Research Study

Plurilingualism, Plurilinguals, and Pluri-positionality: How plurilingualism empowers speakers in relation to norms

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ABSTRACT. Modern global societies are characterized by complex heterogeneity and increased localized diversity. Within the field of applied linguistics, this is reflected in the increasing interest in plurilingualism as a theoretical approach and axiological position on language use. In this conceptual article, I argue that plurilingualism empowers language users in relation to normative standards of language use. Plurilingualism sees successful language use as enabling mutually-understood communication by speakers using appropriate resources in their linguistic repertoires. Plurilingual speakers make informed decisions based on perceived opportunities, including knowledge of conventional language norms, in order to take communicative action toward their language goals and desires. While tensions do exist between perspectives of norms emerging bottom-up through dynamic use and norms being imposed top-down through language ideology, plurilingualism contributes a view of norms as both reliant on and reflective of increasingly creative orientations to norms through their use and interpretation by plurilingual social agents. I discuss both plurilingualism and plurilingual speakers as they orient to norms in contemporary contexts, with implications for both conceptual and pedagogical change.

RÉSUMÉ. Les sociétés mondiales modernes se caractérisent par une hétérogénéité complexe et une diversité localisée accrue. Dans le domaine de la linguistique appliquée, cela se reflète dans l'intérêt croissant pour le plurilinguisme en tant qu'approche théorique et position axiologique sur l'utilisation des langues. Dans cet article, je soutiens que le plurilinguisme habilite les utilisateurs de la langue par rapport aux normes conventionnelles d'utilisation de la langue. Le plurilinguisme considère l'utilisation réussie de la langue comme celle qui permet une communication mutuellement comprise par les locuteurs en utilisant les ressources appropriées dans leurs répertoires linguistiques. Les locuteurs plurilingues prennent des décisions éclairées en fonction des opportunités perçues, y compris la connaissance des normes linguistiques conventionnelles, afin de prendre des mesures vers leurs objectifs et désirs linguistiques. Bien que des tensions existent entre des perspectives de bas en haut par une utilisation dynamique et les normes imposées de haut en bas par l'idéologie de la langue, le plurilinguisme contribue à une vision des normes à la fois dépendantes et réfléchissant des orientations créatives des normes à travers leur

utilisation et leur interprétation par des agents sociaux plurilingues. Je discute à la fois du plurilinguisme et des locuteurs plurilingues dans leur orientation vers les normes dans des contextes contemporains, avec des implications pour l'utilisation de la langue à la fois à l'intérieur et à l'extérieur de la classe de langue.

Keywords: *plurilingualism, multilingualism, language norms, agency.*

INTRODUCTION

The 21st century has been characterized by economic globalization, technological innovation, and mass migration, giving rise to concepts such as "liquid modernity" (Bauman, 2000), "glonacal" (Marginson & Dang, 2017) and "superdiversity" (Vertovec, 2007). The "liquidity" of modern society has resulted in increasingly complex configurations of culture, multiculture, and pluriculture: configurations long considered commonplace for South Asian or African nations (e.g., Canagarajah, 2009; Ssentanda & Norton, 2021), but largely ignored or overlooked by dominant circles in the Global North. In applied linguistics, 21st century research is marked by the social turn (Block, 2003), with an increased focus on emotional, social, and ecological factors that guide the trajectory of language learning and usage. It is no wonder, then, that increased attention has been paid to plurilingualism, a theoretical construct and pedagogical approach that foregrounds individual language development as it pertains to a user's needs and desires (Piccardo & North, 2020), sourced from individualized linguistic and social experiences (Busch, 2017), promoting linguistic diversity and equity (Prasad, 2021) and contributing to a wider linguistic repertoire that encompasses more than a single named language (Piccardo, 2018). There are five key aspects (cf. Piccardo, 2019) of plurilingualism in its operational declination of "plurilanguaging": a) it is a cyclical and emergent process; b) it involves selection and organization by social agents; c) it is characterized by chaos as a natural, positive state; d) it enhances linguistic and metalinguistic sensitivity; and e) it empowers language users in relation to norms. It is this fifth and final aspect that is the focus of this article.

The question addressed in this paper is as follows: *How does plurilingualism serve to empower speakers, regardless of linguistic background, in relation to normative standards of language use?* I examine this question by problematizing and re-defining the key concepts in this question — *1) What is plurilingualism? 2) What are plurilingual speakers? 3) What do we mean by "norms"?* — and examining the second and third sub-questions through the lens of plurilingualism. I first provide a definition of plurilingualism and its distinguishing axiological tenets. I then discuss the plurilingual view of language users, including two key concepts relevant to this paper: agency and affordances. Next, I discuss both plurilingualism and plurilingual speakers as they orient to norms in relevant contexts, before returning to a brief holistic discussion of plurilingual speakers and norms, including implications for language use both inside and outside of the classroom.

PLURILINGUALISM

The term "plurilingualism" was introduced in Europe through the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*, or CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001), and further developed in the *CEFR Companion Volume,* or CEFRCV

(Council of Europe, 2018). Plurilingualism resembles multilingualism in that it valorizes a multiplicity of linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and yet it is distinct in several aspects. While "multilingualism" describes the co-existence of multiple, separate languages, plurilingualism highlights the interconnectedness of named languages and focuses on individual language use and development. According to Marshall and Moore (2018): "Through [a plurilingual] lens, a person's languages and cultures are not viewed as separate and compartmentalised but instead are seen as interrelating in complex ways that change with time and circumstances, and which depend on individuals' biographies, lived experiences, social trajectories, and life paths" (p. 22). Plurilingualism is also distinct from multilingualism in that it moves beyond named languages, which traditionally have been viewed as homogenous, isolated silos, and views language holistically (e.g., Piccardo, 2019). Through a plurilingual lens, "boundary-crossing", by way of code-switching, code-meshing, and translanguaging (cf. Lüdi & Py, 2009), among others, is both a common and natural communicative feature of language users. Just as all speakers alter tone, register, and style within one named language, based on their lived experiences, plurilinguals fluidly move between named languages in their repertoires. Finally, plurilingualism differs from multilingualism in that, unlike multilingualism or multi-monolingualism (e.g., Cruz-Ferreira, 2018), the goal of language development is not necessarily full mastery or "near-native-like proficiency" (cf. Piccardo, 2013; 2024) in any one named language: instead, language users develop a jagged profile of partial competences, as they build competence according to their specific language needs and desires (Lüdi & Py, 2009). These partial competences become part of their holistic linguistic repertoire.

The concept of a verbal or linguistic repertoire precedes plurilingualism and comes from the sociolinguist John Gumperz (1964), who described it as "[containing] all the accepted ways of formulating messages. It provides the weapons of everyday communication. Speakers choose among this arsenal in accordance with the meanings they wish to convey" (p. 138). For Gumperz, the linguistic repertoire is seen as a set of resources that are both linguistic and social in nature (Busch, 2017; Cruz-Ferreira, 2018). Plurilingualism extends Gumperz's original definition to encompass the dynamic, emergent, and fragmentary nature of language use and learning. The linguistic repertoire is not simply composed of individual tools, collected and used in an additive manner: rather, an individual draws upon the whole of their repertoire, and added resources interact with existing ones so that the whole is more than the sum of its parts (cf. Piccardo, 2019). With this view of repertoires, plurilingualism is centered around the individual rather than language (Piccardo, 2017), meaning that each individual's linguistic repertoire, or their personal plurilingualism, is unique as well as in constant flux.

As mentioned in the introduction, modern societies and education systems are not monoglossic, but characterized by complex heterogeneity and increased localized diversity. Language use is no different. Monolingualism is, in fact, as much a myth as the famed "native speaker" so idealized in language teaching worldwide (e.g., Cook, 1999). This has long been acknowledged in countries such as India (e.g., Canagarajah, 2009) and Malawi (Ssentanda & Norton, 2021), but remains true even in nations and regions traditionally thought of as monolingual. For example, Farr (2011) outlines the plurilingual nature of Chicago since its inception: the founder of Chicago, Jean Baptiste Point du Sable, was born in Haiti and spoke both French and Haitian Creole in addition to English and, likely, the indigenous Potawatomi language of his wife. In contemporary Chicago, research has highlighted the plurilingual practices of

retail stores (Gelb, 2005)—where business in a Santeria shop is conducted in Yoruba, Spanish, and English—as well as trans-discursive intralingual tensions in Chicago factories (Herrick, 2005), wherein debates occur between college graduates and former farmers, all immigrants from Mexico, as to whether to use "correct Spanish" or "the Spanish of the people" (quoted in Farr, 2011, p. 166) in a translation of official factory policies for the predominantly Spanish-speaking workforce. These examples highlight the ubiquitous nature of plurilingual language users, even in contexts often thought of as homogenous in language and culture.

As mentioned in the previous section, plurilingualism is deeper than the use of individual named languages. In the words of Piccardo (2019), "every language is itself a compositum of different varieties, sociolects, and borrowings, and is intrinsically dynamic in its constant change" (p. 190). Plurilingualism sees successful language use as that which enables mutually-understood communication by language users drawing on appropriate resources in their linguistic repertoires. Through this lens, even those who identify as speaking only one named language qualify as plurilingual (cf. Piccardo, 2019). This perspective informs the claim that there are no monolingual language users, since all users of language shift between registers, modes of communication, and linguistic styles, often from moment to moment. In fact, as far back as the late 1970s, it was claimed that plurilingualism was an innate characteristic of all language use: Wandruszka argued that all individuals were "internal plurilinguals" in their mother tongue and "external plurilinguals" in their ability to learn and adopt other languages (Neuner, 2004). These shifts, natural and often unnoticed in one's mother tongue or preferred linguistic code, can be understood through a plurilingual lens as resulting from *agency* and *affordances*. These are key terms in plurilingual theory which allow for speaker agency, specifically associated with (but not limited to) empowerment in relation to norms, as will be outlined in further detail below. My main arguments here are interconnected: first, that the practice of plurilingualism is the norm, rather than the exception (Jones et al., 2024); and second, that the term "plurilingual" may be applied to anyone using any language anywhere in the world. In the following section, I discuss how plurilingual speakers operationalize their linguistic repertoires.

Plurilingual Speakers

Plurilingualism sees language users (i.e., everyone) as social *agents* acting according to *affordances*. Agency, in plurilingualism, is defined as "action potential mediated by social, interactional, cultural, institutional and other contextual factors" (van Lier, 2008, quoted in Chen et al., 2022, p. 6). Put another way, agency refers to speakers achieving goals through language, or "languaging" (Swain, 2008), deliberately making choices about how to do so. Crucial to this definition of agency are initiative and choice: language users do not passively conform to static, uniform language codes, but select from their available resources—their linguistic repertoires—and act strategically. These choices are not limited to knowledge of named language, but also include varieties, registers, and pragmalinguistic choices, such as level of formality, or intended implicature, such as humour. These selections are also based on the options plurilingual language users believe are available to them, or *affordances*. Affordances can be understood as opportunities for action as perceived by a language user at a particular moment (cf. Piccardo, 2017): that perception may come from any or all of the factors listed in the definition of agency provided above, in addition to individual factors such as lived experience (Busch, 2017). While the CEFRCV further refined concepts of

plurilingual speakers and plurilingual competence (cf. Council of Europe, 2018), the original CEFR definition remains valid: "the ability to use languages for the purposes of communication and to take part in intercultural interaction, where a person, viewed as a social agent, has proficiency, of varying degrees, in several languages, and experience of several cultures" (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 168). In opposition to a traditional view of language users—as passive recipients and rote-repeaters of standard, idealized language codes—plurilingual language users, who actively draw on their diverse linguistic repertoires, are seen as legitimate participants in discourse (Chen et al., 2022).

While much of the discourse around plurilingualism is focused on language learners and language education (e.g., Piccardo & North, 2020; Prasad, 2021; Ssentanda & Norton, 2021; Swain, 2008), I focus on language use and users in order to make space for my central argument in the following section. In the context of this argument, "speakers" refers to all language users, whether they identify as learners or not. Indeed, if everyone is a plurilingual, and language use is seen as stemming from a complex, dynamic and individualized linguistic repertoire, then the distinction between language learners and language users—for this particular argument, at least—becomes irrelevant. A language learner can therefore, in this case, be redefined as any individual who intentionally pursues opportunities to either develop competence in a desired area of language, or to increase any resources in their linguistic repertoire. This definition may be applied to anyone communicating within or outside of their dominant language or register, such as one developing their knowledge of jargon in a particular discipline. By seeing all language users, regardless of mother tongue or level of proficiency, as navigating communicative goals through agency and affordances, views of plurilingual language users also serve as a lens of empowerment by eliminating hierarchies of legitimacy in norms of language use.

Plurilingual Norms

Thus far, we have discussed plurilingualism as a theoretical concept and ontological position that views plurilingual language users as: a) representative of the global population; b) social agents acting in reaction to perceived affordances; and c) using the entirety of their dynamic, jagged and partial linguistic repertoires to communicate according to their intended goals and desires as legitimate participants in a given discourse. I turn now to a discussion of norms, first situated in the larger field of applied linguistics, and then specifically as they pertain to both plurilingualism and plurilinguals.

Drawing on the wider lens of applied linguistics, many critical theories position language as existing within a dialogic relationship between present language users and prior language use, characterized as "the heteroglossic quoting, reporting, and interpenetration of our own words with those of numerous others" (Gal, 1998, p. 322). Norms, seen as either morphosyntactic or pragmatic chunks of conventionalized language, both create and are created by speaker participation. From a bottom-up perspective, norms facilitate what Coates (1995) calls a "shared floor", where both conversational participants are familiar with the actual words being spoken and can prioritize other interactional goals, such as indicating stance or attending to relational goals. Speakers with knowledge of this "shared floor" are free to play with norms, for example through creative violation or appropriation based on their

previous exposure to, or familiarity with, the relevant conventions. From this view, norms may be seen as emergent and dynamic, not unlike a plurilingual's linguistic repertoire, and yet this line of research focuses on norms within a traditional, homogenized view of the cultures in which these norms occur. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that, from a top-down perspective, norms are explicitly linked to ideology and, therefore, hegemony. According to Cruz-Ferreira (2018), "norming decisions typically favour monolingual varieties that are also prevalent in national institutions where norm-referenced benchmarks can only reliably predict disorder among those sharing the monolingual code from and for which they were normed. (…) The rights of abstract languages override those of real-life language users, who are held responsible for communication breakdown" (p. 168). She goes on to argue that "translating the natural variability of human communication into practices that respect it is a human right" (Cruz-Ferreira, 2018, p. 168), citing Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. There is, then, a clear disconnect between norms as emerging in a bottom-up approach and norms as resulting from externally-imposed ideological restrictions on language use.

A plurilingual lens has much to contribute to a re-conceptualization of norms. Firstly, the nature of modern society, including transnationalism and mass mobility, has necessarily influenced norms in ways that have yet to be explicitly discussed but nonetheless exist. "The transmission of the standard language ideology and related ideologies to new languages, varieties, and contexts has always depended on language contact among multilingual populations" (McLelland, 2021, p. 111). Claire Kramsch argues that this language contact, in addition to globalization and the ease of technologically-mediated communication and information networks, has altered the norms conventionally discussed in the language classroom (Kramsch, 2014), particularly those reflective of what Train (2007) calls "pedagogical hyperstandardization" (in McLelland, 2021). She also calls for an explicit and inclusive approach for educators to help their students engage with norms, exemplified in the following quote: "What is crucial from the position that I am taking here is less the choice of one particular norm over others than the importance that students be made aware that a choice was made and be equipped with the necessary analytical tools to see the cultural, political, and social context of the choice" (del Valle, 2014, quoted in Kramsch, 2014, p. 305). Closer examination both inside and outside the language classroom, informed by a plurilingual lens, may serve to both inform and empower plurilinguals to position themselves in relation to "situated normativity" (Piccardo, 2017), including not only conformity but also resistance or creativity (Piccardo, 2017) in conventionalized language situations.

While tensions do exist between perspectives of norms emerging bottom-up through dynamic use and norms being imposed top-down through language ideology, plurilingualism contributes a view of norms as both reliant on and reflective of increasingly creative orientations to norms through their use and interpretation by plurilingual social agents.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In order to address the research question, *How does plurilingualism serve to empower speakers in relation to normative standards of language use?,* we have moved through an exploration of plurilingualism as a theoretical construct, plurilingual language users acting through agency according to their perceived affordances and within a dynamic and fragmentary linguistic repertoire, and norms as seen from both a general and a plurilingual perspective. By drawing on their linguistic repertoires, valuing partial competences and acknowledging that shifts between language varieties, registers, and tones, as well as named languages, are a natural and strategic feature of communication, plurilingual speakers make agentive decisions based on affordances, including knowledge of conventional language norms, in order to take communicative action toward their language goals and desires. In this way, it is possible to "examine how plurilingual speakers in multilingual contexts may shape, orient to, or be marginalized by standards, whether in one of more of their varieties, but also how different speakers of the same language may use their different repertoires, in relation to the standard, to construct and negotiate their dynamic identities" (McLelland, 2021, p. 117). Through plurilingual practices, therefore, language users are able to position themselves in relation to norms through the constant development of their linguistic repertoires.

While, until now, plurilingualism has been discussed at a paradigmatic level in this article, it is ultimately through the implementation of plurilingual (pedagogical) approaches that language users may truly be empowered in relation to norms. While I make no distinction between language users and language learners, plurilingual pedagogical approaches have been used to great success in language classrooms. In the classroom, language users can be empowered through the inclusion and recognition of their diverse mother tongues (e.g., Cummins, 2021; García & Sylvan, 2011; Prasad, 2021), including explicit discussions comparing and contrasting languages. This has been shown to promote heightened sensitivity to one's own language(s) (e.g. Galante et al., 2019; Suraweera, 2022) in addition to personal pride in learners' existing linguistic repertoire (e.g., Chen et al., 2022; Galante, 2019;). Plurilingual classroom practices may also include explicit discussions of norms in what McLelland (2021) calls "sites of 'metapragmatic commentary', where normally implicit ideologies may be explicitly rationalized" (p. 118). Role plays have also been used (e.g. Galante, 2019; Galante et al., 2019) to empower students as leaders and encourage them to critically evaluate normative situations. Other pedagogical approaches include collaborative learning (e.g. Swain, 2008) and developing competence in intercomprehension (De Carlo & Garbarino, 2021; Lüdi & Py, 2009).

Less work has been published in other areas of applied linguistics, although there are several important areas that would benefit from adopting a plurilingual lens, such as the field of pragmatics, in which literature on norms is primarily situated. While plurilingualism continues to gain traction in academic circles, much of the non-academic world continues to uphold idealized, monolingual ideals, perpetuating the English-oriented hegemony and epistemic injustice that plurilingualism helps to address. Conversations about, and perhaps even adoptions of, plurilingualism help to address issues of linguicism and linguistic inequity in public institutions, government offices, and privately-held transnational corporations. An inclusive view of language proficiency might also begin to address some of the biases inherent in gate-keeping encounters such as university admissions or job interviews. Finally,

within academic circles, a stronger connection between plurilingualism and pragmatics might result in research that more fully reflects the complex, emergent nature of norms in particular, but also natural language use in general.

CONCLUSION

Plurilingualism has gained much attention in recent decades as a theoretical construct that values linguistic diversity as well as partial competence and advocates for the development of an individual's linguistic repertoire over the single mastery of any one named language. In this article, I have examined how plurilingualism empowers speakers in relation to pragmatic norms by problematizing and re-conceptualizing the key terms in this claim: plurilingualism, plurilingual speakers, and norms in pluralistic societies. By drawing on their linguistic repertoires, language users are able to act as social agents and respond to the affordances of emergent, dynamic, and user-controlled norms. This may be done in the language classroom by incorporating learners' prior linguistic knowledge or having metapragmatic discussions of norms across languages and cultures. Outside the classroom, knowledge about plurilingualism could be disseminated to wider audiences, particularly but not exclusively to academic and professional gate-keepers that perpetuate more traditional conceptualizations of language users and proficiency. Both inside and outside the classroom, conceptualizing plurilingual speakers as language users that are empowered to act agentively in relation to norms contributes to the important work of creating equitable change in public and private industries that more accurately represents (pluri)language use as it is practiced in contemporary, pluricultural societies.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

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