

'Investing in language:' Why do we think about language education the way we do?



If someone cannot now learn their native language, adding a couple of foreign (sic) dead languages is not going to help them. And there is no possible economic return such as is available from Asian languages or living European languages – either of which will improve syntactic awareness as much as or better than Latin and Greek. All in all, deluded and wasteful. (Reader comment, 23 June 2014, The Guardian)

with Indigenous Australian languages, the buck stops here – if they are not supported in Australia there's definitely nowhere else to go to later on...the dreadful finality of that should not escape us (Reader comment, Aug 2014 The Conversation)

Our opinions on language education are influenced by our firsthand experiences about languages: our memories of language learning, having friends, family from other countries, or traveling. Our experience is also affected by language policies which reflect the dominant social forces of the era, e.g. assimilation of migrants was the predominant force shaping language policy until the 1970s. Last but not least, the way information about languages and language education is transmitted to us conveys messages.

One very important source of information and thus conveyor of opinions is online news media. Catalano and Moeller's (Catalano & Moeller, 2013) article about media discourse on language education in the US focuses on how media discourse may affect people's opinion on dual language programs. The authors analysed 29 online media articles on dual language education (DLE) to explore what linguistic features they use to affect public opinion.

One such feature was the use of metaphors. These are figures of speech that contain an implied comparison, for example 'the wheels of justice', 'a broken heart', or having a 'bubbly personality'. As Santa Ana (2002) argues in his work on metaphors of Latinos in US public discourse, the casual use of metaphors in everyday discussions and texts is a way to reproduce social inequality as they gear us towards a certain view of the world.

Catalano and Moeller (2013) found two prevailing metaphors in their texts. The first one was language as water; for instance, being 'fluent' in languages, a school that 'immerses' students in a language, or 'mainstream' education. These are words and phrases that are so attached to the vocabulary of language education that we use them without thinking about the additional meanings they may convey. The interesting feature the two authors found about the use of this metaphor is that both those opinions that showed DLE in a positive light (as part of multilingual discourses) used these metaphors and also those that discuss problems with past models (monolingual discourses). This use of the same type of metaphor to express both positive and negative views on two different types of DLE, according to the authors, creates confusion in readers, which in turn does not foster an effective discussion of the topic. The second most common form of metaphor was dual language education as business/factory. Examples for these metaphors include 'developing strategies' to overcome 'challenges' in language education, students needing language 'skills' to 'compete', to mention a few.

Investigating the language market in Australia

How do metaphors of language and language education work in the Australian online media? As part of my research, I analyse publicly accessible online media articles about language education in Australia. The focus of the online articles I analyse are the following: [English language learning for migrants](#); [introducing classical languages in schools](#); [our duty to enable migrant children to keep their first languages](#); [the push to get more migrant children speak their native language](#); [pre-schools trialing language lessons](#); and finally, [language education being compulsory in Australian schools](#).

The dominant metaphor is language education as business, which appears in all six media articles I analysed, with 18 instances of use. To give a few examples,

- **We waste a precious economic resource** [...] essentially a free natural resource
- The more **cost effective** option is to maintain what you already have – to maintain the mother tongues of our bilingual children.
- when there are many languages in the classroom, as there are in most Australian classrooms, bilingual programmes become **logistically** difficult
- What languages should we **invest in**?
- learning another language helps **boost** children's literacy **skills** and comprehension of English.

What I find interesting is, similarly to Catalano and Moeller's (2013) findings, these metaphors do not only appear in discourses in support of multilingualism, but also in those prioritizing the role of English in Australia. As an example, the excerpt below comes from an article reporting on Senator Concetta Fierravanti-Wells addressing migrants on Australia Day 2014.

A lack of English has a personal **cost**, especially in an ageing population with health issues, or for parents that cannot understand their child's teacher ([Hall, 2014, 26 January](#)).

Here, lack of the dominant language is presented as an economic burden for the individual and indirectly for the whole society as well. The reliance on this kind of metaphor in discourses for and against multilingualism, just like the dual function of the language as water in Catalano and Moeller's findings, may not foster a fruitful discussion on the role of language education in Australia. The other reason why Catalano and Moeller warn

against the overuse of the business metaphor in discussions on language education is that this focus narrows down the numerous benefits of bilingualism to an economic one.

To show how prevalent the business metaphor is: the second most common metaphor in my analysis was language as living organism with nine instances, half as many as language education as business. Here are some examples:

- the best way to support their English language learning is to **nurture** their mother tongues
- we “**kill**” the languages children bring with them into Kindergarten
- It gradually **withers** and disappears
- We participate in the destruction of their mother tongue, because without the opportunities to develop the language it becomes **stunted**.

These examples are similar to Catalano and Moeller’s education as cultivation metaphors; however, their findings include ‘blossom’, ‘flourish’, and ‘shine’, which are rhetorically more powerful than the negative equivalents I have found (‘withers’, ‘stunted’). According to Santa Ana (2002) these kind of metaphors are an alternative to the language education as business ones because they emphasize personal development and maturation – or in our case, a lack of these.

Other common metaphors were, in this order, language as object (e.g. ‘lack of English’, to retain a language’), classical language as royalty (e.g. languages as ‘rightful inheritors’, ‘the linguistic regalia of privilege’), and language as duty (e.g. it is our ‘personal responsibility’, languages ‘policed entry into medicine and law degrees’). Interestingly, water metaphors occurred only in two articles and with the words ‘mainstream’ and ‘fluent’ each mentioned twice. However, the metaphor of language as water with the misleading connotation that language learning is natural and happens without any effort is quite common in reader comments to these articles e.g. children ‘absorb English like a sponge’, which I explore in detail in my PhD research.

Improving communication on language education

Returning back to the reader comments I cited at the beginning of the post, it is clear that these metaphors find their way into our everyday talk. The two quotes employ metaphors of business (‘economic return’), gambling (‘the buck stops here’) and language as a living organism (‘dead’, ‘dreadful finality’). Current economic forces affecting people’s life priorities can explain the marketization of the way language education is discussed. However, slipping into this habit of constructing learning and learners solely as participants of the market economy diminishes the whole experience of language learning and excludes other benefits one can gain from the process. As an example, see [proverbs around the world related to the connection between wisdom and languages](#). It is thus important to recognize the power of the ways in which we speak about language learning and the consequences these may have on indigenous and migrant languages and communities in Australia.



Catalano, T., & Moeller, A. (2013). Media discourse and dual language programs: A critical linguistic analysis Discourse, Context & Media, 2 (4), 165-174 DOI: [10.1016/j.dcm.2013.09.001](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dcm.2013.09.001)

Santa Ana, O. (2002). *Brown tide rising*. Austin, US: University of Texas Press.