

Why a multilingual social imagination matters

Last week I was fortunate to be able to attend [the 2016 annual conference of the British Association of Applied Linguistics \(BAAL\)](#) at Anglia Ruskin University in Cambridge. In my plenary lecture I spoke about ways to overcome linguistic exclusion and how to build linguistically inclusive and resilient societies. If Twitter is anything to go by, the key point of my presentation that resonated most with the audience was that linguistic proficiency is not a trait of the speaker but of the way we organise our social spaces.

We usually think about language proficiency as something a speaker does or does not have: language proficiency assessments try to gauge what kinds of speaking, listening, reading and writing skills a speaker has and what they can do with those skills. However, we rarely ask how particular performances are enabled or disabled by social arrangements.

In real life, linguistic proficiency is not static and varies with the context in which speakers find themselves. In the following example we observe that one and the same speaker may be capable of explaining a particular set of circumstances competently in one context but incapable of explaining the exact same set of circumstances only a few minutes later in a different set of circumstances.



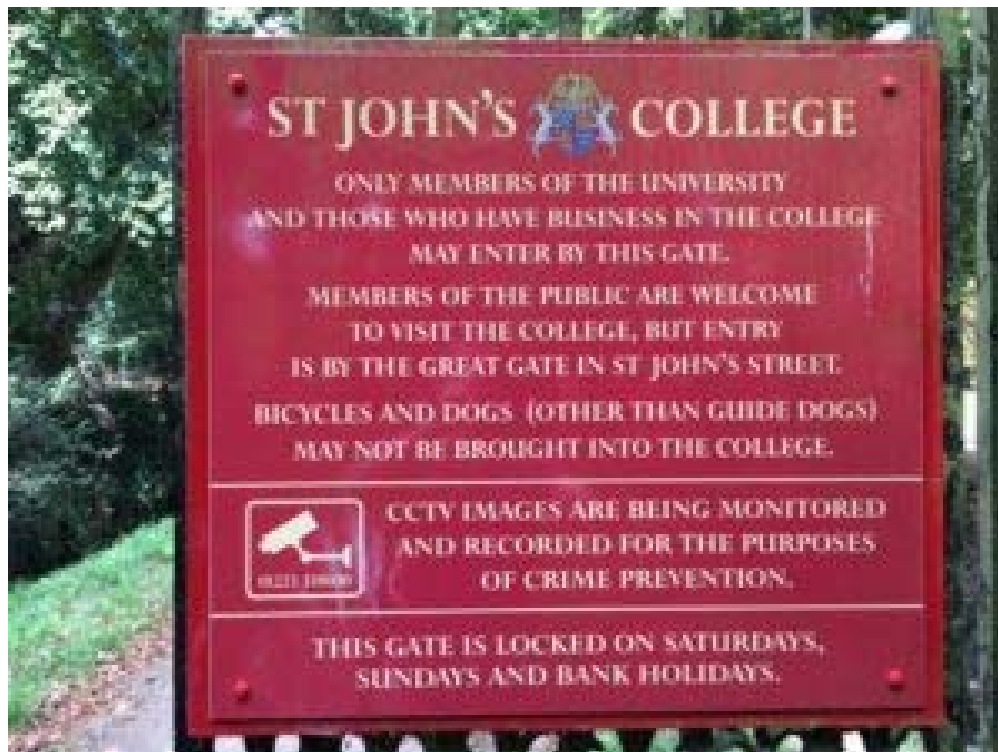
“Speak English or Die!?” How to overcome linguistic exclusion and build linguistically inclusive and resilient societies, Ingrid Piller #BAAL2016 (Image: Reem Doukmak, @doukmak_remi)

The example comes from [an episode about court volunteers in an Australian Magistrates Court on the radio show Law Report](#). The episode explained the role of court volunteers and featured the voices and experiences of a number of court volunteers. Court volunteers help to work as a liaison between courts and laypeople who may find themselves before the court for the first time in their lives and may have little experience with the justice system.

Jo Dorrington, one of the volunteers featured on the show, shared the following story: she was mingling in the foyer of a Magistrates Court with various people waiting there and approached an Asian-looking couple to ask them why they were in court. The couple explained that they had been summoned for unpaid fines on their car. They also explained that they had sold the car prior to the fines being issued and showed the paperwork that they had brought along to document their innocence.

While the radio episode does not comment in any way on the language proficiency of the couple, it is obvious that they were capable of explaining their situation in an informal one-on-one conversation with a stranger. Now, let's hear from Jo Dorrington what happened when the couple were asked to explain the exact same set of circumstances a few minutes later to the magistrate:

When the magistrate actually asked the man if he had anything he wanted to say, just because of stress and I think the language barrier, he actually just stood up and said, 'No.' And so the magistrate then actually just started to make a judgement on orders as far as what he was going to have to do as far as paying back all these fines. And I thought, oh gosh, what am I going to do here? And so actually just said, 'Excuse me, Your Honour, but I'm really concerned that because of a language barrier you are not actually being advised of some critical information.' I should say, [...] we don't actually jump up like that on many occasions, but in that situation I just thought, well, we couldn't let that go.



In the example we see one and the same person having the English language proficiency to explain a problem in one context and lacking the exact same level of proficiency in another. The example clearly complicates the notion of linguistic proficiency: 'proficiency' is a function of inclusive or exclusive arrangements. Where a one-on-one informal conversation allowed this particular speaker to succeed, a formal context where the speaker had to speak in front of a group resulted in failure.

In sum, social arrangements enable or disable linguistic proficiency. Social arrangements that allow for only one form of performance to be valid – having to stand up in front of a group and deliver a public speech as in the court room setting in the example – are obviously exclusionary and unjust. They condemn those who cannot or will not conform to silence (unless they are lucky enough to find a sensitive ally, such as the court volunteer in the example).

Despite the ever-increasing linguistic diversity of our societies, we largely continue to organize social spaces as monolingual spaces. As a result, the voices of large segments of linguistically diverse populations fail to be admitted to those spaces. Excluding particular ways of speaking necessarily translates into excluding speakers.

By contrast, a commitment to inclusion challenges us to change our lens: how can we redesign our social spaces so that language does not constitute a barrier to full and equal participation?

If you are interested in what else I had to say about the sociolinguistics of inclusion and exclusion in linguistically diverse societies, have a look at [the live Twitter feed for #BAAL2016](#). Comments on my lecture appear on the timeline on September 02 between 8:50am and 10:05am (BST) somewhere in a long line of fantastic tweets, which provide a record of an inspiring conference and much food for thought.

Further reading



Piller, I. (2016). Linguistic Diversity and Participation Linguistic Diversity and Social Justice DOI: [10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199937240.003.0006](https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199937240.003.0006)