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The normalcy of linguistic and cultural diversity

« La diversité linguistique en Suisse, et en particulier dans le Canton de Vaud, constitue l'une de ses plus grandes richesses culturelles. En effet, plusieurs dizaines de langues y sont parlées avec une concentration nettement plus marquée en zone urbaine. La majorité de la population scolarisée dans le Canton de Vaud dispose d'un héritage culturel et d'une langue première autre que le français. En parallèle, une forte proportion de travailleurs possède d'excellentes compétences en diverses langues aussi autres que les langues nationales, ce qui facilite les partenariats économiques internationaux au bénéfice de la Suisse. La diversité des communautés linguistiques minoritaires du Canton fait du multilinguisme vaudois une opportunité de positionnement international et un véritable patrimoine culturel. »

(*Vaud Multilingue*, <http://www.vaudmultilingue.ch/multilinguisme/>)

As a researcher, educator and community activist working with families, schools, and ethnic minority communities in the fields of multilingualism and language education across three countries (Greece, England, and Switzerland) for over twenty years, I have witnessed a dramatic shift in societal attitudes and discourses towards multilingualism: from discourses pathologizing linguistic and cultural diversity and multilingual speakers to discourses celebrating cognitive advantages, academic attainment and access to Higher Education and future professional opportunities.

Although the language deficit thinking of semilingualism (the idea that multilingual speakers have no language abilities in any of their languages) still circulates in some educational, political and media debates, there is currently a more receptive climate towards multilingualism among the wider public. This shift is reflected in the quotation above from *Vaud Multilingue*. This is a local initiative led by academics at UNIL (Université de Lausanne) to increase the visibility of multilingualism in the Canton de Vaud and render research on multilingualism more accessible to a wider, non-academic audience. In the quotation, multilingualism is represented as "one of the biggest cultural resources" of the Canton de Vaud. In addition to the national languages (French, German, Italian and Romansch), multilingual speakers (students and workers) are seen speaking several dozen home and community languages.

This heightened awareness of linguistic diversity affords the Canton "an international edge and a real cultural heritage", the hallmark of a pluralistic society that is guided by principles of coexistence between multiple languages, cultures, interests, and convictions. Nevertheless, this discursive shift sometimes obscures the fact that multilingualism is neither a recent nor a primarily urban phenomenon. Many societies across the globe have had or continue to have long and complex histories of linguistic and cultural diversity despite the one nation- one language ideology that underpins modern nation states.

In education, the normalcy of multilingualism in broader society has taken the form of the proliferation of bilingual education programmes, ranging from short-term summer camps to fully-fledged bilingual immersion programmes. Our own school is about to launch its first

bilingual summer camp and a dual-medium (English/French) bilingual immersion programme for early years in September 2021. In principle, these programmes take as their point of departure what Richard Ruiz (1984) has referred to as a “language as a resource” perspective. This perspective advocates for additive bilingualism (as opposed to subtractive bilingualism where students lose their language abilities in their first language as they increase their abilities in the new language) and affirms students and their families’ multilingual identities and lived experiences. It also engages minority and majority communities in conversations about the importance of language and literacy learning for active democratic citizenship and imagining other viewpoints and reconceptualising identities.

A repertoire approach to language and language learning

Within the fields of multilingualism and language education, Stephen May (2014) and other scholars of multilingualism have called the heightened research focus on multilingual language use across a wide range of contexts and speakers the “multilingual turn”. The “multilingual turn” has urged scholars of multilingualism to rethink our understanding of language and language learning in the context of intensified human mobility within and across national borders.

Rather than viewing language as stable structures tied to a particular inheritance (e.g., of ethnicity, nationality, religion), language is understood in terms of repertoires of communicative resources that are tied to social and cultural activities we take part in our everyday lives. According to Blommaert and Backus (2012), language repertoires are conceptualised as follows:

- Language repertoires consist of the full range of our communicative resources. We deploy language varieties (e.g., regional, classed, diasporic varieties of English, French, Greek), styles (e.g., infused by our popular culture preferences and social affiliations), registers (e.g., academic, professional, associated with gaming and other cultural practices), genres (e.g., writing genres specific to formal educational environments) and accents to communicate and signal our sense of group membership and belonging.
- Language repertoires are in a constant state of flux. Language speakers develop multilingual repertoires across the life span. Repertoires are not acquired once and for all, but closely follow our biographical trajectories. Language speakers may add new resources to their repertoires, but they may also unlearn or lose previously learned language varieties, registers, styles, etc.
- Essentialised understandings of membership and belonging has been challenged by intensified human mobility and new digital technologies. Like our language repertoires, membership and belonging are understood as dynamic, changeable, and negotiable.
- Language learning takes place in formal (usually educational) and informal environments (e.g., in the family, peer group, through travel, the internet and social media).
- Language learning is never complete. It is impossible to know all the resources of a given language, even if that language is what we commonly refer to as our “mother tongue”, or we identify as a “native speaker” of that language.
- Language resources are never neutral, and they are unequally distributed. Very early on in our language socialisation we learn that certain language varieties, registers and

styles are more valued than others in particular environments. For instance, where we live, academic varieties of French, German and English are highly valued in educational and professional environments while home and community languages are usually granted significantly less visibility.

- The social values we and society more broadly attach to language resources have real life consequences for processes of language use, maintenance and shift and can support or hinder our individual and collective efforts for language learning.

Beyond recognition to leveraging multilingualism as a resource for learning

In our forthcoming edited book “Liberating language education: Personal, aesthetic and political perspectives” we advocate for going beyond an often-celebratory recognition of multilingualism to actively supporting language policies and pedagogies that leverage students and teachers’ multilingual repertoires for learning in schools. We propose adopting a translingual and transcultural orientation that utilises students and teachers’ multilingual repertoires and cultural knowledge for effective teaching and learning alongside developing students’ capabilities in the academic varieties that are necessary for achieving at school and beyond. This orientation challenges the compartmentalisation of students’ language resources into discrete boxes and valorises their multilingual identities and the normalcy of their multilingual experiences.

In practice, this means creating meaningful opportunities for students to critically reflect upon, question and integrate their multilingual resources and rich cultural expressions that often faded into the background in their everyday school lives as powerful and legitimate tool for meaning making. It means leveraging the purposeful use of code-switching, translation and translanguaging for pedagogical purposes, especially when the languages of schooling are different from the languages students and teachers speak at home and their communities. While such flexible language practices are common occurrence in many classrooms around the globe, they are often stigmatised or remain hidden in the margins of classroom talk, tucked away in informal peer group interactions. This is because they are often positioned outside the school’s narrowly defined normative language use.

Normalising multilingualism in our schools and classrooms as a resource for learning means supporting approaches to education that are based on principles of equality, and social justice. It means listening to our students’ diverse voices and putting their desires, biographies, and histories at the heart of the teaching and learning process.

References

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