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Main Article:

Being Bilingual: Issues for Cross-Language Research

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Abstract

The current political debates in England highlight the role of language in citizenship, social exclusion, and discrimination. Similar debates can also be found around the world. Correspondingly, research addressing different language communities is burgeoning. Service providers and academics are increasingly employing bilingual community researchers or interpreters to carry out research. However, there is very little written about the effect of working with bilingual researchers. What it means to be bilingual is often essentialised and rarely problematised. Bilingual researchers are seen as unproblematically acting as bridges between communities just because they are bilingual. Their ties to communities, their use of language, and their perspectives on the research are rarely investigated. Language is tied in an unproblematic way to meaning, values, and beliefs. In this article, I use examples from my own research to question what it means to be bilingual and to do cross-language research. I argue that there is no straightforward way in which meanings can be read off from researchers' ties to language and that being bilingual is not the same for everyone.

Keywords: bilingual researcher; cross-language research; interpretation; translation

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1. Introduction

The current political agenda in England, where my research was carried out, highlights the role of the English language in citizenship, social exclusion, and discrimination. Alexander, Edwards, and Temple (2004) describe how mother-tongue competency has acquired different political significance in England over the years. In the 1980s it was associated with positive ethnic identity; but now it is seen more as a constraint in building

citizenship and community cohesion. A new blueprint for citizenship education was laid out in England in the Crick Report (2003), in which English language facility was viewed as a core measure of an individual's merit for national inclusion.

The idea behind this article came from a conversation I once had with an academic colleague. He was interested in cultural differences and international social work research. He attributed my beliefs about an issue at work to the fact that I was from Eastern Europe, i.e., since I spoke Polish, my views would be those of someone from Eastern Europe. I was born in Reading, England, and my parents were from Poland. I grew up in England and was taken aback by the suggestion that my perspectives and beliefs were due to an assumed affinity I had with views from Eastern Europe, whatever these might be. However, the comment did start me thinking about the role of bilingual researchers employed in England to work with people who speak languages other than English. In this article, I challenge the view that everyone who is bilingual experiences the social world in the same way and therefore it does not matter who works on research as all bilingual researchers are in effect interchangeable.

Research on, and sometimes with, people from communities who do not share the researcher's language is burgeoning. Service providers and academics are increasingly employing bilingual community researchers or interpreters who are bi/multilingual to access populations that otherwise would be excluded (see for example, Cole & Robinson, 2003; Steele, 1999). Researchers in health, housing, and social care in England have begun to look at concept and word equivalence across languages and to examine issues around the communication of difference in their research (Bradby, 2002; Rhodes & Nocon, 2003). There has also been some debate about the *role* of interpreters and bilingual researchers (e.g., see Gerrish, 2000; Robinson, 2002; Thomson, Rogers, Honey, & King 1999). However, many researchers working across languages still do not address the possible effects of language difference within their research and there has been very little written about the *effects of being bilingual* on research. For example, in a study looking at housing and social care needs of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) households in Derby, England (Steele, 1999), personal interviews were carried out with a sample of Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and African/Caribbean elders. Chinese respondents were identified via the Chinese Welfare Association and a focus group discussion was held with 16 older Bosnian people. No indication is given of the languages involved, the background of the bilingual researchers, or indeed their names, their level of input into the research, or how concepts were interpreted or translated across languages (for another example, see Karn, Mian, Brown, & Dale, 1999).

2. Position of the Bilingual Researcher

Debates about the influence of the researcher on research are common in a range of disciplines. Discussions centre on the effect--or the lack of it--of the social circumstances and perspectives of researchers on research, i.e., on questions of objectivity and subjectivity in research. On this issue, the broad positions of *social constructionism* and *interpretivism* resonate with my own perspective. I will not rehearse the position here (for

relevant discussions, see Hammersley, 1995; Stanley & Wise, 1993), but state that it is based on a view that researchers jointly construct accounts and findings with research participants. This does not mean that there is no social reality, just that there are different perspectives. The researcher's role is to present accounts of reality that are open to scrutiny by other people who may see the social world differently. The issue of the role of bilingual researchers becomes quite significant in this perspective.

The perspectives of bilingual researchers employed because of their language skills should form part of cross-language research. Bilingual researchers, interpreters, and translators in English speaking contexts are not just transmitters of the English language but are part of the process of meaning construction in research (Edwards, 1998; Temple, 2005). The assumption that there is no need to examine the position and perspective of bilingual researchers since knowledge of a language per se gives them a direct access to the views of supposedly homogeneous communities is an essentialist one. It is built on the premise that there is only one way to experience being bilingual and only one way of being part of a community.

There have been developments within sociolinguistics, particularly around what it means to be bilingual, that could make a valuable contribution to cross-language research across a range of disciplines and would go some way to re-dressing the current essentialist premise about what it means to be bilingual. For example, numerous authors have signalled the dangers of assuming that use of a language determines meanings or values within a language or culture (Ashcroft, 2003; de Bot, Lowie, & Verspoor, 2005; Gubbins & Holt, 2002; Harris & Rampton, 2003; Holliday, Hyde, & Kullman, 2004; Wei, 2000a). Language is used to create and re-create social worlds and identities and no one person is positioned neutrally in these processes. Ashcroft (2003, p. 50) argues that "the belief, inherited from nineteenth century philology [the science of the structure and development of languages], that language actually embodies cultural difference rather than inscribes or articulates it, is one of the most tenacious in contemporary theory." Wei (2000a) and others in the area of bilingual research argue for the investigation of multiple identities and experiences of being bilingual (Kanno, 2003; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004). Wei (2000a, 2000b, 2000c) points to the need to recognise the bilingual researcher's identity and to make it a part of research. He challenges the notion that the role and identity of the bilingual researcher are irrelevant. In an interview or focus group, such researchers constantly make decisions about what concepts mean in different languages and how they will be interpreted, although they are rarely asked to discuss this aspect of their work.

The problematisation of the links between languages, identities, and speech is relevant for all cross-language researchers. Within translation and interpretation studies researchers also point to the importance of language in constructing identities within oral and written accounts of people's lives (Simon, 1996; Spivak, 1992, 1993; Venuti, 1995, 1998). Language is used to construct accounts of who we are and how we differ from "others," i.e., those who are not like us. For example, Simon (1996) shows how translators produce accounts that are *gendered*. None of these writers argue that identity or perspective on issues is tied in any deterministic way to which language people speak. Rather they argue

that possibilities for different perspectives of who we are can be opened up by examining the role of language in constructing identity and influencing how people see the social world.

Researchers' concerns about attaching views to particular communities, identities, or languages (Schick, 2002; Twine, 2000) need to be taken on board. Schick's work with Maori communities in New Zealand, exemplifies the argument against an essentialist position on what it means to be bilingual or describe oneself solely in terms of ethnicity:

The committee held in effect that Maori identity corresponded at once to a Maori body, knowledge about Maori, the ability to express Maori needs, and a distinctively Maori worldview. An individual Maori leader was to stand in for the dynamics and complexity internal to the group, to bear the burden of community consultation with Maori, and to represent the interests of all Maori. (Schick, 2002, p. 638)

Schick points out that when a researcher is seen to have expertise only in relation to specific parts of the research, such as being Maori, this reifies social categories and defines in advance what can be said by whom. This is the way much cross-language needs assessments are carried out with unnamed bilingual researchers collecting data from communities. Bilingual researchers' roles are limited to accessing people from communities and collecting data. Schick and others (e.g., Twine, 2000) question whether researchers who share ethnicity with their research participants are necessarily better able to elicit and interpret information and ensure adequate representation. Ethnicity, particularly based solely on pre-conceived notions of linguistic competence and understanding, may not be the only relevant social characteristics in the research.

If researchers want to work with people who speak languages that they do not speak, an examination of the background and perspectives of all researchers is crucial to understanding whom in the communities they are reaching and whom they are excluding. The use of unaccountable self-appointed community leaders as the voice of "the community" or as the sole conduit to reach respondents is increasingly being challenged (Bowes & Dar, 2000; Jan-Khan, 2003; Jewkes & Murcott, 1998).

Pavlenko and Blackledge's (2004) writing is particularly useful for its overview of existing perspectives on language use in research (see also Ashcroft, 2003; Spivak, 1992). They observe that researchers often use the concept of "code switching" in a way that assumes a direct relationship between languages, values, meanings, and identities (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004, pp. 8-10). Code switching involves the movement between languages within speech. It has been shown that this to and fro between languages in speech can take place for a variety of reasons and the process does not guarantee that a specific meaning will be conveyed because of a particular language chosen.

Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004) argue for “the sociohistorically shaped partiality, contestability, instability, and mutability of ways in which language ideologies and identities are linked to relations of power and political arrangements in communities and societies” (p. 10). They point out that identities are constructed “at the interstices of multiple axes, such as age, race, class, ethnicity, gender, generation, sexual orientation, geopolitical locale, institutional affiliation, and social status, whereby each aspect of identity redefines and modifies all others” (p. 16). If this point is made in relation to bilingual researchers, it goes against the notion that bilingual researchers can be chosen without affecting the findings, as long as they speak the relevant languages.

Bilingual researchers come to the research carrying their own perspectives and, possibly, shared histories with the communities they are working with. However, rapidly expanding research with bilingual community researchers or interpreters rarely raises issues of language use and perspective. The status of findings is rarely discussed and the position of bilingual researchers rarely problematised. Ability to speak a particular language is used as the sole criterion to judge researchers’ ethnicity and whether they represent the views of supposedly homogenous communities. Many cross-language researchers therefore carry out research as if the code switching analogy described above can be applied literally and one person can provide meanings and values inherent in an entire language community.

3. A Way Forward?

Approaches have been suggested for cross-language researchers who want to take on board debates about the influence of bilingual researchers on their research and at least aim to allow them, and all researchers working in languages other than their own, a chance to present their perspectives (for a review, see Temple, 2005). Methods based on use of concepts such as “intellectual auto/biographies” (Stanley, 1990; Temple & Edwards, 2002) or “key informants” (Edwards, 1998) have been put forward that involve all participants as active in research. Stanley describes the concept of intellectual auto/biography as “an analytic (not just descriptive) concern with the specifics of how we come to understand what we do, by locating acts of understanding in an explication of the grounded contexts these are located in and arise from” (Stanley, 1990, p. 62). This involves examination of an account of an individual’s life to assess the impact of events and choices on their perspectives on social issues. Accordingly, Edwards (1998) works with interpreters as key informants rather than objective gatherers of findings. Such methods involve, for example, discussion of concept and word choice in interview schedules and transcripts as well as discussing everyone’s perspective on the issues as part of the research process.

These methods do not provide us with the solution to the question about the nature of the relationship between language and meaning in research as there is no single answer, but they begin to address the possibilities of different meanings across languages without essentialising what it means to speak another language. These perspectives therefore show that language matters as meanings can differ across languages. They seek to

problematise any deterministic links between language, identity, and meaning, for example, arguing that there is no single homogeneous community and that within communities, however defined, meanings cannot be read off from social characteristics such as gender, language, or religion.

The notion that anyone is part or not part of any community according to only one single unchanging criterion of language, gender, or anything else has been challenged by others (Alexander, Edwards, & Temple, 2004; Schick, 2002; Twine, 2000). Minority ethnic communities are made up from different phases of migration and contain generations that have been born in the host country. Differences around age, gender, sexuality, and language, among other characteristics, mean that it is possible to belong or not belong to communities according to different criteria and sometimes, according to audience. When picking a bilingual researcher in an attempt to engage communities in dialogue, the kind of information generated will depend in part on how participants perceive and position the researcher. This is no different from any interview where people make decisions about what to say according to audience. In both cases it is important to investigate the influence of all research participants on the findings. Miedema and de Jong (2005) put it well when they state that “concepts are clearly more than language: they are historically, socially and psychologically rooted, and need to be understood in this context. A mere translation is often inadequate” (pp. 236-237).

However, taking on board the lessons from sociolinguistics, interpretation and translation studies, and the broader debates within the social sciences about objectivity and subjectivity implies that there is more to say my position in my research than the fact that I can speak Polish. My various roles, identities, and orientations will also enter into my research. My views are those of someone who is not just a bilingual researcher, but also a woman, an academic, non-religious, and not active in formal Polish community organisations, preferring informal ties. Polish was my first language but it was learnt in England. To illustrate some of the issues involved in assuming that all bilingual people experience being bilingual in the same way, I will discuss interviews I carried out with two Polish-speaking people living in England and present my own experience of being a bilingual researcher.

4. Being Bilingual: Examples from Research

I have been collecting narratives of people who describe themselves as Polish for about 15 years and now have over 50 such accounts. I have chosen two interviews for this article and added my own experience of being bilingual to illustrate some of the different ways that three people see their ties to the Polish language and the importance of the Polish background in their lives. The names have been changed. The first interview I discuss in this article was with Mr Kowacz in 1998. The interview took over eight hours and covered a range of issues, including the importance, or otherwise, of ethnicity, the role of language within this, and the need to narrate a life history. Mr Kowacz was in his late 70s when I interviewed him. This interview was not part of any funded research project. Mr Kowacz knew that I was interested in narratives, particularly in relation to

people's sense of who they had become since leaving Poland. He explained that the interview would be useful for him, as "I want to debrief myself before I start pushing up the daisies," i.e., before he died. This was said in English and Mr Kowacz told me he preferred to carry out the whole interview in English as "the mechanics of recall [were] easier in English." He said that Polish "was beginning to disappear as my natural language."

Mr Kowacz had been a Polish airman during the Second World War and described himself as "of Polish stock" but said that his formative years had been spent in England. He had lost his parents and explained that "they had survived the war but did not survive the people." They had survived the Warsaw Uprising and the fall of Warsaw but had been killed in an air raid. He could not remember which side had killed them. He framed much of his narrative of life during the War in terms of adventure, memories of the girls he met and of "golly jeeps" (exciting adventures), and the fun he had. When discussing his ethnicity he commented the following:

[T]here is hardly any situation when a precise definition is necessary. I am not anything really. Man of the world sounds pompous ... internationalist ... I can become British. Never will I become English. For childrens sake it is easier [to be a British citizen]. (Interviewee anonymised as Mr Kowacz, personal communication, August 1998)

This fluid and context dependent definition of ethnicity had come up in other interviews I had carried out and has also been documented by other researchers (for a good example, see Song & Parker, 1995). Mr Kowacz was clear that his ethnicity was not always relevant and although he was Polish occasionally, British sometimes, and internationalist at other times, ethnicity he said "is no big deal for me." He had concluded that for the most part the Polish language had ceased to matter to him but that it seemed to be important to other people:

Does it matter? Not for me but ... other people seem to think it is important to put you in a box. He speaks Polish ... that sounds strange and different ... They do things differently there ... Stereotyping ... I ask them why? Maybe it is to dismiss views that they don't agree with ... or to explain why they don't like me. I have decided it is their problem. I am more interested in how people see me as a confused old man. Sometimes I can't find the words in any language. They think I am stupid. I haven't any bits of paper [qualifications] but I am respected. I can think. (Interviewee anonymised as Mr Kowacz, personal communication, August 1998)

He felt his age was of more concern to him than his ethnicity or the language that he spoke since, as he got older, he believed that he could be dismissed as "a grumpy old man."

Mrs Groch, my second example, saw her ties to the Polish language differently. She had also been born in Poland and was in her late 40s when I interviewed her. She had come to England about 20 years ago to marry a man with a Polish background she had met when he went for a holiday to Poland. She spoke no English when she came to England. She worked in a nursing home at the time of the interview and spoke fluent English. She had two teenage children. Polish was the language used at home and both her children were studying Polish at a Saturday School. Both parents were active in Polish organisations and attended the Polish Church. Mrs Groch felt that the Polish language was central to who they were:

Speaking Polish is very important to all of us. It is about keeping a way of life going. It is a bit different for my husband and children. We have decided that they should learn ... they should know about Poland and be able to speak to relatives in Polish. It is part of who they are. An English education is important but so is speaking Polish. They were born in England but speak Polish at home. I know they feel both Polish and English ... maybe English is easier for them and Polish is easier for me but both are important in our lives because we mix with Polish and English speakers. (Interviewee anonymised as Mrs Groch, personal communication, September 2003)

For Mrs Groch, her husband, and family, speaking Polish was important for their sense of themselves, but in differing ways. Mrs Groch recognised that speaking Polish did not have the same significance for her husband and children:

We are all mixed up! I could speak only Polish until I came to England. I cannot forget that that was ... is how it is ... They [husband and children] spoke Polish and English as they grew up. There are differences in the way we speak [Polish] but these are not so big now that we have stayed in Poland a few times together. My English will never be as easy for me. I think in Polish. (Interviewee anonymised as Mrs Groch, personal communication, September 2003)

Later on she commented that this situation might not be that unusual anymore:

Everyone is mixed up now. It is difficult to say who we are. People ask me where I am from because I have an accent but my English is as good ... I have qualifications ... better than some of theirs. I need to be Polish but I am part of what happens in England now. (Interviewee anonymised as Mrs Groch, personal communication, September 2003)

Mrs Groch's English was respected by the people she interpreted for when they needed help and she valued being able to give something back to the Polish people who had welcomed her to England. The interview was in English. This was her choice as we had met through English friends and had previously spoken in English for the benefit of non-

Polish friends. In other words, she felt we had a history of speaking English to each other and she felt more comfortable continuing in English rather than switching back and forth.

Looking at my own ties to the Polish language presents another way of experiencing being bilingual. I spoke only Polish until I was about five but learnt my Polish in England. This was common in the community where I grew up, particularly for the first child in a family, as many Polish people who came here after the Second World War believed that they would be going back with their families. My bilingual abilities were often seen as a disadvantage at school or at best a waste of time that could be spent on other subjects. My language biography shows my path from monolingual Polish speaker, to reluctant bilingual (reluctant to speak English), to reluctant bilingual again (reluctant to speak Polish), and finally to proud bilingual. The centrality of each language in my life has changed in part as a result of my experiences both at work and in my social life.

The three examples show that not only are there different ways of experiencing being bilingual but that experiences may also change during the course of life. My reluctance to speak Polish was in part due to the gendered nature of my experiences in the community where I grew up. There were associations for me between the Polish language and traditional views about a woman's place being in the home and being Catholic. I preferred to mix with people with Polish backgrounds (speaking English) in informal networks rather than attending organised events. This way of connecting with my heritage has always been important to me. However, as new waves of Polish people come to England, these very traditional views have been challenged. Of particular interest here is that the kind of Polish spoken has also changed as people continue arriving from Poland. For example, there have been influxes of Polish Roma people--an ethnic group mostly living in Europe--seeking asylum, Polish people coming to marry English people, and more recently coming to work in England since Poland joined the EU. They have brought with them a more modern spoken Polish. The Polish Mr Kowacz, Mrs Groch, and I speak is different. Mrs Groch's is the most modern but "not always grammatically correct," Mr Kowacz describes his as "stale but accurate," and mine is moving from a Second World War spoken Polish that was taught at a Polish school in England to a more up-to-date version as my confidence grows following visits to Poland.

There are, however, other differences between us than the kind of Polish we speak. The way we interpret the world around us also varies. My understandings would be situated within my experiences of community life as gendered and restrictive for women. Mr Kowacz questions the current "advantages" women have whilst Mrs Groch feels it is her sole responsibility to juggle home and work. There is no "Polish" perspective here, as there is no single English or British one either. The position bilingual researchers take on issues is influenced by their intellectual and emotional auto/biographies, where gender and age may be as important as the language spoken. One interesting point about my experiences as a bilingual is that although my first language was Polish it was not learnt in Poland. This situation is common among bilingual researchers and I believe it has important consequences for the ways we experience being bilingual. As Gubbins and Holt (2002) argue, "the language identity chosen by children of migrants is not a simple

attachment to the language of their parents but involves choice and change. The choices made by such speakers have different symbolic and affective meanings” (p. 3).

In a fascinating discussion of what it means to be bilingual, Schrauf and Rubin (2003) suggest that bilingual people have two sets of memories. They ask, “might not the bilingual individual have at least two curriculum vitae, two chains of associations, two sets of memories?” (p. 124). The attempt to position bilingual speakers into two worlds, two languages, two sets of memories and two cultures is one that was prevalent in debates in the 1970s and 1980s around assimilation: they are torn in ways monolingual people are not. My experience suggests the impossibility of separating Polish and English memories, especially when they have been made in the same place since these memories are tied to more than the language used. Mrs Groch’s comment that “Everyone is mixed up” seems to be more akin to the way that I experience being bilingual than attempts to separate my Polish memories from my English memories. I can’t remember which language I used on which occasions in the past and I recall them all in English.

Contrary to Schrauf and Rubin’s (2003, p. 141) position that “memories are in fact encoded in stable manner in one language and preferentially retrieved in that same language,” I argue that memories are re-worked according to a bilingual person’s current experiences to form narratives of self and that these re-workings can be in a different language. The memories I recall as a child must have been those of someone who did not speak English but because of my experiences since then, I recall them in English. Mr Kowacz’s comment about the mechanics of recall being easier in English now is also relevant here, as is Mrs Groch’s about thinking in Polish even when all around her are speaking in English. I have long given up trying to separate my Polish and English memories or beliefs. I do not hold that “remembering is language specific” or that there are “language specific selves” (Schrauf & Rubin, 2003, p. 141) for all bilingual people. I am increasingly drawn to the literature on *hybridity* (Bhabha, 1994) and different ways of being bilingual with language as a factor to investigate rather than an assumed way of being different. As Bhabha states, “by exploring this Third Space [as migrants], we may elude the politics and emerge as the others of our selves” (Bhabha, 1994, pp. 38-39). This is very different from a view of encoded stable memories.

These three brief descriptions I have given of what it means to be bilingual illustrate the argument that people experience being bilingual in different ways. Mrs Groch’s life still affords a key place to the Polish language, whilst English has become a greater part of her life. Mr Kowacz, however, feels he can better express himself in English and his ties are mostly with English people. He appears to have little need to speak Polish and his children and grandchildren speak only English. Arguably, speaking Polish has increasingly become part of who I am. Speaking Polish is a part of my work and sometimes part of my social life. In this sense the Polish language has become re-centred in my life.

5. Discussion

The bilingual researcher has a difficult task in spotting similarities and differences across language communities without stereotyping people. This task can only be achieved if bilingual researchers are seen as active in the research process and not as just neutral transmitters of messages across languages. The focus needs to shift to establishing how concepts are being used rather than assuming one meaning is all embracing for an entire group of language speakers.

Being bilingual is not the same experience for Mrs Groch, Mr Kowacz, or for me. It matters who serves as the link between a cross-language researcher and the language community being studied. This is more than the issue of *sampling* and whom bilingual researchers can access. Moreover, close ties with a community are not always an advantage since people may feel they want to talk to researchers they do not know. There is no correct choice of a bilingual researcher but the research outcome may differ depending upon who does it. The choice, for example, between Mr Kowacz, Mrs Groch, and I may effect who will participate in the research and what they would be prepared to say, but it will also influence the way Polish and English are used in the research and the assumptions made about the meanings of concepts and words.

The assumption underlying much research involving bilingual researchers is a simplistic one: they will know the non-English meanings if they differ from the English meanings, because they must be from “the community” as they speak the language. However, meanings need to be investigated rather than built upon dubious notions of essentialised links between language and representation. Behind this kind of approach is an assumption that has come under increasing attack within sociolinguistics: the assumption implies that any speaker of a language can decode the meaning supposedly shared in that language community. The employment of bilingual researchers has many benefits but they are not interchangeable conduits of meaning across languages.

The intellectual auto/biographies of all research participants matter. Words and concepts have connotations for all researchers that are arguably carried across languages as much as they are tied to them. Employing Mr Kowacz as a bilingual researcher would be a very different experience to employing Mrs Groch. Speaking a language is not the same experience for everyone and there is no way to investigate similarities and differences between languages without putting the bilingual researcher into the frame of reference. Even then, researchers cannot deterministically tie meaning to language community, as there is no such single language community or meaning. There are not many researchers remaining who believe, for example, that there is only one way in which it is possible to experience being a woman, being black, or being disabled. Yet that is the assumption behind the way people experience ties to different languages. Bilingual researchers are still seen to be interchangeable, except perhaps for issues around gender matching.

The call to investigate the role of the researcher in research can be found across many disciplines. The largely unquestioned role of bilingual researchers spans issues beyond

the advantages and disadvantages of employing them. There are epistemological questions that need to be addressed in any cross-language research around the intermediary role of the bilingual researchers in constructing accounts. Arguing that language constructs as well as describes our social world does not mean that there are any deterministic links between language, identity, and meaning. It is up to researchers to investigate the links and to persuade the reader of differences and similarities in meanings across languages. Part of the investigation should be the perspectives of bilingual researchers and the ways in which they use language.

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