**Interrogating Plurilingualism: A Socialist Stance**

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**Introduction: What is plurilingualism?**

*Plurilingualism* is an increasingly popular theoretical framework in second language education (Vallejo & Dooley, 2020). It has been defined as the recognition of “the existence of a complex or even composite competence [in language usage] on which the social actor may draw” (Coste, Moore & Zarate, 2009, 11). As such, plurilingualism “challenges the assumption of complete and balanced competence in [discrete] languages” and “highlights interculturality and the social nature of communicative competence” (Lau & Van Viegen, 2020, 12).

Much ink has been spilt in debates regarding how much this framework replicates the previous literature, which in recent years often problematized decontextualized and standardized orientations towards language. Likewise, arguments (often heated) have raged recently regarding the supposed similarities and differences between plurilingualism and a host of similar frameworks (most notably that of *translanguaging).* I do not propose to wade into those weeds here.

In any case, plurilingualism emphasises the need to honor the first languages of second language learners, problematizes the notion of the *native speaker* and opposes linguistic racism/linguicism (Skutnabb-Kangas,1981). These are some of its positive attributes. However, as I discuss below, there are some potentially negative attributes associated with this framework.

My argument makes the links between the cautions that Ryuko Kubota (2016), as outlined below, regarding how the concept can be cooped for neo-liberal agendas and a literature review on the practical aspects of plurilingualism that my colleagues and I have written that is in press. This stance takes into account the notion of *new materialism* and linguistic thinking of Gilles Deleuze (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980), who was heavily influenced by Marx (Lecercle, 2005; Author, In press),

In this piece, I reiterate a previous argument made by myself and my colleagues that the common concerns of actual practitioners must be considered if the liberatory potential of plurlingualism is to be realized.

In what follows, I argue further that context matters. Of course, these contexts are complex. However, while I think it true that when the focus is on English language usage that privileges the notion of the native speaker, plurlingualism is potentially liberatory, I also believe that when the focus is on minority language maintenance and revitalisation, the notion of the native speaker is progressive and concretely useful.

This piece first summarizes an article in press that reviews current plurilingual theory and practice with notes about the positive claims made about the concept. I then briefly outline the cautions that several scholars have made about it. I note several contradictions. I then go into the linguistic and philosophical background associated with the Deleuzian critique of structural linguistics, the notion of the native speaker and new materialism. This is followed by a quick summary of a project at my home university that attempted to counter the native speaker notion. In concrete ways, this project highlighted the contractions I note earlier. My penultimate section makes the case that context matters, and the native speaker is potentially a progressive notion when the focus is on language preservation and revitalisation. I conclude with some experimental thinking about taking a socialist stance that I invite the reader to engage with me.

**Review of Current Theory and Practice**

In a co-written article (Author, et al. In press), we report a literature review of the current anglophone academic literature pertaining to plurilingualism. We summarize 24 of the most recent pertinent articles in terms of: resistance to the adoption of plurilingual pedagogy; key factors in changing attitudes toward the approach; identified classroom options; and implications for teacher education.

Plurilingualism can potentially make a difference in terms of facilitating gains in linguistic abilities, strengthening student self-confidence, and addressing issues related to social justice. Conceptually, language should be linked to multiple repertoires and identities that are living entities rather than things to be mastered. Concretely, institutional policy and material supports are key.

However, based on our review, we argue that plurilingualism’s positive attributes can contribute to concrete pedagogical change only as long as the legitimate concerns of classroom teachers are respected.

Teachers have a right to be suspicious of the latest fashions within second language education since, as Carroll (1971) once noted, “our field has been afflicted with many false dichotomies, weak conceptualizations, and neglect of critical issues and variables” (p. 102). It is inappropriate to dismiss teachers who show this reluctance as being ignorant of the implications associated with what has been advocated as an advance in theory. As has been consistently argued previously by notable curriculum specialists during the widespread adoption of the communicative approach (Breen, 1984; Johnson, 1989; Markee, 1995; Stern, 1992), real curriculum innovation depends on understanding how the nature of teaching practice and decision-making is influenced by belief systems. Changing belief systems, in turn, depends on teachers being shown what works concretely in the classroom (Kagan,1992; Park & Ertmer, 2007) and respecting their responsibilities and expertise (Clark,1988).

To adopt the attitude that teachers should automatically adhere to the recommendations proposed by self-appointed experts dooms curricular change and perpetuates what Pennycook (1989) once argued is the maintenance of the traditional inequalities and hierarchies between ESL theorists and practitioners.

**Problems and Contradictions**

It is worth quoting at length Kubota’s (2016) concerns regarding the theoretical foundations of plurlingualism:

While notions such as hybridity, fluidity, and multiplicity are potentially liberating, they can obscure actual struggles and inequalities… Using the multi/plural frame of reference with insufficient critical reflection makes us complicit with a neo-

liberalism that exacerbates economic and educational gaps and with a neo-

liberal multiculturalism that evades racism and other injustices… More explicit

attention should be paid to issues of asymmetrical relations of power and

inequalities that privilege or stigmatize individuals and groups due to their plurilingualism, cosmopolitanism, and hybridity on the one hand, or their monolingualism and monoculturalism on the other (p.16).

At the level of policy, McNamara (2011) pointed out that even though the Council of Europe has endorsed plurilingualism, dominant standardized languages such as English and French are still given privileged status, non-dominant or regional languages (or dialects, if you prefer), such as Basque or Roma, do not enjoy official status.

At the level of concrete practice, plurilingualism has also been described as problematic. Cummins (2021), using what he calls *consequential validity* questions the usefulness of plurilingualism for classroom teachers working within formal institutions and tasked with facilitating the acquisition of a standardised language. He argues that many of our current concerns with second language theory fail to account for local teacher agency and experience as co-creators of actionable knowledge and theory.

So, we have at least one contradiction. At one level (or in one context if you prefer), plurilingualism has been described as liberatory: a frame of resistance to monolingual stances that are potentially oppressive tools used to marginalise, ‘hieraticalize’ and silence minority language users. On the other hand (or context), plurilingualism has been described as a potential obfuscation of linguistic (and associated) inequalities that neglects the concrete realities of the classroom.

I argue that this contraction can be illuminated with a socialist stance. However, before I develop my argument further, I think it important that I provide some linguistic and philosophical background for the reader.

**The Deleuzian Critique, New Materialism and the Notion of the Native Speaker**

Deleuze, a contemporary of Foucault (1972) and Derrida (1976) and was an influential French philosopher who wrote extensively on literature, film, and fine art. He died in 1995. Most notably in co-authorship with Felix Guatarri, he developed an orientation that foreshadowed what we now call *new materialism*, he argued that experience is immanent and impossible to categorize along the lines dominant in Western philosophy.

Specifically, Deleuze (1969) argued that language is NOT a hierarchically organized and standardized set of biologically derived rules that constitute statements of fact. Instead, it:

* is indelibly connected to other phenomena;
* always means more than what the speaker intends;
* has material force;
* is a series of sets of sub-systems in constant flux and contention;
* is historical (becoming);
* is partially organized and partially chaotic.

Moreover, Deleuze noted that that stances that endorse standardised languages are forms of symbolic violence. The native speaker is a key concept in such a stance.

First coined by Leonard Bloomfield in the 1930’s, the notion of the native speaker became a fundamental aspect of Chomsky’s transformational generative grammar (Chomsky, 1965). Chomsky argued that the existence of this notion is evidenced by the rapid first language development in children. It is part of our species’ biological inheritance.

However, much as I respect Chomsky’s substantial contributions (both politically linguistically), I think that his continued support of the notion of the native speaker is problematic.

As Cook (1997) and Firth & Wagner (1997) argued with the support of Halliday’s systemic functional model of linguistics, that the notion of the native speaker has set up impossible monolingual ideals that represents most speakers of English as deficient.

As noted above, new materialism owes much to Deleuze’s thinking in regard to linguistics. One can note this legacy in the way Harman (2017) succinctly summarizes the axioms of the new materialism:

* Everything is constantly changing;
* Everything occurs along continuous gradients rather than with distinct boundaries and cut off points;
* Everything is contingent;
* We must focus on actions/verbs rather than on substances/nouns;
* Things are generated in our practices and therefore lack any prior essence;
* What a thing does is more interesting than what it is;
* Thought and the world never exist separately, and therefore ‘intra-act’ rather than interact;
* Things are multiple rather than singular;
* The world is purely immanent and it’s a good thing because any transcendence would be oppressive. (p.145)

Even though some scholars, such as Reves & Medgyes (1994), have argued that native and non-native speakers both have their places in the teaching of English as a second (or other) language, Nuzhat Amin (2000) clearly documented that non-native teachers of English (such as herself) have been usually viewed as inferior to those considered native.

Phillipson (1992) went even further by attacking the very notion as a fallacy which has led to a hierarchy within the profession closely linked to the discourse that English is owned by those born and raised within the linguistic mainstream of Anglo-American contexts (Norton 1997; Widdowson 1994).

**A Project that Countered the Tyranny of the Native Speaker**

In order to implement these new curricular innovations and to improve the standards of teaching and learning English, the China Scholarship Council sent English teachers from rural areas abroad for three months to take professional development courses at the University of Ottawa. The research that was conducted based on this project has been published in a variety of venues (Author, 2023).

In countries like China, English instruction has been dominated by a grammar form-focused pedagogy and the memorization of structures provided by the language teacher (Zhang & Li 2014).

The expansion and growth of English as an international language has increased the number of people around the world studying this language in different contexts and settings. There is a considerable body of research that has looked at this phenomenon using a decolonial lens (starting with Pennycook, 1998).

As an important part of the project, we consciously decided to counter the notion of the native speaker. As part of this goal, we drew upon multilingual faculty to represent the diversity of the Canadian linguistic landscape, explicitly critiqued the unidirectional dissemination of knowledge from (western) teacher to (peripheral) learner and designed our assignments so as to encourage the production of curricular material adapted to the unique linguistic needs and goals of the students these teachers faced.

In addition, as was continually emphasized in the lecture content and workshop facilitation, the participants were encouraged to evaluate (the multiplicity of) dominant trends within current second language teaching theory and classroom practice so that they could determine for themselves the most useful approaches for their own teaching contexts.

This project provided opportunities to negotiate and collaborate on an equitable basis so as to address the global imbalance of power in second language education between the Centre and the Periphery.

To do this in a decolonial manner necessitates problematizing the notion of the native speaker. Theoretically, this is supported by notions derived from New Materialism and Deleuzian theory. In a practical manner, this meant adopting pedagogy that was flexible and adaptable to local conditions**.**

**Language Preservation/Revitalisation and the Need for the Native Speaker**

The native speaker might be an oppressive tool in the case of a majority language that dominates another, but what is the role of the native speaker from the perspective of the minority language users?

Members of minority languages “often find themselves in a specific situation of both intra-group rivalry (between people from minority language families who wish to protect their language, people whose knowledge of the language has become weakened or lost, and people acquiring the language through formal or informal education) and extra-group rivalry (between minority language speakers and the dominant language group), connected with language use and the process of identification (Dolowy-Rybinska, 2023)

These two rivalries are centered on how to define the language in question. In other words, what becomes important in the language preservation and maintenance is defining what that specific language is and what it means to be a native speaker of it. In short, regardless of our methodology, what is the (broadly defined) linguistic content that we must teach in our efforts to preserve the language? Moreover, how do we define the level of competency that we adopt as our standard?

This has practical consequences at the language policy level. In Nunavut, for example, the territorial government is engaged in a massive effort to preserve the local indigenous language, which is spoken in many different varieties throughout the north. As a consequence, official government documents define Inuktut as those varieties spoken in the larger communities of the territory: Kugluktuk, Cambridge Bay, Bathurst Inlet, Umingmaktuuq and Inuinnaqtun. This definition of a native speaker is used to promote and reward public sector employees by an official government agency. This is done though standardised language testing.

As was once explained to me by a territorial official in the Nunavut Ministry of Education (who must remain anonymous), the cohesion and unity of the recently constituted territory depends on promoting and facilitating a standard form of the most common variety of Inuktut available. The alternative for those in the north is to simply allow the languages of the south to attain greater and greater dominance and the eventual extinction of Inuktut. This is common story that has been true since historically at least since the French revolution and the construction of the modern nation-state: language standardisation is an important aspect of nation building.

**A Socialist Stance**

How is my argument socialist? How can the cautions and concerns that the scholars above have raised be better understood when one adopts what I consider a socialism orientation?

Of course, to say the least, defining socialism is problematic. However, I hope that the knowledgeable reader appreciates the fact that Marxist theory greatly influenced Deleuze, a philosopher at the core of the framework for this piece. This is despite Marx’s neglect of language theoretically (Lecercle, 2005). or how structural linguistics (has) remained the norm for successive states that are socialist (Zhang & Li, 2014; Beckett & Postiglione, 2012; Wang, Bahry & An, 2022; Wang & Gao, 2023).

For simplicity’s sake, I define socialism here as an aspirational system founded on common ownership of the means of production and an equitable distribution of goods and services. I am extending that understanding from a purely economic and political orientation to the ideological and interpersonal realm. I am disrupting that old dichotomy between base and superstructure (if I may be permitted to use that long-discarded terminology).

This understanding includes language. The ownership, production, and distribution of language in all its forms should be equitable. So, plurilingualism seems like a natural fit in view of its emphasis on the intrinsic equality of languages and the need for equitable access to linguistic resources. Certainly, this is true when the context is in how the norms imposed by dominant languages have oppressive characteristics.

However, let’s change the context to the one I provided earlier: Nunavut.

This is a threatened language that is progressively (given global warming) becoming a linguistic and cultural island in a sea of French and English, the dominant languages that are flowing concretely and inexorably from the south. How can one protect the equitable ownership, production, and distribution of Inuktut among the scattered people of the north under such circumstances?

I argue that there is little choice but to adopt standardised Inuktut and adopt a native speaker model for language teaching pedagogy. Of course, one should not blind people to the contradictions I’ve noted above. However, it does little practical good if one emphasises to learners the content of their language learning courses is highly problematic in a theoretical sense.

To work, socialist perspectives must be flexible and take context into account. This would apply to linguistic challenges the world over. What are the local characteristics of language policy, teaching and learning?

Of course, contexts change over time and space. When and if in the distant future Nunavut gains an empire and imposes a native speaker standard upon linguistic and cultural minorities, I will change my opinion. Until then, the notion of the native speaker will have value in that context.

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