The language cringe of the native speaker

By Hanna Thorsh  |  June 10, 2015  |  Multilingual families

Keith: I’m still really shit at pronouncing Lisa’s surname. With the umlaut o.
Hanna: What is Lisa’s surname?
(laughter)
Keith: Do I get three goes?
(Keith, Australian, in a relationship with Lisa from Germany)

Despite the increasing value of multilingualism in a globalised world, English-speaking countries such as Australia remain stubbornly monolingual. At the same time the benefits of speaking more than one language are regularly touted in public discourse. My research investigates how speakers of Australian English with a partner from a non-English-speaking background feel about their linguistic repertoires. Embarrassment, as in the example above from Keith (all names are pseudonyms), comes up a lot. So does inferiority. Because of their low proficiency in foreign languages (often as a consequence of their poor quality or limited language learning experiences in formal education) these participants feel they are bad language learners. This response seems to be one way of engaging with and mitigating their own privilege as native speakers of the powerful global language, English, compared to their partners who learned English as an additional language.

“It’s my deficiency”: being a bad language learner
speak so many different languages freely, and a little bit jealous, and at the beginning was a bit more kind of definite about trying to learn German, um and I think the whole experience intimidated me cause I think I’m the kind of person who if they don’t pick something up really quickly kind of just gives up very quickly (...) (Keith)

For Lisa and Keith, Keith’s first and Lisa’s second language, English, has been the language of their relationship. Keith sees Lisa’s language skills as impressive while blaming himself for his own inability to learn German. He feels that Lisa “probably speaks better English than most native English speakers in Australia”. While Lisa learnt languages formally in her school education as a child and young adult, Keith faces all the frustration of learning another language as an adult.

In his own education Keith’s choices were limited. Although he comes from an Italian migrant background, Italian was not available at his public school in inner Sydney in the 1990s. He decided to take Latin instead, but he dropped it after junior high school when he lost interest in his schooling. He has done no further foreign language study in contrast to Lisa, who studied four languages over many years in her schooling in Germany. So when it comes to saying Keith’s Italian surname their pronunciation reflects their differing language learning trajectories:

Hanna: And how are you at pronouncing Keith’s last name (laughs)?

Lisa: I am tempted to pronounce it Italian which then nobody understands (laughs).

Keith: She- like I’m reading out a, a pizza on the pizza menu from our local pizzeria and she makes fun of my Italian accent. You know like quattro formaggi, she’s like (puts on a strong Australian accent) quattro formaggi. ‘Cause she speaks Italian, you know, these fucking Europeans!

(laughter)
are usually anglicised or pronounced in an English way. Both his lack of educational opportunity to study Italian and his Anglicized pronunciation cause him in that moment to position himself as a (monolingual) Australian in opposition to (multilingual) Europeans.

Stephen, from Australia, who is married to Christina from Argentina feels similarly critical of his own poor Spanish skills. He describes his attempts to learn Spanish as “a token effort”, says he “hasn’t got an ear for languages” and it dismissive of his own attempts to learn Spanish:

Hanna: You said you’re the odd one out; how do you feel...

Stephen: No, not at all, because uh because I recognise that it’s my deficiency in not having had the time to devote to learning a language. Now, I make the standard joke I have 50 words of [unclear] of Spanish that I know. I work very hard and uh it’s a standing family joke (...)

In fact, Stephen studied Spanish at night, has a Spanish speaking community in Sydney and has two children who are bilingual. He also regularly visits Argentina and has frequent Argentine house guests. Spanish is a regular feature in his life. In the interview he also says that learning Spanish is “a commitment I’ve probably made and haven’t fulfilled” and feels he is a “handicapped Aussie” compared to his multilingual relations.

Another participant, Amy, has a strikingly similar evaluation of her own language skills. When I asked her why she was interested in talking to me about language she said:

Well, I suppose, I suppose it’s just there and I suppose for me it’s that I’ve got to learn more Spanish (...) And I went to lessons and I started learning and I was enthusiastic because we were going to Columbia, but as soon as we came back from Columbia I was just like that’s it, I’m just not interested anymore. And I learnt that I’m not a good
Amy's language learning experiences at school were typical for my participants. In twelve years of state school education all she studied was ten weeks each of Italian, German and French in her seventh school year. In contrast, she praises her partner for his excellent English language skills which he acquired in Colombia from the “movies and music” he consumed from their powerful northern neighbour.

A new kind of language cringe

It seems these participants characterise their persistent monolingualism as a personal failing, a source of embarrassment, a source of *language cringe*. In Australia language cringe is a child of the cultural cringe. It has traditionally been associated with being embarrassed about speaking Australian English, rather than the more highly valued British English of the mother country. However, in my research I have found a new form of language cringe, related to monolinguals who speak the most valuable global language compared to multilinguals who are non-native speakers. This kind of language cringe contradicts the idea that a native speaker will always be “better” than a non-native speaker through an acknowledgment of the level of skill and knowledge which come with learning an additional language to a high proficiency.

This is most obvious when it comes to accent, because language cringe views an Australian native accent as *lower* value than (some) non-native accents. Lisa points out that she found the Australian accent strange on first hearing.

Lisa: I just remember the first Australian I ever met in my life (...) we started talking in English and I just thought who the fuck is this person? (laughter) It sounded so outlandish I’d never heard that before.

When I asked Keith about what kind of accent he would like his daughter to have, he reluctantly admitted that he wanted hers to be more “international”. Stephen points out that on first travelling to the United States with his wife, the locals “struggled” with his “obvious Australian accent” while she “was much more readily understood”. The implicit high value of a native accent is challenged by the transferability of a more international non-native accent.
He was quickly hired as an English teacher because he was a native speaker. But it was Sara who taught him enough English grammar to make it through the first lesson.

(...) when Sara and I first met I needed to get some work and we were in Chile, um I just before I arrived to Chile we’d split up for a few weeks on the way to. and I’d asked Sara can you hand out a few CVs to English schools when we get there, or when you get there, which she did and I basically arrived and there was a job waiting for me which was perfect. But I’d never taught, I’d never thought about English I had no idea [Sara laughs]. and so the very first lesson I had to do (...) and uh [laughs] they, you know, the school said uh here’s the book this is Headway, this is what you’re using, they’re up to page thirty two or whatever. I opened it up and it was the present perfect and I looked at it and I was like what’s the present perfect, what’s a past participle and Sara sat down and taught me. (Paul, my emphasis)

Sara also spoke four languages to, at that time, Paul’s one. Although Sara is the one with the multilingual skills, Paul was seen by the language school as a better language user because he is a native speaker.

Managing native speaker privilege

Like Keith, Paul is impressed by his wife’s linguistic skills but he also recognises that because of the privilege of the English native speaker Sara’s multilingualism may be less valued. Rather than being embarrassed about his own failings as an individual language user Paul draws attention to the wider failings of the native speaker ideology in terms of its tenuous relation to actual knowledge about language as a system or teaching expertise. Paul acknowledges his partner’s linguistic superiority and the inherent injustice of an employment situation where he benefitted from a discriminatory language ideology because he is a native speaker.
about by this privilege. Recognising their own limited linguistic repertoire and casting it as a personal failing may be a way to tip the scales back in favour of the linguistic repertoire of a multilingual partner.

Tags: Accent  Australia  Australian English  Australian Voices  Bilingual Education  Bilingual Parenting  Bilingualism  Discrimination  English As A Global Language  English Language Teaching  German  Globalization  Intercultural Communication  Italian  Language Education  Language Ideologies  Language Learning  Monolingual Mindset  Monolingualism  Multiculturalism  Multilingualism  Native Speaker  Public Education  Romance  Spanish  TESOL
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Hanna Torsh is a PhD candidate at Macquarie University. Under the supervision of Prof. Ingrid Piller and Dr Agnes Terraschke her sociolinguistic research focuses on the experience of linguistic intermarriage in Australia between English speaking background Australians and migrants of other language backgrounds. She is also interested in language policy, multilingualism and second language learning and teaching. Hanna has a Masters Degree in Applied Linguistics from the University of Technology Sydney and has a background in English Language teaching in Sydney and Germany.

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3 Comments

Jean
June 17, 2015 at 10:00 am
Jinhyun (Jean)  
June 12, 2015 at 10:28 am

Great post Hanna! I was just wondering if you have looked at how the multilingual partners evaluate their English language skills in relation to the high assessment of their native partners? Are they taking it for granted or are they also experiencing language cringe due to the native speaker ideology?

Hanna Torsh  
June 16, 2015 at 10:48 am

Thanks Jean! This did come up in one interview, which I blogged about here: https://www.languageonthemove.com/language-migration-social-justice/the-burden-of-multilingualism-in-australia

However, as my focus was the attitudes and repertoires of the English speaking background partner I don't think I'll have enough data. My feeling is that almost none of my participants from migrant backgrounds expressed much, if any, language anxiety. Given that all of the participants I spoke to volunteered to be interviewed, it may be that those who felt anxious about their English were the ones who declined to be interviewed.
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