

REVIEW

The influence of multilingualism on the L1 – or why the monolingual standard is out

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ABSTRACT

This lecture presents reasons why we should all abandon traditional dichotomies in Linguistics research, such as monolingual *versus* multilingual, native *versus* non-native, innate *versus* learned, biological *versus* cultural factors. It is argued that we should rather understand multilingualism a continuum, ranging from less multilingual to more multilingual, and the reason for it is that real monolingualism is becoming rarer because more people learn other languages or are simply exposed to multilingualism in society. Consequently, multilingual is to be considered here in a broad sense, as a synonym to being able to handle more than one language at any age, and not only from birth. The lecturer concludes, again, that the native speaker as a role model to be followed by language learners does not make sense.



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RESUMO

Esta palestra apresenta razões pelas quais deveríamos descartar dicotomias tradicionais na pesquisa em Linguística, como monolíngue *versus* plurilíngue, nativo *versus* não-nativo, inato *versus* aprendido, fatores biológicos *versus* culturais. Argumenta-se que, em vez disso, deveríamos entender o plurilinguismo como um continuum, indo do menos plurilíngue ao mais plurilíngue. A razão para tanto é que o monolinguismo tem se tornado cada vez mais raro, pois cada vez mais pessoas aprender outras línguas ou são simplesmente expostas ao multilinguismo em sociedade. Consequentemente, o plurilinguismo é considerado aqui de modo amplo, enquanto sinônimo da capacidade de lidar com mais de uma língua em

qualquer idade, e não apenas desde o nascimento. A conferencista conclui, novamente, que não faz sentido tomar o falante nativo como modelo a ser seguido pelo aprendiz de uma língua.

KEYWORDS

Monolingualism. Multilingualism. Native speaker.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Monolinguismo. Plurilinguismo. Falante nativo.

To begin with, three rhetorical questions are posed by the lecturer Antonella Sorace: are native monolinguals all the same? Are native monolinguals the same for their whole lives? And are native monolinguals still there, or are they in the verge of extinction? Most experimental research in Linguistics compares multilinguals to monolinguals, as well as native to non-native speakers. Besides, many quantitative studies assume that the so-called native speakers being compared belong to a homogenous group – even though the monolingual norm and the problems it entails have already been discussed extensively.

The native monolingual norm comes largely from the fact that linguistic research in the last half-century has been predominantly conducted in monolingual Western countries, many of them in the so-called Anglosphere. That is a particularly interesting point, if we consider that Western epistemology is a product of coloniality. According to Mignolo (2011), the concept of different human races was invented by Europeans who sought domination over other peoples, by establishing pseudo-scientific racial hierarchies that stipulate a hierarchical order of superior and inferior races. By the same logic, languages have been divided and classified as part of the plan to impose European languages over the colonized communities. Hence, all non-Western consolidated knowledge and ways of producing knowledge, including multilingual linguistic realities, were discredited and considered as deviant and marginal (CANAGARAJAH, 2017).

Thus, the norm on which research on multilingualism has been relying are the so-called acceptability judgments, which start from the presumption that there are fully competent native speakers, who are capable on such judgments on whether a statement is either correct or incorrect. The highest level a 'non-native' speaker can reach according to this view is 'near native'. This notion has been put into question by latest research on the astounding abilities of non-native professional translators.

Sorace addresses two main reasons why the native monolingual standard is problematic. The first one is that multilingualism should be analysed as a gradual continuum rather than monolithic aristotelic categories. In current research on multilingualism, in Linguistics as in other sciences such as Psychology and Cognitive Science, the interferences between languages in a speaker's repertoire

are usually treated as advantages or disadvantages, and these assumptions reflect the monolingual norm as a principle.

Secondly, it has been proven that learning an L2 has an influence on the speaker's L1. This contradicts the assumption that the linguistic competence in a speaker's first language is stable and unchanging throughout a lifetime. In other words, the languages composing a speaker's repertoire interact in various ways and interact both from the supposedly native language to newly acquired languages and vice versa. The notions of native language skills and L2 capacities are equally fluid and much less stable than presumed, with influences that are going both ways and which are conditioned by a set of parameters including proficiency, age of acquisition and frequency of usage.

Newly available research shows that these effects depend on various parameters, not all of which are currently understood. Language relatedness is only of limited explanatory power, other factors such as age of acquisition and levels of proficiency might prove relevant, once more data is available.

Hence, the very notion of L1 and L2 is under question.

As for migrants, who have adopted a second language after the critical period, it has been observed that it is possible for their linguistic abilities in their L1 to undergo changes and resemble that of an advanced L2 speaker. The convergence of language structures from both languages is influenced by pragmatics and context. However, this kind of deterioration is reversible, once the speakers are re-immersed in their native L1 community. Thus, it is not a loss or erosion of the grammar, commonly denominated *attrition* in Linguistics studies from a monolingual perspective.

The scenario presented in order to illustrate pragmatically conditioned interference effects contrasts one language where the use of pronouns is obligatory and a second language where it is optional. The use of pronouns by a speaker of both languages conveys subtle differences in terms the language of reference: in cases like this the multilingual speaker tends to opt for the avoidance of ambiguity, applying the rules of the languages where pronouns are obligatory. For the message to be clearly transmitted, the speaker avoids ambiguity by opting for redundancy.

Another factor that needs further research is the relation between integration and inhibitory control in multilingual speakers. Inhibition refers to the ability to background or eclipse one of the languages when using the other, whereas integration manifests as a tendency to blend features of the involved languages. Inhibition and accommodation appear to be mutually exclusive to some extent: the more a speaker tends to integrate, the less they are able to accommodate and vice versa.

To sum up, the studies presented put the usefulness of received notions of what we call 'monolingual speakers' and 'nativeness' in doubt, suggesting that native monolinguals are not all the same, nor are they the same for life. Considering the statistically significant interference between languages in a speaker's repertoire even at low proficiency levels, it is questionable whether true monolinguals can be considered the norm or even exist at all.

If the concepts of monolingualism and native language skills are not as stable as they have been considered so far, and assuming that mono- and multilingual modes have entirely different dynamics and cannot be explained by the same set of explanations, we have one more great reason not to use

either monolingual or native speakers as the point of reference in the search for universal properties of human language.

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