Metalanguaging Matters: Multilingual Children Engaging with “The Meta”

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ABSTRACT

In this article, the authors build on empirical data from the ongoing longitudinal research project Signs of language (2008 – 2018) to examine how multilingual children in a primary school setting use metalinguistic resources linked to several written languages. Grounded in social semiotics and drawing on newer social perspectives on metalinguage, the authors focus on a researcher-generated activity designed to invite the children to reflect on language and literacy. In two particular interactions, they explore how the children “engage with the meta” by navigating between different languages and sign systems, and how their use of metalinguistic resources in a referential sense is inextricably linked to a dialogically formed and performative negotiation of social identity and social relations. Thus, adopting a metalanguaging perspective, this article demonstrates how metalinguistic statements about language are closely interwoven with an ongoing production and negotiation of the communicative situation.

KEYWORDS
Linguistic Diversity, Literacy, Meaning Making, Metalanguage, Multilingual Classroom, Reflexive Awareness, Signs of Language, Social Semiotics

INTRODUCTION

In many (teaching) contexts, the basic role of language is perceived to be an exchange of information, and metalanguage is seen as “a kind of optional extra” (Cameron, 2004, p. 312). In this line of thinking, metalanguage is most often understood as a discrete, scientific register that does not represent the world directly, but instead represents representations of the world (see e.g. Van Leeuwen, 2004). This understanding makes a distinction between the language that is being addressed - the object language - and the language used to talk about the object language - the metalanguage (Carnap, 1958). Whereas the object language focuses on the signified and the content of what is being said, metalanguage focuses on the signifier and the form of the language.

In this article, we will adopt a different perspective on metalanguage, in that we do not view metalanguage as a unique register that can be isolated from other language manifestations (Verschueren, 2004), but instead view it as an integrated part of all communication, and thus also as an integrated part of the object language (Van Leeuwen, 2004). We see metalanguage as something that is done, and we see the metalinguistic dimension as a linguistic function on a par with, and connected to,
other language functions. That is, even though the recognised terminology about language constitutes part of the metalinguistic dimension, the terminology far from covers the entire dimension. The metalinguistic function is often represented using verbal language resources; however, it can also be represented using other semiotic means, such as air quotes (a gesture made by raising and flexing two fingers of each hand to simulate quotation marks).

To emphasise this view on metalanguage as something that is done, in the article we will use the term metalanguaging that is inspired by the term languaging, in which the -ing form indicates activity. In this understanding of languaging, an agent performs the activity, and this agent both acts within and co-creates a social space. Moreover, we find that recent sociolinguistic perspectives on languaging offer an understanding of language that breaks with the fixed understanding of language as defined and isolated units. This understanding enables us to view students at Danish schools that are officially referred to as bilingual students not just as students “‘speaking two languages’, but as languagers making use of resources that are recognized by the speakers or others as belonging to two sets of resources” (Jørgensen & Juffermans, 2011, p.2).

In the article we examine the metalanguaging of children through a researcher-generated activity carried out in a primary school, where groups of three multilingual children talk with a research assistant about a number of texts in several different languages. Our analysis will demonstrate how the children, at one and the same time, use metalanguaging to talk about language and texts in accordance with the framing of the activity, and to form and negotiate the framework for the linguistic interaction.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES: METALANQUAGING AND REFLEXIVE AWARENESS

In this context, when we apply an analytical perspective on metalanguaging understood as a dimension in all use of language, we do not see metalanguaging as a phenomenon reserved uniquely for linguists. Instead we see it as a phenomenon that reflects the reflexive awareness (Verschueren, 2004) essential in all communicative behaviour, and that also children practice in their daily communication. Reflexivity in the form of metalinguistic activity is included in all interactions to structure the linguistic activity that is taking place (Lucy, 1993; Verschueren, 2004). As Coupland and Jaworski (2004) point out, language without a metalinguistic dimension allows no room for discursive negotiations, strategic revisions, processes of inference, and social investments in certain ways of using the language. Seen from this perspective, the metalinguistic dimension not only consists of linguistic utterances about the language itself, but also includes social contextualisation processes, for example contextualisation signals (Gumperz, 1982), that send signals about the setting in which a given utterance is to be understood. Another example is stylisation and performance (Bauman, 1992) that “calls attention to and involves self-conscious manipulation of the formal features of the communicative system” (Bauman 1992, pp. 47-48). Metalinguistic behaviour is thus seen as a natural part of how people use language, and research therefore focuses on both the referential nature of metalanguage (how language refers to language) and on the performative nature of language (how language is created, structured and formed metalinguistically) (Mertz & Yovel, 2009).

The interest in metalanguage can be traced back to Roman Jakobson (Jakobson, 1957, 1960a), who was one of the first researchers to look at the metalinguistic function as an integrated part of language. ”[M]etalanguage is not only a necessary scientific tool utilized by logicians and linguists; it plays also an important role in our everyday language” (Jakobson, 1960, p. 355). Jakobsen wanted to develop a general communication theory; his model is based on an understanding of communication that requires that participants in the interaction use a homogenous code, and that there is a metalinguistic consensus with regard to the code (see Mertz & Yovel, 2009). However, in our research, when we focus on the language activities of social actors, we are less interested in the metalanguage itself, and more interested in how the individual’s representation of language and language use reflect how language is valued in different social contexts, and how language users make active use of the metalinguistic
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