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Ingrid Piller

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Monolingual ways of seeing multilingualism

Ingrid Piller
Department of Linguistics, Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia

Introduction

Tony Liddicoat shows that English-language research publications about multilingualism are by and large a monolingual affair. Only 7% of the references cited in his corpus of multilingualism research articles refer to work in languages other than English. In this commentary, I expand on Liddicoat’s quantitative findings by sketching out a qualitative examination of monolingual ways of seeing multilingualism. In speaking of ‘ways of seeing’ I draw on Berger (1972), who argues that what we see is constrained by what we expect to see based on our beliefs and knowledge. English monolingualism undergirds contemporary ways of seeing multilingualism, including, and perhaps particularly, academic research into multilingualism. Specific aspects of these English-monolingual ways of seeing multilingualism that I address here include perceptions of multilingualism as generic and context-free; as characteristic of the present; and as constituted in textual products rather than processes of production and reception. I conclude by asking how multilingual ways of seeing could be fostered in the field.

Monolingual ways of seeing I: generic and context-free multilingualism

Having been educated in Germany, I hold degrees in English, German and Spanish Philology. Philology is a field that combines the study of a specific language with the study of the literature produced in that language. The university departments where my studies and early career were located were the English Department, the German Department and the Romance Department. When my career took me to the English-speaking world – first to the USA and then Australia – I found myself no longer teaching and researching in language-specific disciplines but in the university’s Linguistics Department. From an expert in English, German and Spanish language and literature I was transformed into an expert in linguistics. Not being an expert in a number of specific languages any longer, I became an expert in all matters language-related. This may sound like a liberating expansion of perspective from the specific, local and particularistic to the general, global and universal. In theory, it is. In practice, however, as I soon noticed, the ‘general, global and universal’ focus of non-language-specific linguistics merrily engages in teaching and research practices that tacitly equate ‘language’ with ‘English.’

The common assumption in Anglo-Saxon linguistics is that one does not need to have any level of proficiency in a language in order to analyze it. In his guide to field linguistics,
Crowley (2007, 155), for instance, explains that he has published accounts of 18 different languages ‘though I never tried to carry out even a basic conversation in most of these.’ Crowley is, in fact, exceptional in that he explicitly addresses the question of language proficiency in his linguistic research. Most linguistics researchers are surprisingly coy on the topic and rarely offer explicit information about their relevant linguistic proficiencies in their publications (see Pavlenko 2014, 309ff, for a detailed discussion).

Not only do academic linguists in the English-language tradition subscribe to the assumption that they do not need to know specific languages in order to conduct research on ‘language,’ they frequently even take pride in NOT knowing languages and lampoon the idea that an academic linguist should know a number of languages as silly and misguided. For instance, on linguistics-related social media sites the following quip by a UK-based academic linguist has been making the rounds:

Asking a linguist how many languages they speak is like asking a doctor how many diseases they have.

While the conceptualization of multilingualism as disease may not be representative of linguistics in the English-language tradition, the understanding of ‘language’ as independent from specific languages certainly is. What this ontology blithely ignores is the fact that research about language in the abstract is, of necessity, always conducted in a particular language. Thus, if not further specified, in a disciplinary sleight of hand, the abstract universal language that constitutes both our object of study and the lens through which we produce knowledge about it implicitly becomes English.

Given this universalism which tacitly equates ‘language’ with ‘English,’ multilingualism continues to be obscured in linguistic research. A number of authors have recently postulated a ‘multilingual turn’ (e.g. May 2014; Ortega 2013). Even so, and despite regular lip-service to the fact that ‘there are more multilinguals than monolinguals in the world,’ multilingualism continues to be seen as a particularistic linguistic condition. Even where the research focus is on multilingualism, as it is in the articles in Liddicoat’s corpus, the same universalizing tendencies I noted for ‘language’ prevail. As Liddicoat found, 20 out of 95 articles in his corpus (see Table 11) ‘investigated issues of multilingualism that were not situated in a specific region or context – that is they discussed issues that were features of multilingualism or theoretical constructs that were not anchored in any polity or region.’

The preference for context-free theorizing about multilingualism that Liddicoat observes is deeply problematic because it must be seen to constitute a preference for theorizing about something that does not exist. As Aneta Pavlenko (2014, xi) frankly puts it in a book entitled The Bilingual Mind:

In reality, there is no such thing as the bilingual mind: bilinguals vary greatly in linguistic repertoires, histories, and abilities, and the bilingual mind appears here as an umbrella term to refer to a variety of speakers, including multilinguals.

‘Multilingualism’ is thus best seen as an umbrella term that covers a wide variety of linguistic contexts and practices. Language status, speaker status, national histories, individual proficiencies and institutional contexts are some of the main variables that shape a great diversity of ‘multilingualisms.’ Where this diversity is erased in context-free universalistic theorizing multilingualism usually comes to be seen as a combination of serial or
parallel monolingualisms (for extensive critiques of this way of seeing multilingualism, see the contributions in Heller 2007).

One key way in which languages differ – and which is of central importance to the present discussion – is with regard to their communicative reach. The global language system can be understood as a pyramid-like organigram (de Swaan 2001). The languages at the bottom of the pyramid, which account for an estimated 98% of all the 5000–6000 languages in the world, are ‘peripheral languages.’ Peripheral languages are the languages of local communication, ‘the languages of conversation and narration rather than reading and writing, of memory and remembrance rather than record’ (de Swaan 2001, 4). Above the huge layer of peripheral languages sits a thin layer of ‘central languages.’ Central languages are usually the official languages of a nation-state. They are used in elementary and sometimes secondary education, in the media and in national politics and bureaucracies. De Swaan estimates that there are around 100 central languages. The next layer is occupied by about a dozen ‘super-central languages,’ which serve in international and long-distance communication. Finally, the apex of the pyramid is occupied by one single language, English, which de Swaan describes as ‘hyper-central language.’

De Swaan’s global-language-system pyramid is intended to demonstrate communicative reach: speakers of a peripheral language need to learn a central language to communicate outside their local community; speakers of a central language need to learn a super-central language to communicate internationally; and speakers of a super-central language need to learn the hyper-central language in order to communicate globally. By contrast, English native speakers often have no obvious need to learn any additional language because English can serve local, national, international and global communicative functions. The system is thus hierarchically ordered: the greater the communicative reach of a language, the more valuable the language is.

The same is true of academic research publications about multilingualism: a lot has been written about multilingualism in English; a fair amount has probably been written in Chinese, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Norwegian, Russian, Spanish, and maybe a handful of other languages. However, the vast majority of languages have never even been used to produce academic publications about multilingualism.

As a proxy, consider the languages used to author Wikipedia entries (List of Wikipedias 2015): Wikipedia entries are available in a total of 291 out of all the world’s languages. The number of languages is usually estimated to total between 5000 and 6000, and 291 thus account for around 5% of the world’s languages. The vast majority of these 291 languages only have a small number of entries. Fifteen languages account for the overwhelming majority of entries, and even within these 15 languages English stands out: with 4,948,736 entries it accounts for 2.5 times more entries than the second-most frequently used language on Wikipedia, which is Swedish with 1,974,655 entries.

It is fair to assume that the list of languages in which multilingualism research is produced is even shorter and more skewed in favor of English than the list of languages in which encyclopedic knowledge is produced on Wikipedia. Seen against all the things that humans do with language, writing academic research papers is a highly specific exercise that is undertaken by only a small number of people in only a very small number of languages, with a significant bias towards English. What this means is that academic understanding of multilingualism is skewed towards mediation through English:
Whorfian effects par excellence are found not in some far-away exotic tribe but on the pages of academic journals, among scholars who [...] equate the English lexicon with ‘the language of thought’, adopting English terms – that lack translation equivalents in many languages – to describe ‘thinking for thinking’ and ‘feeling for feeling.’ (Pavlenko 2014, 300)

In sum, English-monolingual ways of seeing multilingualism entail a very peculiar perspective; a perspective that disguises its peculiarity as general and universalistic. This perspective has two consequences: first, English-monolingual ways of seeing are obscured from being recognized as particularistic; and, second, examination of the detailed and specific in its local context is devalued.

**Monolingual ways of seeing II: the perpetual present**

In the previous section I suggested that general and universalistic ways of seeing multilingualism are deeply flawed. This contention is not at all new. Hugo Schuchardt, who is sometimes considered one of the first modern academics to specialize in multilingualism research, already made the point eloquently more than a century ago:

*Auf dem Gebiete, das ich hier durchmessen habe, gilt das πάντα ρεί mehr als irgendwo und es ist für den wissenschaftlichen Ordnungssinn schwer sich mit ihm abzufinden. [...] (In the questions I have addressed here, related to language contact, the Ancient Greek maxim ‘everything flows’ is truer than anywhere else, and that is something that the academic sense of order finds difficult to accept.’ My translation.) (Schuchardt 1909, 461)*

The fluidity and heterogeneity that Schuchardt recognized as characteristic of multilingualism more than a century ago – drawing on a philosophical tradition with a pedigree of more than two millennia – is today often treated as a novelty and a new discovery of our age. Contemporary academic literature on multilingualism frequently tells us that our world is no longer ‘diverse’ but ‘super-diverse’; that the multilingual practices of our time need entirely new terms such as ‘translanguaging,’ ‘metrolingualism’ or ‘polylingualism’ to be adequately explained.

However, multilingual practices were already noted by the ancients. For example, the Odyssey, the ancient Greek epic about the Trojan War dating back to the twelfth century BCE, contains this description of the island of Crete:

*’There is a land called Crete; ringed by the wine-dark sea with rolling whitecaps; handsome country, fertile, thronged with people well past counting; boasting ninety cities, language mixing with language side-by-side.’ (Homer, Book 19, ll. 172–175; cited in the 1996 translation by Robert Fagles)*

Overlooking 3000 years of linguistic diversity is the result of a specific monolingual way of seeing that is extremely recent and only dates from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. That period saw the consolidation of the nation-state and was characterized by concerted political efforts to dismantle linguistically and ethnically diverse polities, such as the Ottoman and Habsburg Empires. The ethnically and linguistically homogeneous nation-state is the product of the ‘unmixing of peoples’ in Lord Curzon’s infamous phrase (see, e.g. Brubaker 1995; Chatty 2010; Marrus 1985; Wachtel 2008). It is as much a historical peculiarity as the academic research article. Taking the ‘unmixed’ state as the norm against which multilingualism should be understood is another form of English-monolingual ways of seeing multilingualism.
The idea that contemporary multilingualism is novel in its complexity and heterogeneity originated in the UK in the first decade of the twenty-first century (the term ‘super-diversity’ is usually credited to Vertovec (2007). This was a time when Britain, virtually for the first time in its recent history, experienced a higher rate of immigration than emigration (Hawkins 2015, 11). ‘Super-diversity’ and heightened linguistic heterogeneity may thus well be part of the contemporary British experience but that does not mean we should theorize multilingualism on this basis. Indeed, migration researchers Czaika and de Haas (2014, 32) have argued that ‘the idea that immigration has become more diverse may partly reveal a Eurocentric worldview.’

With declining European emigration toward other continents, there has been a major shift in global directionality of migration, with the transformation of Europe from a global source region of emigrants and settlers into a global migration magnet. This has led to an increased presence of phenotypically and culturally distinct immigrants in Europe as well as settler societies of European descent in North America and the Pacific. In other words, rather than an increasing spread in terms of origin countries of migrants per se, the national and ethnic origin of immigrant populations has become increasingly non-European.

Liddicoat’s research allows us to quantify a specific Anglo-centric bias of contemporary multilingualism research: the research context of a third of the research reported in the articles in his corpus (32 out of 95 articles; see Table 11) is located in Anglophone center countries.

John Edwards (2012) has summed up the problem with failing to recognize the heightened diversity, complexity and heterogeneity that may currently obtain in these contexts as historically specific rather than universally novel: he writes that ‘superdiversity is an obviously unnecessary term coined to suggest a non-existent development’ (34); and that the perception of this non-existent development results from a lack of knowledge about ‘the historically longstanding awareness of vocal multiplicities, their sources, their intertwinnings and, consequently, the problems of interpretation that they present’ (37).

If much of the contemporary academic literature on multilingualism fails to see that ‘multiculturalism is the normal human experience,’ as anthropologist Ward Goodenough (1976) put it, this is also a consequence of English-monolingual ways of seeing in the field.

Hugo Schuchardt’s work presents a case in point. As I pointed out above, Schuchardt, who was born in 1842 and died in 1927, insisted on individualism as a driving force in language contact and on fluidity as a key aspect of multilingualism more than a century ago. Even so, his work is rarely cited in contemporary multilingualism research. This is not due to a lack of accessibility: the complete works of this immensely fascinating, productive and empirically wide-ranging linguist are conveniently available for open access through the online Schuchardt archive at the University of Graz (http://schuchardt.uni-graz.at/). Even so, his work is neither read nor cited in the field in any measure proportionate to his importance. The editorial introduction to the Schuchardt Archive spells out one of the reasons for this disciplinary neglect:

Schuchardt konnte es sich noch leisten, den Großteil seiner Schriften in seiner Muttersprache zu veröffentlichen. Daß die heutige linguistic community nicht mehr in der Lage ist, diese im Original zu lesen, gehört nicht zu den wirklichen Fortschritten des Faches. [Schuchardt could still afford to publish most of his works in his mother tongue. That today’s ‘linguistic community’ is no longer capable of reading them in the original hardly constitutes disciplinary progress.’ My translation.]
In sum, English-monolingual ways of seeing multilingualism also entail an ahistorical perspective that results in the identification of a specific historical phenomenon – heightened linguistic diversity in contemporary Anglophone countries – as globally new and hence in need of being theorized in completely new ways, including the proliferation of newly created terms for multilingualism. Not only does this mean that long-standing philosophical traditions exploring linguistic and social diversity, complexity and heterogeneity are being ignored, it also means that historical and contemporary research contexts where multilingualism might have been the normal and unproblematic experience are being ignored (for an extended discussion see, e.g. Piller 2016; Yildiz 2012).

Monolingual ways of seeing III: product focus

As I pointed out above, one of the reasons, if not the prime reason, why Schuchardt’s work is rarely cited today is that he published mainly in German, and that only a small number of his publications have been translated into English. Schuchardt was part of an international community of scholars who were capable of reading a substantial number of languages. Their wide-ranging receptive proficiencies allowed each of them the luxury to write in their native languages. However, to equate the experience of reading a ‘German’ academic article by Schuchardt to that of reading a contemporary English academic paper would be misleading. Contemporary multilingualism research written in English offers, by and large, a monolingual reading experience. It is not uncommon to find that data from other languages are simply presented in translation; if non-English data are presented in the original, they are always accompanied by an English translation. As we know from Liddicoat’s research, citations of conceptual work in other languages are exceedingly rare. Where they occur, mostly English paraphrases are used; direct quotations are provided in translation, often without the original. Furthermore, any occurrences of non-English language items are commonly marked typographically by quotation marks or italics etc. In sum, in the typical contemporary English-language research article, the reader can comfortably go into monolingual mode; even if other language material appears in the article, the reader, if so inclined, does not need to pay attention and can skip it to simply concentrate on the English.

The experience of reading a ‘German’ article by Schuchardt is entirely different and it is impossible for the reader to slip into monolingual mode. The ‘Lingua Franca’ article cited above, for instance, is an incredibly multilingual text where German provides some sort of matrix but the feel of the text is best described metaphorically as a delightful multilingual tapestry. To begin with, Schuchardt extensively quotes from work published in French, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish. These quotes are simply part of the running text and no translation is provided. In order to follow the argument the reader needs to also understand French, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish in addition to German. Second, Schuchardt cites data excerpts from a wide variety of languages. The vast majority of these are Romance languages and contact languages based on Romance languages. In addition to the standard Romance languages, I counted examples from Algerian Jewish French, Andalusian, Guiana Portuguese Creole, Ladino, Mozarabic, Old Spanish, Sabir, Sicilian, Southern French and Venetian, but I may well have overlooked some. These examples from Romance languages are rarely translated. Furthermore, no matter how ‘mixed’ the
language of the example may be, the various source languages are not segregated typographically, as is customary today. Schuchardt also quotes a number of examples from Afrikaans, Arabic, including various national and non-standard varieties, Chino-Russian, Russian and Turkish. The latter quotes are usually complemented by a translation into German. Finally, the multilingual ‘feel’ of the text is also enhanced by references to a wide variety of additional languages, which Schuchardt uses as points of comparison and contrast for the phenomena he discusses. In addition to the languages already mentioned, these wide-ranging references include Chinese Pidgin English, Malay, Swahili, Volapük and the Yokohama dialect of Japanese.

In sum, reading a Schuchardt article is a multilingual experience where reading a contemporary academic article typically is a monolingual experience. I do not assume that he intended to but Schuchardt was clearly ‘model[ing] multilingualism as a part of [his] academic practice,’ as Liddicoat exhorts ‘researchers who are invested in multilingualism as a research area’ to do.

However, we should not romanticize multilingual texts. While I enjoyed the experience of reading a research article with such a rich multilingual flavor, I am also cognizant that my enjoyment of this particular article depends on a very specific set of linguistic skills. As it so happens, I have exactly the right (receptive) language proficiencies to enjoy a well-written text of the sort that it is: German, its matrix language, is the language that was the predominant medium of my education, and I studied Latin, Spanish and French and thus have a good (reading) knowledge of the many embedded Romance languages. However, if the multilingual combination of the text had been different, it would have been a different story. Even if the matrix language stayed the same but the embedded languages were replaced with, say, Chinese, Japanese, Russian or a number of other academic languages, not to mention the 5000–6000 peripheral languages, and I could not have read this particular article.

And herein lies the crux of the problem: in his academic work, Schuchardt was communicating almost exclusively with men (!) with linguistic profiles very similar to his: Europeans, who, irrespective of their national background, would have been educated in the classics and modern European languages. As the academy has diversified, this highly multilingual, yet homogeneous, canon has disappeared.

We may deplore English-monolingual research articles in multilingualism research but a highly monolingual text in English is accessible to a greater diversity of readers than a multilingual text. A comparison with language choice in multinational corporations is instructive here: employees in the Central and Eastern European subsidiaries of multinational companies originating from Germany have been found to prefer English-monolingual language policies over multilingual policies (Nekvapil and Nekula 2006; Nekvapil and Sherman 2009, 2013). This was due to the fact that multilingual policies in practice meant English-German bilingualism but not Czech-English-German trilingualism. The global language pyramid described above explains why Czech employees had to learn English and German in a multilingual policy but German expatriate managers did not feel compelled to learn Czech. For Czech employees having to operate in one single foreign language was less burdensome than having to operate in two foreign languages. Furthermore, many felt that an English-monolingual language policy put them on a more egalitarian footing with German employees, as both groups had to operate in a foreign language in this scenario.
In sum, English-monolingual ways of seeing multilingualism entail a focus on the product of the monolingual academic text. While we may intuitively value a multilingual article more, it is easy to forget that a monolingual text may be more inclusive than a multilingual text. English-monolingual research articles are embedded in increasingly multilingual processes of reading and writing and, paradoxically, enable increasingly diverse processes of knowledge production and communication.

**Multilingual ways of seeing?**

English-monolingual ways of seeing multilingualism limit our vision and constrain our understanding. I have briefly sketched out the shortcomings of universalist, ahistorical and product-focused ontologies that can be observed in contemporary multilingualism research. It has been my aim to show that monolingualism and multilingualism run deeper than the ‘linguistic landscape’ of a research article, which is ultimately purely symbolic. Because English-monolingual ways of seeing are deeply embedded in contemporary multilingualism research, as elsewhere, I do not believe that referencing more non-English citations would, in and of itself, result in meaningful change. To free the field of monolingual ways of seeing much deeper changes are needed in my view. I close with three suggestions intended to start a conversation about multilingual ways of seeing.

First, we need a discussion about compulsory language studies for our students; should we really be graduating ‘linguists’ or ‘TESOL teachers’ who have not undertaken in-depth studies of any language other than English?

Second, multilingual processes in data collection and analysis should be routinely presented and subjected to peer review. All too often, published research is allowed to remain silent on multilingual processes such as the language proficiencies of those involved or quality assurance of translations although these determine the quality of the data and the credibility of the analysis.

Finally, the field needs a serious discussion about publishing practices. Despite the fact that we are well into the digital age by now, the academic research article remains the most prestigious and highly valued form of publication. Unfortunately, the research article is also extremely normative, highly static and difficult to access. If we want multilingual publication practices, we will need to start engaging in and valuing alternative publishing formats, as I have argued in detail elsewhere (Piller 2011), with reference to the sociolinguistics portal Language on the Move (http://www.languageonthemove.com/).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

**Notes on contributor**

Ingrid Piller is Professor of Applied Linguistics at Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia. Over the course of her international career, she has also held appointments at universities in Germany, Switzerland, United Arab Emirates and USA. Ingrid’s research expertise is in Intercultural Communication, the Sociolinguistics of Language Learning and Multilingualism, and Bilingual Education. She is particularly interested in the ways in which linguistic diversity as it arises in the contexts of globalization and migration intersects with social inclusion and global justice. Her most recent book Linguistic
Diversity and Social Justice will be published by Oxford University Press in 2016. She is also the author of Intercultural Communication: A critical introduction (Edinburgh University Press 2011) and Bilingual Couples Talk: The discursive construction of hybridity (Benjamins 2002). Ingrid serves as editor-in-chief of the international sociolinguistics journal Multilingua and the sociolinguistics portal Language on the Move, where most of her publications are available for open access download.

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