

# Advocating for linguistic diversity - Language on the Move

*By Ingrid Piller*



Linguistic diversity is a demographic reality, as Dr Alexandra Grey pointed out in her presentation

This week, [Professor Lisa Lim](#) and her colleagues from Sydney University's School of Languages and Cultures brought together researchers from Sydney and Hong Kong [to examine heritage languages in urban multilingual diaspora](#). The many diverse perspectives and research projects presented at the symposium served to reinforce the fact that, in Australia as elsewhere, linguistic diversity is a demographic reality.

At the same time, the presenters stressed that multilingualism and language learning are not widely valued. Language learning and maintenance are, by and large, considered private concerns that are the responsibility of families. By contrast, to society at large, they seem of limited benefit. At best, heritage languages are the object of benign neglect and haphazard policy efforts; at worst, they are actively suppressed.

How can we change that situation? Is the linguist's conviction that linguistic diversity is inherently a good thing enough to make a claim on scarce societal resources to be devoted to language teaching and multilingual service provision?

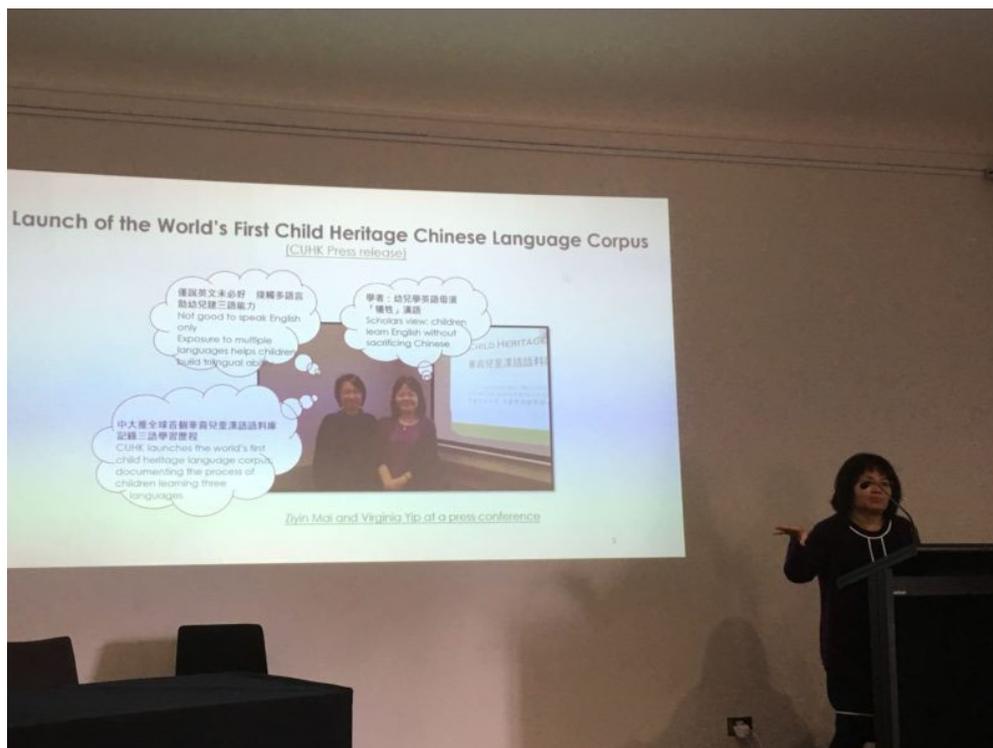
The answer is patently no.

For us as linguists, this means that greater effort is needed to provide convincing answers as to why language teaching matters and why services should be provided in languages other than English (or the dominant language, to put it more

generally). We can only do so if we highlight the social consequences of linguistic diversity. How do specific language regimes constrain or enable access to social goods such as education, employment, healthcare, or welfare?

Only where we can show that language loss is connected to social injustice or that language learning contributes to the social good, can we make legitimate claims on the body politic and lobby for changes in language policy.

Language is deeply intertwined with who we are, and the symposium's focus on ancestry necessarily trained the eye on the family. Focusing on heritage means that we are likely to ask questions about our past and where we come from. However, as families and individuals we have responsibilities both to the past and the future.



Some Hong Kong parents prefer to speak English to their children, as Professor Virginia Yip has found

Parents strive to maintain ancestral languages so that children can communicate with grandparents and remain connected with their country of origin. At the same time, they are guided by future-oriented considerations, such as which languages can be expected to be most beneficial to children's future careers. In Hong Kong, for instance, calculations of future benefit motivate parents to switch to English as family language.

The dichotomy between English and Chinese is artificial, of course, and bilingualism provides a ready means to honor families' responsibilities both to the past and the future.

Bilingualism can be an attractive option for some families. At the same time, we also need to ask whether – in our desire to defend bilingualism against the monolingual mindset – we are not celebrating bilingual parenting a bit too enthusiastically, creating new barriers along the way. Bilingual parenting in the absence of strong institutional support, particularly in schools, is an uphill battle and one that requires significant resources to succeed.

There is [an increasing body of evidence that parents want bilingualism for their](#)

[children](#). However, wanting to raise bilingual children is not enough to do so. For us as researchers, this tension might mean that it is time to turn our attention away from battling the monolingual mindset to actually helping to build an infrastructure that makes bilingualism and language learning a realistic option for all parents, irrespective of whether they can afford to pay for private school attendance, are willing and able to give up their Saturdays for community school attendance, or decide to prioritize full-time parenting for maximum minority-language input over paid employment.

If we agree that bilingualism is not only the private responsibility of families but requires a whole-of-society commitment and effort, this inevitably raises the question of limited resources. In the Hong Kong example, the choice is not actually between English monolingualism and English-Chinese bilingualism but between Cantonese, Mandarin, English, a variety of combinations, and, for an increasing number of families, a wealth of other languages. In Australia, [over 300 different languages are spoken](#).

Can and should we treat all these languages as equal when it comes to language teaching and multilingual service provision?

Linguists tend to shy away from the question of hierarchies – the equality of all languages is a fundamental tenet of our discipline. This means that, by and large, we are not very good at countering the obvious truth of the argument that it is impossible to treat all languages equally in schools and public service provision. I suggest we need to start asking some uncomfortable questions in order to be able to advocate for positive change.

Again, this means we need to shift our attention from language to social impact: what kinds of language policies have the most positive outcomes not in terms of language but in terms of social and family cohesion? In other words, we need [a social justice approach to linguistic diversity](#).

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