The burden of multilingualism in Australia

By Hanna Torsh | July 28, 2013 | Language, migration & social justice

In recent Australian political conversation, there is an increasingly bipartisan recognition of the value of cultural and linguistic diversity. So it’s fair to ask, what is Australian society offering those whom it characterises as “diverse”? As far as being multilingual goes, it seems highly skilled, highly educated migrants still experience it as a negative rather than something that is highly valued. Below I briefly discuss the cases of two such women who I interviewed as part of my doctoral research into linguistic intermarriage in Australia.

The wrong accent

“Scuse the recording but I fuck it up so many times with my accent [laughs] ... it’s years after and I still muck it up in terms of accent sometimes.” (Sara)

Sara (all names are pseudonyms) is a trilingual professional from Spain who has worked in Australia for over ten years. Despite her high level proficiency in English, her accent shapes people’s views of her as an exotic foreigner. Sara is well aware of the stereotypes her accent evokes and she talks about using them to her own advantage to connect with people by putting them off their guard and playing up to stereotypes about the European who talks with her hands.

Yet despite all this she still feels that she doesn’t get it right sometimes, and that she should mention this to me in the interview. Why? At what point will she get to “own” English and her way of ?
The wrong language

“It’s my right to speak Chinese mate!” (Jessie)

Jessie is another professional who completed her Masters in Australia, worked in Shanghai for many years for a multinational company and now works in the finance sector in Australia. Like Sara she is a highly balanced bilingual. It is perhaps not surprising then that she was offended when she experienced the kind of policing which is part of linguistic privilege. A colleague in Australia, herself an adult migrant from a non-English speaking background, criticised her for speaking Mandarin socially at work. In fact, she exhorted her to “speak English!”, putting herself in the linguistically privileged position and making Jessie the foreigner who doesn’t know the rules. As Jessie said to me in the interview, it can feel strange or artificial to speak another language with someone you know shares the same linguistic and cultural background as you. Jessie is granted none of the privileges associated with being a “native” English speaker and is a target for criticism for the way she speaks even during her own personal time.

Rather than being a plus, it seems that being a speaker of accented English in Australia is often a minus. Minus linguistic privilege and minus social power, it’s all about what you are not, rather than what you are.

Multilingualism at work

“...and so I just realised I did not want to be the ethnic in the ethnic team, and so I went from that position to the most boring dry ... policy officer in the most boring department. Middle-aged white fat women, just because I thought otherwise I’m gonna be always ethnic, ethnic, ethnic.” (Sara)

It is often argued that speaking many languages will lead to better job opportunities. I asked both women about their experience working in Sydney. Had their language skills, particularly their multilingualism, been useful to them? Neither of them found that speaking Spanish or Mandarin had helped them in their careers. In fact, for Sara coming from a language background other than English meant she was stuck in a career pathway which was limited to what she called “ethnic” roles in public service. For Jessie, speaking Mandarin did help her with customers at a Sydney branch, but that
service in a diverse society, this value was not recognized by the organization nor was it remunerated.

**Multilingualism at home**

“For me I feel like I uh I s-, I don’t have a choice as such that I would like to, Louis to be able to speak Chinese and English or I would like Louis to speak English only, I don’t have a choice because my parents they can’t speak English, so Louis has to speak Chinese otherwise they can’t communicate with Louis and I’m in big trouble then so (laughs).” (Jessie, talking about her son Louis)

It is easy to see why some parents might be ambivalent about the often expressed and casual exhortation to raise their children bilingually when they experience their own linguistic repertoire in such contradictory and often negative ways. Like Jessie, for many parents it may be more about personal relationships than about any notion of global citizenship that they want to raise their children in two (or more) languages. Even when multilinguals are highly proficient language users and better educated than the Bureau of Statistics (2012), they still experience language that bilingual child rearing is incredibly hard work, and language and you have no institutional support, it may not seem such an obvious proposition.

As long as diversity is seen to be the province of those who are outside the mainstream people like Sara and Jessie will bear the burden of living within the contradictory celebration of diversity on the one hand and the lack of social recognition of the value and experience of multilingualism on the other. This is the double burden of multilingualism in Australia today. However you look at it, it is not as simple as having something that the majority do not. It may be a richer experience of communication, even a more diverse and complex experience of life but it can also be a burden that is no less heavy for being invisible to those who do not share it.

**Reference**

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Hanna Torsh

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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Sam Wainwright
October 5, 2013 at 10:58 am

The poignant observations of the people you interviewed that illustrate that for all our celebrated multiculturalism, mainstream Australian is an Anglophone mono-lin assimilationist juggernaut.
it the “graveyard of languages”. He remarks that despite the fears of the far-right Republican Tea Party “English Only” types, the children of today’s migrants to the US are becoming mono-lingual Anglophones just as surely as those before them.

According to Greene even Spanish speakers are being assimilated at almost the same rate as other migrants, and it’s only the steady flow of new arrivals that maintains a significant Spanish speaking community. I expect the assimilationist pressures are just as strong, if not stronger, in Australia.

As you’ve observed it’s fairly common for migrant parents NOT to pass their mother tongue on to the second generation. I expect language transmission to the third generation must be extremely rare, even where both parents are second generation and bi-lingual in English and the same other language (be it Italian, Greek, Chinese or whatever). Perhaps there are some very tightly “sealed” communities highly defined by a common religion where it does happen, such as some orthodox Jews in the US who continue to use Yiddish, but I can’t think of any in Australia.

Carolla
August 6, 2013 at 8:30 am

Very, very, very good article! Eye-opening to say the least. I had a slightly similar conversation last week with three Australians on different days and they blame the rest of the world for not appreciating Australians. They were quite fed up of Australia being regarded as a ‘whole different world’ and ‘its just so far away’. Its like Australia is the ugly step-child to the rest of the world – in their opinion and they felt that it was time “the West starts treating us like we are part of the world and we have a great contribution to make to global affairs.” So, this article, which I will share with them, sheds some light on one of the reasons why (maybe) Australia feels so abandoned. The rest of the world is embracing multiculturalism, multilingualism, and diversity, it would behoove Australia to do the same. After all, the two most populated countries in the world do not speak English as a first language so it would be a beneficial if Oz gets a move on embracing languages if it wants to share the global stage with the rest of the big powers. Thank you for this article though as I was made to understand that Oz openly welcomed multilingualism, especially Sydney.

Is there any way you can share your email with me? I would love to ask you some questions because you and I seem to be in the same language/culture field and I would be great to receive some of your insight.

Hanna Torsh  
August 2, 2013 at 2:53 pm

Agi I think your point about things perhaps being less negative in your experience of a childcare centre shows that attitudes are changing. What we have currently are a number of exclusive ways of thinking about culture and language which co-exist with more inclusive ones. Many of my younger participants talk about multiculturalism being normal to them in a way that struck me as very positive, something perhaps which wouldn't have been said thirty years ago. Now we just need to shift attitudes on multilingualism. The fact that it is growing as an area of study is perhaps significant in that it will result in, and indeed is already resulting in, a theorization of multilingualism which takes power into account. And I think that makes it easier to talk about, because it's never just about language but about language in relation to social life.

Nicole I think your third point is really relevant too, that the teaching of English in spaces where it is not relevant is extremely oppressive to those who are forced to learn it. I think it demonstrates really well the mistaken idea that English is the only language you need to be successful no matter where you live and what you do. Kimie wrote a great post on this last year in regards to Thailand.

Agi Bodis  
January 3, 2014 at 9:59 am

Update on more positive experiences re attitudes to bilingualism, Hannah: post-natal/early childhood care in a not so multicultural area includes advice on bilingualism. Both midwives and child and family health nurses have brought up the topic of using L1 with baby on numerous visits – when they heard my accent. I think it’s a good sign that this issue is recognised at all, especially outside the more multicultural centres.

Hanna Torsh  
August 2, 2013 at 2:53 pm
are no easy answers. As we all know, language education is in dire straits in Australia and although my personal opinion is that yes, if another language was a compulsory part of the education system it might go some way to making more visible the experience of being multilingual, we are nowhere near that despite the White Paper and the fact there seems to be a bipartisan recognition of the value of other languages. Changing attitudes is also important and that's something I hope the kind of research I'm doing can help us work towards.

Paul Desailly
August 3, 2013 at 8:09 pm

Dear Hanna

Your thoughts together with your imminent Doctorate give you a deserved forum for changing attitudes. Your work is key to opening minds and to the step by step empathizing on the part of mono lingual Australia as to the challenges faced by multilingual citizens born abroad and their kids. Reading between your lines I feel you might agree with me that the White Paper is flawed (how so?) as far as language tuition is concerned in our school system vis-a-vis most schools and most kids. Perhaps the best way forward is enhanced bipartisanship which, importantly as a precondition, sanctions the appointment of a plenipotentiary Commission. A predetermined fixed choice or position, whether taken by proponents of a universal auxiliary language or by supporters of a national language as in 'English for all' or by advocates of a vast multiculturalism program tends to limit true consultation and even to hamper the establishing of such a Commission. The Australian government in its recent 700 page White Paper – Australia in the Asian Century – calls on the nation’s schools to start emphasizing Asian languages, specifically – Bahasa Indonesian, Hindi, Japanese and Mandarin. Though not stated directly the policy paper implies, by recommending Asian languages for Aussie kids, that English is hardly the lingua franca fait accompli for the whole of Asia or for Australia as opined in some circles. That Arabic's widespread usage isn't cited indicates that more consultation may com

A.Bodis
July 31, 2013 at 7:27 pm
away from Sydney). But I was pleasantly surprised that the staff at the childcare centre I visited offered to learn and use key words in my L1 and prepare traditional ethnic meals so that other kids can get familiar with the culture too. I think this sounds promising.

Nicole
July 31, 2013 at 6:28 pm

I do think that speaking English with a “foreign” accent affects a lot how people see you and they judge you.

There are 2 different problems though. Migrants have to learn English if they live in an English speaking country, but native speakers should realise how difficult and time-consuming it is and that English pronunciation is very hard.

The other problem is to expect everyone to learn English, even if they have no intention of visiting an English-speaking country. About that problem there was a very interesting talk by a Chinese Esperanto speaker at the Esperanto conference I attended earlier this month in Germany. The Chinese government wants every child to learn English, which causes lots of problems. The average child has no motivation, his self-esteem is going down as English seems very difficult and illogical, an enormous amount of time is wasted that could be used for more useful purposes, etc. In any case according to the Chinese speaker it would be much, much better to teach English only to those interested and not impose it on everyone, he thinks that Chinese children suffer a lot in their education by the way English is imposed onto them.

Paul Desailly
July 31, 2013 at 8:56 am

As a teacher of languages in China for a decade who’s residing again in Australia with two school age kids whose mother speaks various Chinese languages (and whose English in some non-colloquial ways surpasses my home grown version) I’d like Hanna to share more of her thoughts vis-a-vis a solution to ‘the double burden of multilingualism’ described. Is a solution to be found in changing some attitudes of the Aussie masses and effecting a cultural swing or is a linguistic solution an alterna...
thank you Hanna for your post! I like how do you connect the public discourse as open to new languages and cultures, and the real daily world of the foreigners there.

I think that in the case of Japan, we mostly have the wrong facial features for the ones that we do not look as Japanese, wrong accent for the Japanese descents from Latin America – at least from my research – and the wrong language for many that we have other native language or we are not English native speakers – the language of social prestige. I would like to hear more from your work!

Miro
July 29, 2013 at 5:24 am

Amazing research, Hanna! I am also looking at how migrant multilinguals experience their repertoire in the specific context of Cardiff, UK. They have a slightly more positive perception of their own multilingualism than it seems to be the case in Australia. However, at a public level, their skills are highly ignored, unfortunately! Keep up the good work! I think Australia is a fascinating case and this website is great to find out more about what’s going on there!
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