



Separate and flexible bilingualism in complementary schools: Multiple language practices in interrelationship

Angela Creese*, Adrian Blackledge

with Taşkın Baraç, Arvind Bhatt, Shahela Hamid, Li Wei, Vally Lytra, Peter Martin,
Chao-Jung Wu, Dilek Yağcıoğlu

MOSAIC Centre for Research on Multilingualism, School of Education, University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham B15 2TT, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

Sociolinguists have long recognized that language is a social construct, and have found elusive any firm definition of what constitutes a language in relation to overlapping varieties. On the other hand, it is long established that language is recruited by nations, communities and individuals for its symbolic value and distinctiveness. Whereas the first of these positions views language as fluid and changing, with permeable boundaries, the second stresses the fixed, rigid nature of language. This paper describes how these two positions are played out in the multilingual contexts of four English cities, in complementary schools where young students learn Bengali, Cantonese, Gujarati, Mandarin, and Turkish. In the research reported here we observed a broad range of multilingual practices across a variety of settings in schools, and at the boundaries of school and home. From these practices we identify two seemingly contradictory positions in relation to participants' bilingualism: an ideology which argues for 'language separation' and one in which 'flexible bilingualism' flourishes as a practice. These two positions can be said to illustrate the dynamic tension described in sociolinguistic research, which has often viewed language as fluid and overlapping, while at the same time acknowledging language as a social construct which demarcates and reifies identities. The paper looks at how students and teachers simultaneously lived both 'separate' and 'flexible' positions, and navigated between them interactively and discursively. Our analysis suggests that relations between 'language' and 'ideology' are far from straightforward for the young people and teachers in complementary schools. The heteroglossic reality of multilingual practice, with its flexible movement across and between 'languages', is underpinned by the social structures of which such interactions are a part.

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1. Introduction

This paper describes the range of linguistic practices of multilingual students and teachers in the setting of complementary schools (also known as 'heritage language', 'community language', 'supplementary' schools) in the UK. We look across a four case-study research project to develop our earlier work on bilingualism and linguistic repertoire

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: A.Creese@bham.ac.uk (A. Creese), A.J.Blackledge@bham.ac.uk (A. Blackledge).

(Martin et al., 2004, 2006; Creese et al., 2006a,b). Two constructions of bilingualism are described, in which some teachers argue for language ‘separation’ in complementary schools, while on the other hand both teachers and young people practise a flexible bilingualism, in the course of which they call into play diverse sets of linguistic resources. We refer to the first of these positions as ‘separate’ bilingualism. We use the term ‘separate’ bilingualism to describe what Heller (1999:271) has called parallel monolingualism, or bilingualism with diglossia (Baker, 2003; Fishman, 1967), what Grosjean (1985) describes as a monolingual view of bilingualism, and Gafaranga (2000) calls a language separation approach. We use the term ‘flexible’ bilingualism to refer to what Garcia calls ‘translanguaging’, which “normalizes bilingualism without diglossic functional separation” (Garcia, 2007:xiii), and Bailey (2007), following Bakhtin (1994, 1986), describes as ‘heteroglossia’ – the simultaneous use of different kinds of forms or signs. This body of work has connection with Grosjean’s early work (1985) on a bilingual view of bilingualism, and what Gafaranga (2005:288) has referred to as language use “for all practical purposes”. We argue here that theorising the use of linguistic signs as processes of translanguaging and heteroglossia provides a better understanding of participant identities in complementary schools.

In this paper, we demonstrate that these two seemingly contradictory constructions of bilingualism are performed alongside each other in complementary schools. We will argue that these two different conceptions of bilingualism are linked to conflicting political, pedagogical and sociolinguistic discourses on language. In particular, we suggest that ‘separate bilingualism’ is associated with powerful and pervasive political and academic discourses which view languages as discrete, and tied to nation and culture in simplified and coherent ways. Such a view places emphasis on linguistic and social categories and classifications. We will suggest that this construction of bilingualism is performed in complementary schools to reproduce essentialist views of culture, but also to challenge them. An ideology and practice of separate bilingualism allows teachers to articulate, organize and assemble resources to counter the hegemony of other ‘mainstream’ institutional accounts of nation, history, culture and language. However, in doing so, teachers in complementary schools themselves sometimes settle on simplified cultural narratives.

‘Flexible bilingualism’ represents a view of language as a social resource (Heller, 2007a,b) without clear boundaries, which places the speaker at the heart of the interaction. It stresses individual agency and understands language use as predicated on using all available signs (themselves socially constituted) in the performance of different social subjectivities. Participants’ awareness of ‘language’ or ‘code’ is backgrounded, and ‘signs’ are combined and put to work in the message being negotiated. Flexible bilingualism captures the heteroglossic nature of communication in the bilingual context of complementary schools. It leads us away from a focus on ‘languages’ as distinct codes, to a focus on the agency of individuals in a school community engaging in using, creating and interpreting signs to communicate to multilingual audiences. We will look at how students and teachers use linguistic resources to break down boundaries between languages in performing the routine activities of complementary schools.

1.1. *Language and ideology*

Heller (2007a,b) points out that the study of bilingualism is situated in the domain of studies of ideology, social practice and social organisation. Language is a fundamentally social phenomenon, and linguistic practices are not separate from the beliefs and attitudes relating to languages in societies. Nor are language ideologies always fixed or straightforward. Recently, studies of multilingualism in societies have drawn attention to the social positioning, partiality, contestability, instability and mutability of the ways in which language uses and beliefs are linked to relations of power and political arrangements in societies (Blackledge, 2005; Blackledge and Pavlenko, 2002; Blommaert, 1999; Blommaert and Verschueren, 1998; Gal, 1998; Gal and Woolard, 1995; Kroskrity, 1998; Woolard, 1998). Hand-in-hand with our investigations of language practices and resources, there is a need to enquire into the relations between these practices and resources and the construction of social difference with which they are associated (Heller, 2007a,b:15). Positioned in, and subject to, their social, political and historical contexts, language ideologies constitute the larger social, economic and political systems which play a role in structuring dominant-subordinate, majority-minority relations. However, the role of language ideologies in relation to practices is not always straightforward, as “their impact on everyday experience cannot easily be predicted” (Rampton, 2006:19). Rampton argues for a perspective which does not view culture exclusively as an elite canon, or as a set of static ethnic essences, or as a simple reflection of economic and political processes. Rather, he considers that “the reality of people’s circumstances is actively shaped by the ways in which they interpret and respond to them” (Rampton, 2006:19). Actions, attitudes and linguistic practices are not merely a reflection of the communities or societies into which speakers are born. Rampton proposes instead a frame in which “here-and-now social action is seen as playing at least some part in the formation of potentially consequential solidarities and divisions” (2006:23). In the research reported here the relations between ‘language’ and ‘ideology’ are far from straightforward. The complementary schools exist in relation to, in response to, and perhaps even in spite of, a strongly felt public discourse of monolingualism and homogeneity in the multilingual, heterogeneous state. This impetus towards the erasure of minority immigrant languages is resisted where complementary schools have been set up by communities which have gathered whatever resources are at their disposal to teach and maintain the heritage/community language. At the same time, the complementary schools often appear to argue for a static, reified version of ‘culture’ and ‘heritage’, which may be remote from their students’ experience (Blackledge and Creese, 2008). In this complex ideological context complementary schools become sites where subtle, nuanced negotiations of identities

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