

## Editorial Preface

# Beyond the Slippery Slope of a-Politicised Linguistic Diversity

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This special issue of IJBIDE deals with the important question of raising awareness about linguistic diversity, and – if possible – promoting it, and giving it a real and solid place in education. The guest editors have collected fascinating articles about the Nordic and Baltic countries, which serve as illustrations of a pluralistic approach to language awareness currently being used in this part of Europe.

Interestingly the last decade has witnessed multidirectional calls for promoting multilingualism in different parts of the world. Take Europe for example. The words *multilingual*, *plurilingual*, *linguistic identity*, *translanguaging*, *language awareness* (amongst others) are now omnipresent in policies, curricula and professional development programmes for teachers. Yet, at the same time, language learning-teaching is currently experiencing hefty cuts. Besides the range of taught languages diminishes steadily. Even a ‘big’ language like Putonghua (otherwise known as Chinese Mandarin), which is said to be the language of the future, does not always get the pedagogical, financial, human and symbolic investments it deserves (Moloney & Xu, 2016). Thus, there seems to be a clear contradiction between the promotion of multilingualism and the realities of the classrooms. There also seems to be a contradiction between the repeated calls for multilingualism and the realities of everyday life where most people are involved in diverse forms of languaging, “manag[ing] signs, manag[ing] roles and manag[ing] relationships with unfamiliar people, strangers with whom to share or makes exchanges” (Baudrillard & Guillaume, 2008: 29-30). This is no wonder as, in the current European ‘linguistic marketplace’ (Bourdieu, 1977), different ways of speaking (languages, dialects) have different values. That is also true for other contexts. While some languages enjoy high overt prestige (some European languages), others are granted less symbolic value (so-called non-standard varieties, peripheral languages, dialects). A friend from an African country was recently told by a Finnish teacher that her child has language issues because she did not appear to be able to speak a single language ‘correctly’ (teacher’s words). The child can speak three different languages, amongst which none are considered symbolically powerful in Finland. In a different vein, a friend from a European country was told by another teacher that his child is a real ‘multilingual cosmopolitan’ because he can speak two ‘prestigious’ European languages...

On 26th of September each year, Europe (i.e.: 45 participating countries) celebrates the European Day of Languages. Jointly organised by the Council of Europe and the European Union, this event aims at celebrating the “rich linguistic and cultural diversity of Europe” and promoting language learning-teaching. According to the Council of Europe website promoting the event, “Learning other people’s languages is a way of helping us to understand each other better and overcome our cultural differences” ([edl.ecml.at/Home/WhyaEuropeanDayofLanguages/tabid/1763/](http://edl.ecml.at/Home/WhyaEuropeanDayofLanguages/tabid/1763/)). This quote contains at least four problematic assumptions: 1. There is no systematic link between speaking someone’s language and a lack of misunderstanding/non-understanding (Obvious truth: even speakers of the same language misunderstand each other); 2. Many interactions take place globally by means of a lingua franca (Chinese Mandarin, English, French, Spanish – but also, potentially, any other language), which may not classify as “other peoples’ languages”; 3. The reference to ‘overcoming cultural differences’ is a typical differentialist and essentialist argument which rejects the idea that people also share similarities across (national) borders (Dervin, 2016); 4. And probably most importantly, “learning other people’s languages” should entail learning *with* each other, and also a two-way

‘pact’ of learning each other’s language(s). This is needed to reduce the hierarchies between ‘us’ and ‘them’ and to promote more ‘connected’ engagement (Li & Dervin, 2017). The pluralistic approach proposed by our colleagues moves well beyond such faulty beliefs and we would like to encourage our readers to follow their path.

In a graduation address in Canada, the sociologist of law de Sousa Santos (2012: 241) called for the reconceptualisation of the idea of diversity within a globalised world: “the world is diverse, but it is not equally diverse”. A European Day of Languages that recites a ‘holy mantra’ of respecting the diversity of languages by learning some of them can only fall flat on its face. Our relations to languages are neither apolitical nor free from power relations: Not all languages or language forms are treated the same way by both individuals and governments. Calling for the respect of linguistic diversity can appear somewhat shallow. Although praiseworthy in some cases, respect can be patronizing: One individual decides what/who to respect, and the other plays the role of the ‘respected’. This establishes or reinforces hierarchies and power relations between people, groups and... languages. The main question relates to who can decide what (not) to respect in terms of linguistic diversity, why and how. In education, there is a need to turn the use of languages into more political achievements: Whose language(s) are represented in a school? Whose language(s) are silenced? Who makes decisions about these? An awareness of power differentials and hierarchies between languages, and an ability to act upon them, is undoubtedly one of the most important skills of today.

R. Lakoff (1990: 7) articulates clearly this educational need when talking about language and power: “Language is politics, politics assigns power, power governs how people talk and how they are understood. The analysis of language from this point of view is more than an academic exercise: today, more than ever, it is a survival skill”. Language awareness needs to discuss these elements and to help people question the hierarchies between different forms of languages so as to empower linguistic diversity. Let us repeat with Lakoff: “it is a survival skill” (ibid.).

How many so-called migrant children in Europe see ‘their’ languages ‘exhibited’ in a politically correct way in a classroom or simply ‘silenced’? Do these children have the language to speak for themselves, take critical and reflective positions about what they have to go through? How could they be really empowered? The example of so-called migrant children is easy in a sense. But in reality, how many children of the so-called ‘majority’ also experience similar phenomena? As such, they might speak in a way that is marked by their social class, their regional origins, their gender, their interests, etc. Well-intentioned but simplistic mantras about multilingualism in education have shown their limits and must be substituted by political awareness about linguistic diversity and... actions.

Everyone has ideologies about languages, influenced by different actors and contexts. Education is ‘polluted’ by many such ideologies that tend to have uncritical, often deterministic and highly subjective, basis. A critical approach to multilingualism entails deconstructing beliefs about languages, doing away with those that are harmful to others, and reconstructing alternative discourses that avoid the slippery slope of stereotyping. These ideologies need to be discussed in the open in education.

In what follows we share some of the most resistant yet problematic ideologies about language (‘mine’ vs. ‘others’), on which we the editors of IJBIDE would like to insist. We believe that language awareness through a pluralistic approach can help combat them:

## **MYTHS ABOUT LANGUAGES**

- No language has a unique form. People can speak the ‘same’ language in different ways and thus need to negotiate meanings.
  - Ex.: There is no such thing as ‘British English’ but a vast array of British Englishes.
  - Ex.: People often mix different (forms of) languages when they speak or write.
  - Ex.: People often create their ‘own’ language with others and invent ways of expressing feelings, emotions, etc.
- No language is better than another (more romantic, more logical, more beautiful, etc.).
  - Ex.: Explaining that a migrant child hasn’t been able to learn another language properly because his/her language is not as logical as the other.

- Ex.: We might think that the French language is romantic. Our stereotypes about different languages might affect our views of individuals.
- In a similar vein, no language is more difficult than another – it depends on one’s own language(s), motivation to learn a language, learning and teaching methods, etc.
  - Ex.: Claiming that one will never learn a given language because it is too difficult (common statement about the Finnish language).
- No language can prevent people from thinking in certain ways or determine the way(s) people speak about something.
  - Ex.: The typical neo-racist argument that Chinese people cannot think/philosophize, which some of them recycle to self-orientalise (Cheng, 2008).
- Speaking a lingua franca with another person (of which none of the interlocutors is a ‘native’) does not make their thoughts simpler or their language poorer.
- ‘Native’ speakers are not perfect at their language. Some ‘non-native’ speakers fare better than them in specific contexts, in terms of language richness, knowledge about grammar, etc.
- Languages share dissimilarity and similarity. It is important to reflect on these two aspects.

## BEYOND LANGUAGE AS AN EXCUSE

- Contexts, interlocutors and emotions (amongst others) have an influence on how we interact with each other. Language alone does not dictate attitudes, behaviours and performance (see the refutation of the principle of linguistic relativity or the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, Sapir, 1958).
  - Ex.: Intertextuality between people (i.e. the interrelationships between past discourses, experiences, memories in a given situation) can have a strong impact on people’s language use and treatment of the other (e.g. someone reminds another of his/her enemy, which impacts on the way s/he might be treated).
- Discourses on one’s and others’ language(s) are always politically tainted.
- The words used to describe languages or their attributes are never neutral (e.g. mother tongue, heritage language, linguistic superdiversity).
- Everyone is influenced by their own representations of language when interacting with others, which may have a strong influence on how they treat them.
  - Ex.: An accent can make us imagine how someone is, his/her social origins, his/her ‘degree of intelligence’, etc.
- As much as a so-called ‘cultural’ habit, value and artefact can be explained to an outsider – should one wish to take the time to do so – words and phrases that are said to be unique to a given language can also be discussed, explained and translated, even if it takes paraphrases or detours. Discourses of not being able to translate or explain because of the exclusivity of one language might contain manipulations, and/or too easy answers to e.g. misunderstanding.
- Language does not just refer to words but also to body language and other non-verbal aspects that do play a role in communication (e.g. music, art but also emoji characters). It is important that teachers and students learn to use and negotiate these ways of communicating as alternatives to mere verbality.

We would like to thank Petra Daryai-Hansen and Heidi Layne for their great work on this first issue on linguistic diversity to be published in IJBIDE. We are convinced that our readers will find inspiration, resources and tools to explore the fascinating topic of language awareness in education.

Fred Dervin and Julie Byrd-Clark would also like to seize the occasion to welcome Yongjian Li as their new co-editor. 欢迎! His arrival will surely make a fine and diverse contribution to IJBIDE.

*Fred Dervin*  
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