

Exclusive language ideology and solutions for inclusive language classes

Abstract

Native-speakerism is one part of a wider system of beliefs which is an exclusive language ideology. To create inclusive language classes, we need to better understand what language ideology is and how it works, to challenge exclusive language ideology, and to adopt solutions towards inclusive language ideology.



Biography

Dr Francesco Screti is an Italian teacher at Centre de Langues of Université de Lausanne and post-doctoral researcher at the Institute of Multilingualism (Université de Fribourg). In his research he deals with the multiple connections between language, politics, and society.

Francesco Screti

Language nationalism

Native-speakerism is one part of a wider (exclusive) ideological system, called language nationalism (Moreno-Cabrera, 2008). Part of this nationalist language ideology is *monolingualism* (Barratt, 2018), the idea that each nation has one and only one language, which emanates from the original population – *ethnos* – of one territory and expresses almost naturally the spirit of that people. This idea is resumed in the slogan “one people – one nation – one language”. Language is so central in the rhetoric of nationalism, that some scholars have talked of “language fetishism” (Bourdieu & Boltanski, 1975).

Nationalist discourse also highlights the importance of national authors (Cervantes for Spanish, Dante for Italian, Goethe for German, Shakespeare for English, etc.), and sustains national centres of language spreading, centralist policies, and centralizing bodies of knowledge production on language like Instituto Cervantes, Società Dante Alighieri, Goethe Institut, British Council, and so on. Many authors have argued that these institutions, via their documents and policies often favour (new) forms of colonialism or of imperialism (Perley, 2020) and of *linguicism*, meaning the unfair treatment of an individual or community based on their use of language (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2015).

Prescriptivism

Another corollary of native-speakerism is prescriptivism or purism (Milroy, 2001). This proposes the idea that a standard exists, which is the only correct variety, hence the only one suitable to be taught, while other ways of speaking or writing need to be erased from teaching and learning. This posture involves phonetics, prosody, vocabulary, syntax, pragmatics, and morphology: so, just to mention the case of English, other realizations of the interdental consonants /ð/ or /θ/ as respectively /d/ and /t/, the double negation, or the deletion of -s for the third person singular, are considered wrong. Even though some of these features, such as the deletion of -s at the third person singular, are more logical than the standard: given the presence of personal subject pronouns, the morphological mark [-s] is redundant, thus unnecessary.

Immobility

Connected to the previous two is the idea that languages have to be preserved as they are, whereas variation (diachronic and synchronic) is one of the essential features of language, which is at the same time individual and social, and adaptive. Thus, it has to be flexible to respond to the different needs of the human beings using it. Languages are the result of a long series of changes, many of which were mistakes or frowned-upon ways of speaking. A language is just a snapshot of a moving thing: it seems still, but in reality, is in constant movement. As a result of purism, people (grammarians, teachers, students, parents, journalists, bureaucrats, politicians) tend to think that languages should be preserved from changes, for changes are dangerous and detrimental for the language itself, its speakers and society! So, instead of accepting diversity (=variation), they strive for uniformity and stability, for example, by opposing orthographic reforms that would make more transparent the relation between phonetic and graphic plans of language, by rejecting non-standard varieties and forms from public discourse or teaching, or by discriminating and silencing speakers of non-standard varieties. In so doing, they fail to understand that no language is pure and that the notion itself of purity is constructed.

Recently, ETAS published a much-needed contribution (Goetze et al., 2023), which fostered a debate on the topic of native-speakerism (Holliday, 2006), which is crucial for the advancement of language teaching and learning. Building on that article, Francesco widens the discussion about and beyond native-speakerism, to understand better what it is and how it works. To do so, he will provide a theoretical and conceptual framework, which is that of language ideology. In the second part of the article, he will make some suggestions on what can be said and done in language courses to overcome native-speakerism. These latter suggestions are based on some of the contributions to the panel named *Dismantling Language Ideologies and Promoting Social Justice in Higher Education Second Language Teaching* at the AILA conference, the world conference of applied linguistics, which took place in Lyon (France), 17–21 July 2023.

Native-speakerism is part of a language ideology

Native-speakerism is only one part of a wider conception of the world, languages, and speakers, and of their relations. Native-speakerism is only one part of a wider cognitive/social interface called language ideology (Philips, 2015; Woolard, 2020).

What is an ideology?

An ideology is a contact point between the thinking (cognition) and the doing (action) (van Dijk, 1998). It is a vision of the world, a *Weltanschauung*, which is shared amongst persons within a group. Without this social aspect, there is only a collection of personal beliefs, representations, and attitudes, whereas ideology is a social cognition, and it is constructed and spread (mainly but not only) via discourse, or verbal expressions, books, textbooks, conferences, lessons, movies, posters, comments, gestures, laws, etc. Ideologies have descriptive and prescriptive functions: they describe and explain the world, and they tell people how the world should be. An ideology is the result of historical events and social conditions: it is a superstructure of a social structure. Ideologies help in justifying, defending, and perpetuating the social conditions of which they are the expression or help challenging them.

Language ideologies

Language ideologies work just like any other ideology: they describe and represent what languages are, how they work, how speakers are and work, and how both language and speakers should be. They justify the social conditions from which they arise and which they express.

Inclusive language ideology

Contrasting this exclusive language ideology, an alternative ideology exists according to which nothing social is natural, but it is rather the result of a construction; no varieties are better than others (since those which have been constructed as superior serve to defend the privileges of some speakers over others); and every language or variety expresses perfectly what speakers need or want it to and has equal potential to express any imaginable meaning and serve any social purpose.

Language nationalism, monolingualism, native-speakerism, purism, and prescriptivism are deeply anchored in the speakers' mindset and in the social practices of modern and contemporary bureaucratic societies, which are based on the existence of official languages, the ones of the State, laws, dictionaries, textbooks, exams, diplomas, and on “official” translations from or to other (officially recognized) languages. Prescriptivism is rooted in the way schools function and in the mindset of teachers, learners (their parents), stakeholders, principals, bureaucrats, ministry, and policy-makers. Prescriptivism is entrenched in the institutional structure of teaching and learning: exams need objective grading rubrics, correct answers need to be indicated in exam papers, so to clearly tell right from wrong, so that the system of punishments and rewards on which schooling is founded can work properly.

Suggestions and solutions for change

Escaping this situation is not easy, but answers must be given. The first point is the teachers' consciousness, to favour a critical language awareness (Taylor et al., 2018). Teachers can be part of the problem, because they *de facto* implement language policy and perpetuate a system which is fraught with and which brings (social and linguistic) inequalities, or which brings the solution via social justice (Piller, 2023). Below is a list of suggestions from the conference mentioned above:

- Stop presenting multilingualism as non-normative (Lo Bianco, 2010), and start presenting it as normal.
- Put the oral system back at the centre, so move away from writing and its constraining power (writing systems are one way to control language variation) and fix the oral system.
- Since students with low language proficiency or different accents are treated as academically unprepared and personally incompetent, then teachers should be aware and counter this bias.

References

- Barratt, L. (2018). Monolingual bias. In J. I. Lontas & M. Delli Carpini (Eds.). *The TESOL Encyclopedia of English Language Teaching*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118784235.eelt0024>
- Bourdieu, P., & Boltanski, L. (1975). Le fétichisme de la langue. *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales*, 1(4), 2–32. <https://doi.org/10.3406/arss.1975.3417>
- Duchêne, A. (2020). Multilingualism: An insufficient answer to sociolinguistic inequalities. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 2020(263), 91–97. <https://doi.org/10.1515/ijsl-2020-2087>
- García, O., & Wei, L. (2018). Translanguaging. In C.A. Chapelle (Ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Applied Linguistics*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781405198431.wbeal1488>
- Goetze, S., Semadeni, F., & Greaney, K. (2023). Native-speakerism in English teaching and learning. *ETAS Journal*, 40(1), 22–23.
- Holliday, A. (2006). Native-speakerism. *ELT Journal*, 60(4), 385–387. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccl030>
- Lo Bianco, J. (2010). The importance of language policies and multilingualism for cultural diversity. *International Social Science Journal*, 61(199), 37–67. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2451.2010.01747.x>
- Mendoza, A., Hamman-Ortiz, L., Tian, Z., Rajendram, S., Tai, K. W. H., Ho, W. Y. J., & Sah, P. K. (2023). Sustaining critical approaches to translanguaging in education: A contextual framework. *TESOL Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.3240>
- Milroy, J. (2001). Language ideologies and the consequences of standardization. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 5(4), 530–555. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9481.00163>
- Moreno-Cabrera, J. C. (2008). *El nacionalismo lingüístico. Una ideología destructiva*. Península.
- Perley, B. C. (2020). Linguistic imperialism. In J. Stanlaw (Ed.). *The International Encyclopedia of Linguistic Anthropology*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118786093.iela0240>
- Philips, S. U. (2015). Language ideologies. In D. Tannen, H. E. Hamilton & D. Schiffrin (Eds.). *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis* (pp. 557–575). Wiley. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118584194.ch26>
- Piller, I. (2017). *Explorations in language shaming*. <https://www.languageonthemove.com/explorations-in-language-shaming/>
- Piller, I. (2023). Language and social justice. In J. Stanlaw (Ed.). *The International Encyclopedia of Linguistic Anthropology*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118786093.iela0416>
- Skutnabb-Kangas, T. (2015). Linguicism. In C.A. Chapelle (Ed.). *The Encyclopedia of Applied Linguistics*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781405198431.wbeal1460>
- Taylor, S. K., Despagne, C., & Faez, F. (2018). Critical language awareness. In J. I. Lontas & M. Delli Carpini (Eds.). *The TESOL Encyclopedia of English Language Teaching*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118784235.eelt0660>
- van Dijk, T. A. (1998). *Ideology: A multidisciplinary approach*. Sage.
- Woolard, K. A. (2020). Language ideology. In J. Stanlaw (Ed.). *The International Encyclopedia of Linguistic Anthropology*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118786093.iela0217>

- Highlight that “variation is the only linguistic constant”, and show that variation (diachronic, synchronic, register, style, context, situation, contact, etc.) is the norm.
- Adopt translanguaging (García & Wei, 2018), but acknowledge its potential limitations (Mendoza et al., 2023), such as marginalizing singletons (those speaking only one language), lack of shared proficiency in the languages used, or lack of language knowledge by teachers.
- Do exercises which prompt reflection about representations associated with languages, for example, by presenting two recordings of two languages to see the adjectives associated to them by students, so as to challenge the correspondence of language features (pronunciation, syntax, words) with social status, education, wealth, and the consequences of devaluing languages and speakers.
- Adopt a variationist approach through corpus linguistics (by using corpora of real-life examples), showing articulatory phenomena such as the least articulatory effort, to show that languages are all equal and that standard varieties are not more logical than other varieties.
- Show the gap between speaking and writing, to illustrate that people do not speak like they write and as many textbooks say they speak; present regional varieties and non-standard examples; avoid taking off points from users of non-standard varieties or informal registers; use informal or non-standard expressions or regional varieties in oral and written productions; show examples from less-represented communities; encourage students to go to less-represented areas for language trips; and show videos of non-native or non-standard speakers to increase acceptance of language and cultural diversity. All this should be done as soon as possible, since it is never too early to expose students to language variation.
- Teach students about language shaming (Piller, 2017) and how to respond to it.

Although these suggestions are steps toward a different and more inclusive language ideology and teaching practice, they are insufficient. Major ideological and political shifts and structural changes are needed at institutional level (curricula, teachers' selection process and criteria, grading criteria, policy-making, government language policies, etc.). Proposing only linguistic solutions to problems which are more than linguistic is insufficient, and we need to de-centre language so as to re-centre social problems (Duchêne, 2020).