

Broadening the Conceptual Lens on Language in Social Work: Difference, Diversity and English as a Global Language

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Summary

Language is infused in multiple dimensions of human behaviour, and social work is essentially a language-centred activity. Yet, despite the pivotal position of language to many social work activities, its significance has rarely been explored in terms of difference. Moreover, the linguistic diversity that characterizes the local and global contexts in which many practitioners operate has been given minimal attention in the social work literature. In this paper, I contend that how language is conceptualized in social work both shapes and constrains the way that practitioners perceive issues relating to linguistic diversity. The paper maps out the limitations of some of the existing conceptual lens used for viewing language in relation to the multilingual milieu in which social work takes place. It also draws attention to the global pre-eminence of English, the significance of bilingualism and the limitations of a monolingual frame of reference for social work. A case is made for augmenting the existing knowledge base on language with a multidisciplinary approach to language that incorporates bilingual perspectives. Rather than providing a definitive model for understanding language, I suggest that such an approach expands the conceptual landscape for exploring language and difference in social work.

Keywords: Language, diversity, difference, social work

Introduction

Social work is primarily a language-centred activity where ‘talk and talking’ are seen as the ‘stock in trade’ of practitioners (Rojek *et al.*, 1988, p. 17). Yet, despite the pivotal position of not only spoken but also written language to many social work activities including assessment, intervention, social policy, research and teaching, social workers have given minimal consideration to the significance of language practices to the profession. In particular, they have rarely examined language in relation to *difference* despite the linguistic diversity that characterizes both the local and global contexts in which many practitioners now operate (Pugh, 1994, 1996; Ruzzene, 1998; Kornbeck, 2001, Dominelli, 2004).

Pugh (1994) speculates that social work practices and policies in the UK may actually work against the needs of minority language speakers rather than supporting linguistic pluralism. In the broader European context, Kornbeck (2001, p. 307) refers to language as ‘a neglected topic in social work literature’, while in the USA, cultural awareness is prioritized over language skills training in social work education (Smith *et al.*, 1999). Similarly in Australia, Ruzzene (1998, p. 17) contends that language represents ‘the forgotten dimension in cross-cultural social work’. Linguistic diversity would, therefore, appear to occupy a peripheral space in social work practice, policy and education in many English-dominant locations around the world.

It is this apparent lack of attention to linguistic matters in social work that signals the need for further exploration of language and difference in social work. There are, of course, a multitude of ways for examining and theorizing language. However, this paper is essentially concerned with conceptual issues around *language, difference and diversity*. Its primary purpose is to broaden the conceptual lens(es) through which social workers have traditionally viewed language in order to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the linguistic dimensions of social work in a multilingual context. More specifically, it is concerned with expanding conceptual understandings of language that take into account the global, post-colonial era in which social work is historically located. In this context, English retains a pivotal role on the world stage, and linguistic diversity is contracting (Crystal, 1997, 2000). At the same time, new forms of language identity are emerging where bilingual identity now constitutes more the norm rather than the exception, and English is more commonly used as a second rather than a first language (Kachru, 1996).

One of the limitations of the following discussion is that it is conceptually confined to spoken and written languages and does not consider sign languages. However, many of the ideas explored in this paper have been considered previously in terms of the status of sign language users and majority–minority language group relations. For example, Corker (2000) highlights the privileged position of majority language groups, the salience of both covert and overt language policies in reinforcing hierarchical social arrangements, and how judgements made about competence in the majority language tend to

devalue the bilingual skills of sign language users. These concerns are similarly explored here in relation to a broader set of language demographics that connects the global dominance of English to local language usage patterns.

The paper comprises five sections. The first section outlines a view of language as an active social practice that cannot be separated from people's lives, and hence is of central importance to social work. The second section then expands on the limitations of some of the existing frameworks used in social work to understand language with regard to the multilingual milieu in which practice occurs. Next, language is explored in relation to difference. This is followed by a discussion on the changing nature of linguistic diversity with regard to the global diffusion of English and its impact on local contexts, using Australia as a case example. Finally, a case is made for privileging a bilingual lens to look at language practices in social work in order to counter a perceived monolingual Anglophone bias in the literature.

Language as an active social practice

Contemporary social theorists view language as playing a pivotal role in day-to-day social activities, where linguistic interaction impacts *on* other aspects of the social world while at the same time it is shaped *by* the social world (Giddens, 1987; Fairclough, 1992). Language is therefore intimately related to the people who use it, where 'speech, speakers and relationships are inseparable' (Norton, 1997, p. 410). Seen in this context, language arguably constitutes a key concern for social workers because of the importance attributed to the relational aspects of practice.

Language has been envisaged as a potential form of behaviour (Halliday, 1997), a tool for 'communicative action' (Habermas, 1984) and an economic resource (Bourdieu, 1977). Theorists from a variety of disciplines including anthropology (Duranti, 1997), socio-linguistics (Spolsky, 1998), cultural studies (Hall, 1997) and education (Gee, 1996) similarly concur that language performs a variety of functions that go beyond its commonly cited communicative role and is implicated in socialization, identity formation, cultural affiliation, social relations and knowledge production. More recently, the recognition of the importance of language in the construction of identity has spawned an explosion in theory and research on the language-identity connection from psychological, anthropological, educational and post-structural perspectives (Miller, 1999).

Accordingly, it can be seen that contemporary writers from a range of traditions attribute an active, social role to language where it constitutes a dynamic presence in people's lives on a number of different levels. Viewed as an interactional practice, language-in-use shapes people's social relations, identities and understandings of events. In the next section, I chart how these ideas about language have been incorporated into social work, and explore some of the limitations of the extant perspectives on language in the literature.

Existing perspectives on language in social work

The idea that language constitutes an active social practice has been similarly recognized in social work, although perhaps its communicative role is highlighted more than its other social functions. For example, Kornbeck (2001, p. 308) refers to social work as 'an activity which, quintessentially is about communicating and interacting'. Traditionally, however, communicative practices have been envisaged in a rather limited fashion in social work in terms of a 'conduit metaphor' which imagines meanings to be pre-formed in sentences that are then transmitted from sender to receiver through processes of encoding and decoding (Reddy, 1979). This transmission model of language-in-use is evident in many social work texts aimed at teaching social work students communication skills for practice (for example, see O'Connor *et al.*, 1998; Brill and Levine, 2002).

The conduit model of communication has, however, been subjected to criticism by linguists and educators because of its mechanistic frame, which tends to neutralize the role of language as a social practice and overlooks how dialogic processes actually construct information (Coupland *et al.*, 1991; Chilton, 1997; Min, 2001). More recently, post-structural perspectives on language have gained prominence in social work, which on one level seek to counter a simplistic transmission model of language-in-use. Writers affiliated with this tradition or who adopt a postmodernist stance point out that language interacts with discursive practices to construct particular versions of reality and that meanings are not fixed (Chambon, 1994; Howe, 1994; Parton and O'Byrne, 2000).

This new perspective on language has led to an interest in demonstrating how social work practice is constructed through 'talk' and 'text', using a variety of methodologies such as discourse analysis, conversation analysis and ethnographic approaches (Camilleri, 1996; Taylor and White, 2000; Seltzer *et al.*, 2001; Hall *et al.*, 2003). Social work writers who embrace these traditions have therefore been concerned with the politics of language to the extent that they seek to demonstrate the ways in which language and meanings mediate our perceptions of the world, and how relations of power are encoded in language practices. Accordingly, there has been a move away from seeing language solely as a neutral conduit for communication, and recognizing language-in-use as a social *and* political activity.

These contributions to the canon have in turn sparked debates amongst social workers themselves about the actual power of language and the posited relationship between language and 'reality' (for example, see Beckett, 2003). Nevertheless, what has not been aired in this debate is the political significance of *what* languages are involved in formulating worldviews, which in turn implicates a politics of speaker relations based on language choice. As Thompson (1998, p. 70) points out, 'the choice of language can be just as significant as the choice of words'.

While Rojek *et al.* (1988) contest traditional models of social work which view language as a neutral means of expression, they only cursorily acknowledge

that many of the concepts employed in social work are derived from English, a prestigious global language. More recently, writers in social work have attempted to highlight how different languages embody different assumptions, beliefs and worldviews that are not easily translated across linguistic borders (Ling, 2000; Martínez-Brawley and Zorita, 2001; Weytes, 2003; Mafile'o, 2004). Pugh (1996) is similarly critical of discussions on language in social work that depoliticize social interaction and assume white English-speaking culture to be the unstated norm. Moreover, while markers of identity such as race and gender have been extensively explored in social work, the issue of language identity has not been scrutinized to the same degree (Pugh and Jones, 1999). Arguably then, issues relating to language, difference and identity have been under-emphasized in social work, although there are some key exceptions that are described below.

Most of the extant social work literature that explores how language interacts with group identity appears to have emanated from those countries where the territorial significance of minority languages has become politicized. One such country is Wales, where a number of writers have related the legacy of English colonization to discriminatory practices in social work education and practice (see Williams *et al.*, 1994). The introduction of the Welsh Language Act (1993) has meant that social workers have had to review their language activities in both social work education and practice, particularly in relation to offering service users language choice. The Care Council for Wales (formerly the CCETSW) has been admirable in this respect in terms of promoting language awareness and producing bilingual publications, although the situation of other 'minoritized' language speakers has perhaps not received the same degree of recognition (Drakeford and Lynn, 1999).

The Victoria Climbié inquiry has revealed how a failure to recognize the importance of language identity can seriously compromise a child's ability to speak out when he or she is not fluent in the majority language. One recommendation emanating from the inquiry into her death was that children whose first language is not English must have access to an interpreter when concerns are raised about their welfare (Lord Laming, 2003). Victoria resided in a linguistically diverse area where some 160 different languages were spoken. She spoke little English and relied on her carer to interpret for her, which ultimately contributed to a tragic outcome because this person was one of her abusers.

Lord Laming (2003) commented that her carer—who was bilingual—appeared to use her languages selectively in order to protect her own interests. This case not only illustrates the importance of providing linguistically sensitive services to minority language speakers, but also demonstrates the need for social workers to have an awareness of bilingual language practices, and to adopt an emergent rather than a fixed view of language identity. In this regard, socio-linguists have demonstrated how people use their linguistic resources selectively to 'project and shape ethnic (and other facets of) identity in unfolding talk' (Schilling-Estes, 2004, p. 163). In family therapy as well, British therapists

have started to recognize the importance of working cross-linguistically with bilingual families whose members have different language competencies (Ali, 2004).

With some exceptions such as Wales, social workers in English-dominant countries have not yet adequately engaged with the issue of language choice and its attendant power relations. More specifically, they have not explored how the use of a globally influential language such as English may mediate access to social networks, produce inequitable social relations or shape knowledge production. In light of a change in global demographics that has seen an unprecedented growth in the use of English, I would suggest that we need to further an understanding of the politics of language use in social work with regard to how dominant English practices interact with local diversity. This diversity is evident not only across different languages, but also *within* the English language itself, where its widespread diffusion has resulted in it being shaped by multiple cultural forces. The influence of English is not only restricted to 'Anglophone' countries such as the UK, Australia and New Zealand, but also extends to a range of other locations through processes of colonization and globalization. These issues are explored below in the context of a broader language demography that encompasses both linguistic diversity and language variation.

Language and difference

Linguistic anthropologists have documented how different languages categorize the world in distinct ways and seek to show how language use constitutes a cultural practice (Duranti, 1997). Moreover, differences exist not only across languages, but also *within* the same language, and it is this language variation and its relationship to the social world that represents the primary concern of socio-linguistics (Spolsky, 1998). The notion of a unified or pure language is in fact a myth. Instead, Bakhtin (1981) contends that language is 'heteroglossic' in that it is composed of a combination of dialects, social languages and genres that individuals use selectively. In this sense, all individuals use multiple linguistic codes. Krishnaswamy and Burde (1998, p. 77) are in turn critical of Western theories of language that do not adequately portray 'the epistemological mode of a world dominated by heteroglossia'. In the case of English for instance, Lippi-Green (1997) argues that the ideology of a 'standard language' has been mythologized and propagated by predominantly white, upper middle class groups who classify as 'non-standard' what is actual natural variation in language usage.

More recently, postcolonial critics from a range of disciplines have drawn attention to the language variation resulting from the imposition of imperial languages such as English during the colonial era (Kachru, 1986; Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 1989; Pennycook, 1994; Krishnaswamy and Burde, 1998; Singh, 1998). These writers point out how such 'difference' is often judged

according to monolingual standards, in turn negating the experience of those individuals who routinely use two or more languages on a daily basis for a variety of purposes. While bilingualism was essential to survival during the colonial era, it was also a source of tension for colonized groups because of their ambivalent feelings about using the colonizer's language and their ascribed status as inferior speakers (Memmi, 1967). Language practices and linguistic relations therefore constitute a key concern for postcolonial writers.

Kachru (1996) exposes the flawed assumption underlying many studies on language where monolingualism and monolingual societies are assumed to be the natural state of affairs. As a consequence, second language users have often been 'othered' and monolingualism legitimized as the norm despite the fact that it constitutes an exceptional state for most of the world's speakers (Jeßner, 1997). Thus, traditionally, the study of language has failed to take into account a significant proportion of the world's speakers who are bilingual and interact with a range of speech communities. This assumption is also reflected in many social work texts that deal with language, where the dominant language constitutes an unstated norm (Morris and Williams, 1994). Similarly, the language practices of bilingual speakers have rarely been considered in social work, although the Care Council for Wales is one exception, having produced training material on working with bilingual service users (Davies, 2001).

In the social work academy, Martínez-Brawley and Zorita (2001) claim that bilingual skills are often devalued by dominant language speakers, particularly in terms of practices such as code switching or moving between languages. With reference to their own experiences in academia, they demonstrate how such language practices are commonly perceived as flawed or even suspect. This deficit view of bilingualism is similarly reflected in the way that speakers are often identified in terms of their relationship to English through the use of terminology such as 'non-English speaking background' (Clyne, 1997). In my own research which explored how bilingual social workers in Australia employed their language skills in practice, several participants commented on how the distinction made between native and non-native English speakers covertly extends to the social work profession itself (Harrison, 2003). These practitioners believed they are judged in relation to native speakers, whose English is presumed to be the norm. For example:

There are certain ideas that because you speak with an accent, you think with an accent, you work with an accent.

And:

Lots of journals will say that you have to find some native speaker to read your English first, and then you send it [the article] to us. What does it mean? I think they naturally assume that language is just the medium, that it's nothing [to do] with the meaning. It's just the meaning is clear or not clear. But what happens is not [that they] understand or not understand, but accept or not accept.

Arguably, a case can be made for privileging 'difference' as a lens for understanding language, particularly as it applies to Anglo-American social work where a taken-for-granted attitude towards English is evident along with a superficial recognition of language variation. Furthermore, drawing on knowledge from those language disciplines that explicitly focus on difference, such as socio-linguistics, anthropology and postcolonial studies, can greatly enhance existing understandings of language in social work. In the following section, I build on the preceding discussion of language and difference to examine the issue of linguistic diversity as a significant context for social work practice that is commonly overlooked in the literature.

Language and diversity

Despite the fact that most social workers now operate in multilingual contexts, unlike other forms of diversity, linguistic diversity has received minimal attention in the social work literature. In this section, I first map out the global linguistic landscape before scrutinizing this landscape in terms of the widespread diffusion and diversification of English. I then examine how these demographics interact with local contexts, using the example of Australia as a multilingual society. Through doing so, I demonstrate why linguistic diversity is an issue that social workers need to be cognisant of on a political level in their practice.

With the advent of global communication systems and deregulated labour markets, the issue of cultural and linguistic diversity is a fundamental concern for all contemporary societies (Kalantzis and Cope, 1999). Linguistic diversity is no longer just a significant issue for traditional immigrant societies such as Israel, Australia, Canada and the USA, but also increasingly so for countries such as the UK due to the greater permeability of national borders. The movement of people across geopolitical borders, whether through migration, employment, tourism, education or the need to escape local situations of conflict, is a marked feature of contemporary patterns of global mobility (Appadurai, 1990). The increased mobility of people has in turn produced greater language diversity at the local level.

On a global level, current estimates suggest that there are between 3,000 and 10,000 languages used throughout the world (Crystal, 2000). Of some concern, however, is the claim that this linguistic diversity is under considerable threat. While the use of English continues to expand at a global level, a concurrent phenomenon has been the rapid rate of extinction of a vast number of the world's languages. Current predictions suggest that between 50 and 90 per cent of the world's language will die out in the next 100 years (Crystal, 2000).

Language extinction does not only result in a loss of cultural knowledge and diversity. When minority groups perceive their language rights to be threatened, the potential for the rise of separatist movements and intrastate conflict is heightened (de Varennes, 1996). The destruction of indigenous languages through colonization, a lack of government commitment to maintaining the

languages of migrant groups and the taken-for-granted attitude that cross-border activities will take place in English are patterns that are replicated in many Anglophone countries (Nettle and Romaine, 2000). In this context, a tension exists between the global dominance of English and the desire to preserve local languages, which include new varieties of English that have evolved in the wake of colonization and globalization.

According to Crystal (1997), the main reason a language assumes international dominance is because of the combined political and military power of its people. In this regard, the English language has been accorded significant currency in global politics, and its native speakers hold a privileged position on the world stage. In social work itself, Dominelli (2004) observes that English has dominated many international conferences and consequently disadvantages other language speakers who have less communicative power. While English is not the only language that has assumed political significance in the broader world context, the rapid development of worldwide communication networks, international market deregulation and the amalgamation of world finances have all served to elevate its status further (Lo Bianco, 2000).

Currently, nearly one-third of the world's people use English in one form or another (Fishman, 2000). However, the vast majority of these speakers are not from the traditional Anglophone countries, but from countries where English has a colonial legacy or where it is learnt for economic, educational or social purposes. Kachru (1996) points out that for every so-called native speaker of English, there are now four 'non-native speakers'. In other words, English is being used more and more as a second language, not just to communicate with native English speakers, but also as a lingua franca in multilingual contexts across a range of countries. Through the concomitant processes of globalization and localization, English itself is also diversifying as it takes on local identities (Kalantzis and Cope, 1999). Hence, communication is occurring in a range of different Englishes rather than in one mythical 'standard' variety, where bilingualism is usually an associated feature of this usage of English.

In the case of Australia, for example, English plays a key role both as the first language of the majority Anglophone group and as a lingua franca for a population from a diverse range of linguistic backgrounds who exhibit different levels of proficiency in English and speak a variety of Englishes (Neil, 1996). Through its dominance in social, political, economic and international affairs, English represents a highly sought after linguistic resource in multilingual Australia where some 200 languages are spoken (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003). Consequently, a significant level and degree of individual bilingualism exists in the population (Neil, 1996).

The complex and changing nature of linguistic diversity in Australia also impacts on social work. Given that Australia is one of the most linguistically diverse countries in the world, most social workers are likely to come into contact with people who speak a language other than English in their practice (Ruzzene, 1998). Australian social workers have therefore been instrumental in lobbying for professional interpreting and translating services (Rodopoulos,

1998). Moreover, for a significant proportion of the population who are native speakers of other languages, many of their social interactions take place in English as a second language. This includes some members of the Indigenous population who use English as a second language or speak Aboriginal English. Hence, the need to be familiar with language practices associated with Aboriginal English has also been identified as an issue for Australian social workers (O'Connor *et al.*, 1998).

A dynamic linguistic diversity and language variation are thus notable features of the demographics in which Australian social work is positioned. The importance of these demographics were very clearly demonstrated to me through my own experience of running a support group for a diverse group of international students completing postgraduate studies in social work at an Australian university. These bilingual students used a variety of Englishes in the group, engaged in code switching in order to express their meaning more clearly (or at times to exclude others) and incorporated their own indigenous terms into their academic work when they could not find an English equivalent.

While these students commonly cited language as a problem in lectures and tutorial groups, somewhat surprisingly, their communication appeared to be relatively unproblematic amongst themselves. Some of these students speculated that this was due to a mutual understanding of the issues involved in communicating in English as a second language. Indeed, McArthur (1998) contends that because globally English is now used frequently as a shared medium for communication amongst non-Anglophones, the parties to these interactions are likely to have a heightened understanding of the issues involved in using English as a second language. On the other hand, it is questionable whether monolingual Anglophones have this same degree of linguistic awareness in social work.

In English-dominant countries such as Australia, linguistic diversity and language variation are customarily problematized on a number of levels. The co-existence of multiple languages is commonly cited as a language barrier to communication. Alternatively, linguistic diversity is seen as a potential source of tension where multiple languages are vying for recognition in localities where conflict exists between different ethnic groups (Chilton, 1997). The diversity evident within English itself has also led to a public outcry regarding a perceived erosion of language standards or language purity (Romaine, 1995). Accordingly, for a variety of reasons, linguistic diversity is positioned as a barrier, a threat or a deficit.

In this sense, it is important that Australian social workers adopt a political perspective on language that moves beyond remedying problems in cross-lingual communication and acknowledges the importance of language rights. According to Singh (2001), a monolingual assimilationist ethos continues to infuse language policy formulation in Australia. Language politics constitutes a site of unresolved tension in Australia that dates back to its colonial history where English monolingualism was symbolic of a British tradition (Clyne, 1997). Indeed, Smolicz (1995) argues that the reluctance of Anglo-Australians

to recognize the language rights of Indigenous and migrant groups is due to the perceived symbolic function of language in representing a cohesive cultural identity. In many Anglophone countries, competency in the national language has become a measure of assimilation and allegiance to the state (Lockard, 1997). More recently, this ideology has been promoted in a number of locations besides Australia. For example, in both Britain and the USA, fluency in English now constitutes a pre-condition for citizenship (de Lotbinière, 2004).

The current unprecedented growth of English as a global language has led to calls for an examination of language policies in countries where English has a taken-for-granted status, particularly given the tensions emanating from a growing countermovement favouring linguistic diversity and language rights. In particular, the global dominance of English has been identified as a tool of social divisiveness that promotes inequality. It has been argued that the high social ranking of English on a global level affords its competent speakers certain privileges and benefits, such as increased opportunities for political participation and employment, and greater access to economic markets (Holborow, 1999). Conversely, lack of competence in English in not only Anglophone countries, but also many post-colonial locations, compromises academic achievement, social participation and employment prospects (Phillipson, 1992).

Advocates of linguistic rights argue that in these contexts a kind of 'linguicism' is operating, which results in 'unequal access to power and material resources' (Kontra *et al.*, 1999, p. 13). The global diffusion of English has in turn fuelled a movement concerned with the promotion of indigenous and local languages in order to guard against the perceived homogenizing effects of English. These languages include local Englishes that reflect distinct cultural identities but are not given the same status and recognition as English varieties spoken in Anglophone countries (Singh, 1998).

With a few key exceptions, the social work literature does not actively engage with the politics of English diffusion and its impact on other language groups. In Australia, Ruzzene (1998) highlights the privilege attached to speaking English in terms of increased access to services and political resources. Humphries (1997) briefly considers how the language practices of minority groups in the UK have been marginalized by 'the hegemony of Standard English', which is equated with the maintenance of social order. In the Welsh context, Drakeford and Morris (1998, p. 96) contend that the use of a dominant language may constitute a discriminatory practice, signalling that choice of language has 'wider implications of citizenship and social worth'. Rumsey (2000) also foregrounds the issue of language politics with particular reference to her own teaching experience in South Africa, where English has been paradoxically linked with both linguistic imperialism and resistance on the parts of colonized groups. Generally speaking, however, these broader language demographics have not been widely considered in social work in terms of their potential for perpetuating inequitable social relations.

Arguably, the contemporary changes wrought by the increased rate of cultural, social and economic exchange in the world will increasingly highlight the issue of

linguistic diversity for the profession. Border movements, in terms of both people moving around the globe and people adopting border identities, shape the local demographics of social work practice (Martínez-Brawley and Brawley, 1999). This form of mobility is similarly evident amongst social workers themselves. The advent of the international academy also means that social work education is extending beyond national borders. Hence, social workers are increasingly operating on a transnational level through activities such as study, research and practice, or through international or regional organizations and forums.

Language is central to all these activities, and in this broader context linguistic differences along with the role of English in social work are particularly salient concerns. The contemporary global dominance of English signals the need for social workers to be aware of how this impacts on the communicative power and linguistic identity of other language groups and those who use English as a second language. These language demographics foreground issues in social work pertaining to cross-lingual communication, access to information, the influence of English language-based ideas in social work, and control over knowledge production. The need to explore these issues is particularly important in a profession such as social work, which seeks to affirm difference and promote social inclusion.

Making a case for bilingual perspective(s) on language

Spivak (1993, p. 195) makes the provocative claim that: ‘You cannot translate from a position of monolinguist superiority’ and asserts that learning other languages is essential to learning about ‘the other’. Essentially, she foregrounds the importance of the bilingual experience and the need to move beyond English language-framed understandings of difference. In a similar vein, I suggest that social workers need to move beyond monolingual Anglophone perspectives on language practices given that traversing different languages and cultures is a routine activity for many people in the world. In this section, I outline some ideas about how this might occur through first exploring the concept of bilingualism and then considering how the use of a bilingual lens may enhance understandings of language in social work.

Bilingualism manifests as both an individual and societal phenomenon. On an individual level, it refers to the ability to use two or more languages in a functional manner (Grosjean, 1982). This population comprises individuals with plural language affiliations and/or postcolonial identities whose diasporic relationships may extend beyond the borders of the nation state. However, because these speakers do not necessarily identify with the dominant language culture, their language practices have often been rendered invisible or problematized by majority language groups (Brock-Utne, 2000).

Kachru (1996) claims that a limited conceptualization of bilingualism based on monolingual norms has negated the creative ways that these speakers use their languages. The mythical idea that bilingual speakers must have equal

competence in two languages means that their language skills have often been found to be deficient. In reality, bilingual speakers rarely have equal competence in both languages because they use their languages for different purposes and contexts (Baker and Prys-Jones, 1998). This devaluation of the linguistic resources of bilingual speakers is evident in Anglophone countries where language competencies are defined in relation to English and evaluated in accordance with monolingual norms.

More recently, studies comparing monolingual and bilingual speakers have identified a number of advantages associated with bilingualism. These include enhanced creativity, cognitive flexibility, greater sensitivity in communication, a heightened awareness of language and the adoption of dual reference groups (Liddicoat, 1991; Saunders, 1991; Romaine, 1995; Jeßner, 1997; Baker and Prys-Jones, 1998; Mondada and Gajo, 2001). On a societal level, bilingualism may also be seen as an instrument of social change because it challenges the primacy of a monolingual society's language (Pugh, 1994).

In view of the attributes and skills of these speakers, Romaine (1995) advocates a bilingual perspective in constructing new theories on language, particularly in light of the fact that mainstream theories of language have traditionally been prefaced on monolingual standards that assume a homogenous speech community. Similarly here, I suggest taking a bilingual perspective as a starting point for examining the linguistic dimensions of social work. Pugh (1996, p. 23) points out that monolingual English speakers 'rarely have occasion to examine carefully how their language carries ideas about the world and their place within it'. Consequently, they usually lack the means to explore how the English language underpins the knowledge base of social work. Monolingual English speakers often mistakenly assume that all languages are translatable to the extent that they describe a common reality (Pugh, 1996). Conversely, bilingual speakers have linguistic skills and knowledge that may enhance understandings of language, particularly in contexts where cultural and linguistic diversity are prominent themes.

A bilingual perspective is used here to signify the *idea* of developing new ways of looking at language in social work that go beyond a monolingual frame of reference. In this context, it refers to ways of seeing that are not limited by access to only one language. The term is used strategically rather than in a strict classificatory manner, which arguably would not do justice to the myriad language identities that blur the boundaries of mono-, bi- and multi-lingualism. It is also used in a political sense to signal the privileged position of monolingual English speakers from Anglophone countries, who Tsuda (1997) claims have greater status, credibility and communicative advantages over other speakers *and* expect everyone else to speak English. On a broader level then, it entails scrutinizing dominant language practices that are normalized and thus rarely questioned (Bourdieu, 1977).

Practitioners and educators in social work are in fact starting to offer alternative portrayals of language that are informed by a bilingual perspective. For example, Perez Foster (2001) conducted research into how bilingualism impacts on the expression of trauma, while Ling (2000) used her bilingual skills to explore help seeking and help giving in Sawarak, Malaysia. There are a

myriad of possibilities for this type of research and application in social work. Another potential field of inquiry is how certain varieties of English and linguistic styles of expression are valued (or devalued) in social work, which in turn partly dictates whose knowledge contributions to the profession are seen to be 'legitimate'. An equally important project here would be to explore the language awareness of monolingual English-speaking practitioners and academics, their understandings of linguistic difference, and their preparedness to engage with linguistic diversity in social work.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to open up new possibilities for understanding language practices in social work in an internationalized era of practice and education. It has built on an underlying view of language as an active social and political force in people's lives that has gained recent prominence in social work. While many writers in social work now recognize the importance of the dialectical relationship that exists between language and the social world, at the same time there has been limited recognition of the issues of linguistic diversity and heteroglossia in these texts.

Adopting a broader approach to language that incorporates socio-linguistic studies on language variation, anthropological accounts of linguistic diversity and postcolonial insights on difference will do much to augment existing understandings of language in social work. By privileging a bilingual perspective on language practices, I also suggest that this knowledge base can be enhanced to reflect the reality of the linguistically diverse local, international and academic communities in which social work is positioned. Such a perspective foregrounds difference while also locating bilinguality as the norm rather than the exception.

Many English-dominant countries now host considerable diversity. However, a taken-for-granted attitude towards English minimizes the political implications of language choice in social work and promotes an apolitical view of communication and knowledge production. In an age of international social work and where the primacy of English in the social, political and economic domains is being questioned on both a local and global level, it is vital for the profession to develop an awareness of these issues. Given the increasingly complex nature of the multicultural and multilingual environments in which social workers operate, it is imperative that we broaden our conceptual lens(es) for viewing diversity in all its manifestations.

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