that do use language? The mystery is solved when we realise that the label native in ‘native speaker’ has nothing to do with your birth rights or those of your languages: it actually means ‘monolingual’, which is the condition of all control populations in this kind of research. This realisation helps clarify why people accept without blinking to label someone born into more than one language as ‘native-like’ and ‘near-native’ (or not) whereas these labels never, ever, apply to someone born into one single language. We can try, for added fun: you are a native speaker (= monolingual) with native-like language abilities. Or, you are a monolingual (= native speaker) with near-monolingual language abilities.

A similar creative use of technical terms applies to the label mother tongue. You will have

heard intriguing questions like, say, **“If you are multilingual, what is your mother tongue?”** You may have hesitated to respond, or you may even have been told that mother tongue is just not for you, because you have more than one, and there’s only one mother tongue per individual. Being summarily tongue-orphaned in this way is very funny, for two reasons. First, because it treats languages like some commodity that must be coupon-rationed, as if there were a shortage of languages around the world -- there are about 6,000, at the latest (rough) count. And second, because no one ever asks the one question that matters, which is “Who says that people can have only one mother tongue?”, just like no one ever asks “Who says that people can have only one native language?”

If we try to define mother tongue as opposed to native language (the distinction is far from clear even in research about monolingualism), we might say that your mother tongue is what your parent speaks to you. In monolingual settings, **it then becomes clear that mother tongue is the same as native language**, which makes one wonder why we need two technical terms for the same thing. But that’s another story. The point is that, by this definition of who-speaks-what-to-you-from-birth, multilinguals may have several mother tongues if the mother happens to use more than one language to them, or they may have a mother tongue and a father tongue, like they may have a sibling tongue and a grandparent tongue, which now means that all of these must be your native languages too.

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And so on. **The fun that one can derive from the six labels discussed in this column is never-ending.** You can have an L1 (the first language you learned) which is not your native language (if you happen to have two L1s), because a native speaker is a monolingual. You can be dominant in your children’s father tongue from around 7 p.m. on weekdays and the whole day on weekends, and then mix bits and pieces of this language into your own father tongues. You may be asked to provide linguistic evidence that you are a balanced multilingual in the same breath that you are asked to use the same evidence to show that you are dominant, across the board, in a single one of your languages. You can also be balanced in your L2 and L3 (if you took a simultaneous interpreting certificate in these languages) and semilingual in your L1 (if you didn’t, in this one), of which you are a native speaker because you started off monolingual.

Or you can decide that so much fun deserves official recognition. **What the labels discussed in this column have in common is that they describe multilingualism in extremely funny ways**, whether multilinguals are labelled Language mixers / Code-switchers, Semilinguals, Dominant multilinguals, L1, L2, L3, ..., Ln speakers, Balanced multilinguals or Native-like users of language. So why bother with so many different labels doing the same job? My purpose with this column was to show how the all-encompassing term funny-linguals ideally encapsulates what these labels really mean, and I believe my point is proven beyond reasonable doubt. Warm welcome to the brand-new, unambiguous, insightful world of funny-lingualism! ❖

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