Epistemology of Monolingual Bias: Contexts from a Tagalog Standpoint

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Abstract

How did *monolingual bias* emerge and why does it persist? What are the epistemologies concerning human language? How do *language* and *languages* develop? What do the terms *monolingual*, *bilingual*, and *multilingual* mean? What does “*typical*” language development entail? What constitutes “*atypical*” language development? To answer these questions, this paper foregrounds that language is a human cognitive skill for communication, and that Anglo-American and European notions of language diversity, monolingualism, bilingualism, and multilingualism disseminate monolingual bias. *Monolingual bias* extends to educational and clinical contexts where children from bi/multilingual households and/or communities face inappropriate scrutiny when language practitioners assess and support them based on normative monolingual expectations or standards. Monolingual bias is then linked to conceptual issues on “typical” and “atypical” language development. Ultimately, this paper attempts to explain why Anglo-American and European notions of bi/multilingualism are less relevant for most, if not all, of the world’s multilingual contexts, especially in the Philippines.

Keywords: monolingual bias; epistemology; language ideology; language development; theory; Tagalog; Philippines

Introduction

Generations of language researchers from Western Europe and North America (see Bialystok, 2001; Genesee, 2015; Grosjean, 1985; Paradis & Grüter, 2014; Romaine, 1994; Surraín & Luk, 2019) have produced a body of research literature that equates bilingualism with equal proficiency in two or more languages (i.e., “balanced” bilingualism). In these territories, monolingualism and majority/official languages (e.g., English, French, German, Dutch) are overrepresented in research (Treffers-Daller, 2016) and, hence, can be misconstrued as the standards to which bi/multilingualism across all contexts should be measured. This overrepresentation is also evident in language assessment practices when existing norm-referenced tests (Dockrell & Marshall, 2015; Gorman, 2015; Stow & Pert, 2015) can only account for monolingual and majority language proficiency. In other words, *monolingual bias* extends to educational and clinical contexts where children from bi/multilingual households and/or communities face inappropriate scrutiny when language practitioners (e.g., speech/language therapists, language teachers) assess and support them based on normative monolingual expectations or standards. Language practitioners, even in bi/multilingual communities or countries (e.g., Philippines), use standardized and non-standardized language tests (Denman et al., 2019)

that were designed using monolingual frameworks to determine whether a child exhibits “atypical” language development (i.e., the child is interpreted to be performing poorly when compared to their “typical” monolingual age-matched peers). Similarly, when language researchers use the same norm-referenced tests and assume that comparing bi/multilinguals and monolinguals is essential in understanding bi/multilingual language development (see Bialystok, 2009; Genesee, 2015; Paradis & Grüter, 2014; Surraín & Luk, 2019), they carry the risk of propagating monolingual bias or what Treffers-Daller (2016) calls Western bias in language research.

How did such *monolingual bias* emerge and why does it persist? What are the epistemologies concerning human language? How do *language* and *languages* develop? What do the terms *monolingual*, *bilingual*, and *multilingual* mean? What does “*typical*” language development entail? What constitutes “*atypical*” language development? To answer these questions, this paper builds on the premise that language is a human cognitive skill for communication, and that Anglo-American and European notions of language diversity, monolingualism, bilingualism, and multilingualism disseminate *monolingual bias*. Monolingual bias is then linked to conceptual issues on “typical” and “atypical” language development, as evidenced by extant research and clinical practices. Ultimately, this paper attempts to explain why Anglo-American and European notions of bi/multilingualism are less relevant for most, if not all, of the world’s multilingual contexts, especially in the Philippines.

Language as Human Cognitive Skill for Communication

In the fields of developmental psychology and clinical language sciences, *language* has been defined as a code that represents and communicates “ideas about the world through a conventional system of arbitrary signals” (Bloom & Lahey, 1978). From this lens, investigations are restricted to decontextualized and arbitrary elements signaled by conventionalized symbols at the cost of vastly neglecting the contextual and semiotic elements of language (e.g., *iconicity* or the perceptual resemblances of language form and meaning; Ferrara & Hodge, 2018). If we follow the traditions of linguistics, “ideas about the world” would fall under *semantics*, the communication of ideas would refer to *pragmatics*, and the conventional code of arbitrary signals would refer to *syntax*. Moreover, grammarians further specify syntax as “a set (finite or infinite) of sentences, each

finite in length and constructed out of a finite set of elements” (Chomsky, 1965, 2009).

While these classifications and their components as well as their derivatives are accepted by various scientific and clinical communities in Western Europe and North America, the central element is missing. Neglecting a crucial element exposes these accounts as claiming that language can operate on its own. It appears that when Western researchers and practitioners approach *language*, they undervalue who developed the code that we call *language* from the beginning. Who, then, developed *language*?

We, humans, have developed language because we need and want to communicate. In other words, people developed *language* as a cognitive skill for human communication. People, within their social spheres, also invented *languages* as enumerable, territorial, singular linguistic entities (Makoni & Pennycook, 2007). Hence, if languages are social inventions and if language researchers rely on monolingual measures and datasets, it follows that notions of *language diversity*, *monolingualism*, *bilingualism*, and *multilingualism* in the Western research literature are also social inventions that are based on *monolingual bias*. Monolingual bias in the Western literature, as discussed in the following sections, have been shaping and perplexing the interdependent socio-political, geographical, cultural, educational, scientific, and clinical landscapes of *language*.

Monolingual Bias

The notion of language diversity stems from what Makoni and Pennycook (2007) call a *census ideology* that posits languages as identifiable, territorial, isolatable, and countable entities. The earliest and, perhaps, the most influential language census practices are the ones pioneered by cultural and socio-political organizations such as SIL International and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). SIL International developed a paywalled repository, called Ethnologue, that has been documenting the world’s “living languages” based on metrics such as anglicized language identification, user population, location, classification (see also McMahon & McMahon, 2005), language status, dialects, and typology (Eberhard, Simons, & Fennig, 2019). Similarly, UNESCO also identifies and ranks languages based on their measures of vitality, endangerment, and vulnerability (UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages, 2003). Irrespective of the scope of census methods that SIL International and UNESCO continue to use, it is evident that they primarily aim for the survival of languages as artefacts, but not as fruits of human communication. In other words, their census methods cannot explain language as a human cognitive skill for communication.

Language rankings based on a census ideology also privilege certain populations, social classes, or countries as they create superordinate languages, modalities (e.g., spoken, written, signed, typed, augmentative), and language usage. For instance, the spoken English language might be regarded as a superordinate language if we use Ethnologue’s and

UNESCO’s language metrics. If English is a superordinate language, then English-speaking populations, such as in England and America, who identify themselves as monolinguals (i.e., people who exclusively use “one” language) would also be ranked as archetypal language users by virtue of their monolingualism. In addition, the development of World Englishes (Kirkpatrick, 2020), predominantly as a result of English and American imperialism, reflects what Cruz-Ferreira (2010) calls *monolingual variabilities*. Hence, a very large number of international populations who speak World Englishes would further improve the ranking of English as a dominant language if we assess it based on the measures set by Ethnologue and UNESCO. The corollary would also be that English speech and monolingualism might be regarded as a global norm. Such biased language measures, therefore, continue to contribute to global socioeconomic inequalities, especially when embedded in scientific, educational, and clinical practices.

Socioeconomic inequalities are created when language planning projects and policymakers use similar census ideologies and language rankings in formal education. For example, social differences were heightened when “mother tongue” education and vernacular literacy programs introduced constructed languages, which constituted mixtures of both local and foreign discourses, to colonized populations (Makoni & Pennycook, 2007; Rafael, 1993). In the Philippines, this was first experienced in the late 16th century when Spanish colonizers misrepresented and reduced Tagalog speech to writing that is based on Latin categories (Errington, 2001; Makoni & Pennycook, 2007; Rafael, 1993). This misrepresentation of Tagalog discourse is also evidence that Spanish Catholic missionary linguists rejected *Baybayin*, the indigenous Tagalog script, as they perceived *Baybayin* to have “phonetic indeterminacies” (Errington, 2001; Rafael, 1993). In the early 20th century, a second misrepresentation of Tagalog was constructed when American colonizers introduced English as the language of instruction for colonial education in the Philippines (Martin, 2010; Sibayan, 1991). And even when the Philippines gained “independence”, formal education practices continued to reconstruct Tagalog and other local discourses by (1) teaching a so-called “national language” based on Tagalog as a school subject in 1935, (2) teaching Tagalog and local discourses after World War II, (3) renaming Tagalog to Pilipino as mandated by the Department of Education and Culture in 1958, (4) teaching Pilipino as coequal of American English in 1974, and (5) implementing spoken and written bilingual education which was based on the 1987 Constitution’s renaming of Pilipino to Filipino and the proclamation of Filipino and (American) English as the two official languages of the Philippines (Sibayan, 1991).

When constructed spoken-written languages are exclusively taught and can only be learned in formal schools, people who do not have the anatomical, locational, and/or financial capacity to access formal education become socially disadvantaged. In the Philippines, another catalyst for these

social inequalities emerged with the recent implementation of the legally mandated *mother tongue-based multilingual education* (MTB-MLE). Current MTB-MLE practices in the Philippines have been shaped by a superficial appreciation of local discourses/languages but remain misguided by the census ideology of Ethnologue. For instance, Tupas (2015) reports how teachers simultaneously believe that their students learn best through their “mother tongues” but devalue them at the same time due to a colonially induced English-only ideology of globalization. Ethnologue contributes to this English-only ideology when they claim to be an authority in deciding how to confirm or reject the existence of languages. This is evident in 2018 when Ethnologue reported 187 living Philippine languages in their database then later reduced it to 183 in 2019 due to uncertainties regarding the existence of the four languages that were previously documented based on their census methods (Eberhard et al., 2019). Should we accept that four languages suddenly disappeared in just a span of a year?

Monolingual Measures Cannot Determine “Typical” Language Development

As discussed earlier, monolingual bias, which stems from census ideologies and constructed spoken-written languages, magnifies socioeconomic inequalities. Monolingual bias also forms the foundation of the culture of standardized language testing in education, clinical linguistics, developmental science, and clinical practice. In North America, standardized tests were originally designed and administered in schools with an aim to exclude European immigrants from specific forms of education (Valdés & Figueroa, 1994). In addition to socioeconomic predilections, standardized monolingual tests also favor what some linguists call a “native-speaker ability” that does not qualify bi/multilinguals, including those who use signed language and/or other modalities, as native language users (Valdés & Figueroa, 1994). To date, the global population continues to be assessed against this notion of an “idealized educated native speaker” (Chomsky, 1965; Valdés & Figueroa, 1994) through standardized monolingual tests, such as those that are administered by the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). Hence, extant language testing practices not only continue to facilitate socioeconomic inequalities, but also contribute to the misconception that spoken monolingual skills represent “typical” language development.

Monolingual bias also influences how researchers develop language measures in order to understand “typical” bi/multilingual language development. To date, language researchers synonymously use the terms *bilingual* and *multilingual* to refer to people who learn, use, or have been exposed to two or more languages (see Armon-Lotem et al., 2014; Bialystok, 2001, 2009; Byers-Heinlein et al., 2019; de Bot, 2019; Dijkstra et al., 2016; Floccia et al., 2018; Genesee, 2015; Grosjean, 1985; Paradis & Grüter, 2014; Pearson, 2007; Romaine, 1994). Operationalizing bi/multilingualism research based on language count is another manifestation of a census ideology that misrepresents language ability. If

researchers quantify bilingual and multilingual populations as two interchangeable variables and then consider them distinct from monolingual populations, they reinforce the misconception that monolingual populations and their “native-speaker ability” represent “typical” language development. This misconception may also explain why researchers continue to compare bi/multilinguals and monolinguals (see Genesee, 2015; Paradis & Grüter, 2014; Surrain & Luk, 2019) in order to attribute cognitive advantages (see Bialystok, 2009; Dick et al., 2019; Nichols et al., 2020), better developmental and educational outcomes (see Byers-Heinlein et al., 2019), phenotypic markers (see Rice & Tager-Flusberg, 2016), and language dominance (see Dijkstra et al., 2016) to either populations even though they only use monolingual metrics.

Monolingual Measures Cannot Determine “Atypical” Language Development

The current understanding of “atypical” language development is also confounded by monolingual bias. In school-based contexts, monolingual standardized tests are still widely and primarily used in assessing children’s language skills irrespective of their linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Language educators, researchers, and clinicians continue to profile children as having language “disorders” (see Bishop et al., 2016, 2017) when they perform or are reported to perform outside the norms established by standardized language tests or instruments that are only available in majority languages like English (Dockrell & Marshall, 2015; Gorman, 2015; Stow & Pert, 2015) and are based on spoken-written monolingual constructs. An example of these monolingual measures and one that arguably holds the highest currency is the MacArthur-Bates Communicative Development Inventories (CDIs). CDIs are English parent-report instruments that are standardized based on spoken language data from monolingual American populations and are adapted in other languages for the purposes of norming early language acquisition and assessing children with “disorders” (Fenson et al., 1994; Law & Roy, 2008). If we follow this premise along with the MacArthur-Bates CDI Advisory Board’s (2020) guidelines for CDI adaptations, it appears that researchers and clinicians assume that American English or monolingual norms epitomize “typical” language development. If this is the case, children from diverse backgrounds have been and will always be disadvantaged or even misdiagnosed when they do not resemble the documented and dated language performance of monolingual American populations. Such practices should then be specified as assessment of American English language proficiency and not of *language* as human cognitive skill, especially when administered to populations in multilingual contexts.

In bi/multilingual clinical contexts, researchers and practitioners also assess bi/multilingual children’s language skills using monolingual measures. This is evident in Kay-Raining Bird, Genesee, and Verhoeven’s (2016) narrative

review when they claim to have pooled “considerable” evidence of bilingual language skills in children with “developmental disorders” even though all the studies they reviewed merely used either monolingual or majority language measures. In their review, it is important to highlight that they classified “children with Specific Language Impairment, Autism Spectrum Disorder, and Down Syndrome” under one umbrella term that they call “developmental disorders” as if these children are a homogeneous group. Predictably, it is also from such precarious understanding that they believed to have characterized the actual bilingual skills of these populations when in reality, they only engaged with *pre-accuracy evidence* (Dollaghan & Horner, 2011) of these populations’ majority language or monolingual skills. Explicit evidence of this would be available if their readers pay close attention to the majority language tests/instruments that were used for each study as well as to Kay-Raining Bird et al.’s (2016) recurrent statements of comparison between bilingual and monolingual populations throughout their review. Hence, publishing a paper about bilingualism in children with “developmental disorders” that merely reports pre-accuracy evidence of these children’s majority language or monolingual skills is not only misleading but also unethical when the authors advocate for broad dissemination of such flawed findings that misrepresent these children. Flawed evidence can be synonymous to absence of evidence and is, therefore, problematic for clinical and educational decision-making.

On a relatively progressive side, some researchers and clinicians are now beginning to move beyond awareness that there is a pressing need to develop culturally-appropriate and less biased language assessment paradigms, especially for bi/multilingual populations. To this end, recent advances in dynamic assessment practices have emerged. Dynamic assessment (DA) is an interactive approach that applies a test-teach-retest procedure to assess a child’s language learning processes, based on the principles of modifiability and mediated learning experience (Camilleri, Hasson, & Dodd, 2014; Dockrell & Marshall, 2015; Gorman, 2015; Hasson et al., 2013; Stow & Pert, 2015). However, monolingual bias is still evident in these DA approaches as their language targets and instructional procedures (see Camilleri et al., 2014; Gorman, 2015) are still based on majority languages (e.g., English) and/or spoken-written monolingual frameworks. In addition, Orellana, Wada, and Gillam (2019), in their systematic review on the use of dynamic assessment for the diagnosis of language “disorders” in bilingual children, acknowledges that existing DA approaches still lack diagnostic accuracy and validity. Hence, in agreement with Dollaghan and Horner’s (2011) findings as reported in their systematic review on the diagnostic accuracy of bilingual language assessments, optimal methods for assessing bi/multilingual children’s language skills do not exist yet.

Conclusion

From the outset, this paper built on the premise that language is a human cognitive skill for communication. I used this premise to describe how notions of language diversity, monolingualism, bilingualism, and multilingualism in the Western clinical and language research literature disseminate monolingual bias as they only use monolingual measures (e.g., majority language tests or spoken-written monolingual frameworks that expect bi/multilinguals to achieve monolingual proficiency in two or more languages). I then argued that monolingual measures cannot determine “typical” and “atypical” language development, especially in bi/multilingual populations. Therefore, the notions of bi/multilingualism in the Western research literature that I reviewed in this paper are highly problematic if applied in multilingual contexts. The monolingual measures in this body of literature remain flawed and linguistically- or culturally-biased because they are inaccurate *index measures* (Dollaghan & Horner, 2011) that were operationalized against a highly problematic *reference standard*: “balanced bilingualism”. “Balanced” bilingualism as a *reference standard* does not represent the actual language skills of bi/multilingual populations, including those who use signed language and/or other modalities, in real-world and dynamic communicative environments.

Finally, as a bilingual and a Tagalog speech/language therapist from the Philippines, I see the need to abandon the construct of “balanced” bilingualism. There is evidently an urgent necessity to explore better and inclusive language paradigms. One paradigm that appears to exhibit theoretical strength in uncovering actual bi/multilingual language skills is *translanguaging*. *Translanguaging* acknowledges the role of the bi/multilingual’s diverse linguistic and multimodal resources in forming their full language repertoire (Otheguy, García, & Reid, 2019; Yilmaz, 2019). However, existing language assessment paradigms in the fields of speech/language pathology and language development research (see Denman et al., 2019; Dockrell & Marshall, 2015; Law & Roy, 2008; Stow & Pert, 2015) do not yet have the capacity to account for the *translanguaging* nature of bi/multilingualism. To address this gap, one way forward is for language researchers and clinicians to develop diversity-affirming paradigms (e.g., Bottema-Beutel et al., 2020; Cheng et al., 2021; Ferrara & Hodge, 2018; Manalili, 2022; Williams, Wharton, & Jagoe, 2021) if we truly value diagnostic accuracy and ethical practices in multilingual contexts.

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