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Language, Migration and Continuity of Being:
Notions of Migrant Language Proficiency and Self-Concept
among Multilingual Migrants in Aotearoa-New Zealand.

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Ute Gerda Walker

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Abstract

Migration entails adjustment and change, a process crystallized in the way language use patterns, proficiencies and identifications change. Although migrants are often bi/multilingual, their language proficiency tends to be associated with fluency in the host language. Such a monolingual approach is fundamentally at odds with the ethnolinguistic diversity in migration contexts and has prevented a more holistic approach to the dynamic realities of bi/multilinguals. It has also perpetuated a view of linguistic proficiency as technical skill, judged according to idealized monolingual norms. Little is known of speakers' own notions of proficiency in their existing *migrant languages* (ML) and the impact on their social-psychological makeup as their linguistic repertoire undergoes changes in use, function and status. This research investigated proficiency as a matter of conceptualization through its users, including its role for migrants' continued sense of self in the face of sociolinguistic discontinuities. A three-phase research design involving focus groups, a postal survey and follow-up interviews was used with a sample of migrants from a wide range of ethnolinguistic backgrounds. The study found evidence for a multidimensional conceptualization of *migrant language proficiency* (MLP) with a complex range of underlying motivations and a strong emotional attachment to ML, revealing ML as a linguistic resource crucial for self-construction. The present study aimed to provide a deeper understanding of the dynamic nature of these matters to contribute to a socio-culturally grounded view of proficiency and self-concept to help reveal some of the complex processes associated with migrants' social, cultural and psychological wellbeing. The study proposes bi/multilingualism as a settlement target to facilitate this outcome and to foster a sense of self that accommodates multiple identities. Investment in languages promotes an inclusive society of global citizens and complements New Zealand's official Māori/English bilingualism.

Abbreviations and Terms

<i>ML</i>	Migrant language(s), that is any language or languages other than English or <i>te reo māori</i> . The term reflects the transitory nature of both linguistic and social-psychological dynamics associated with the migration experience.
<i>MLP</i>	Migrant language proficiency, as conceptualized by the respondents in this study.
<i>Bi/multilingual</i>	A collective term that encompasses bilingualism, trilingualism and multilingualism, either at the individual and/or societal level. This composite term avoids possible confusion, particularly in the New Zealand context where a common connotation exists in relation to Māori/English bilingualism.
<i>Host language & host society</i>	The majority language spoken in the receiving country, for example, English in New Zealand in the case of the present study.
<i>L2</i>	Used to refer to any additional language learnt formally, including cases of multilingual speakers, who may have more than two languages already.
<i>SLA</i>	Second Language Acquisition.

Preface

The issues

Migrants' typically experience changing patterns of language use and proficiencies, fluctuating orientations towards their languages as well as the emergence of new and possibly multiple identities. Their languages are associated with their past histories and have the potential to connect them with their future *being* and *becoming* in the new sociocultural context. All too often, however, there are expectations that migrants will shift completely to the language of the host society to facilitate acculturation.

Studies of minority languages have typically investigated language maintenance or language shift, involving the assessment of speakers' discrete skills through methodologies conceptually and practically informed by the Second Language Acquisition (SLA) paradigm, where proficiency is defined by the idealized native speaker (NS) benchmark. This approach may have little relevance in relation to the languages of migrants (ML), which tend to be either first languages or heritage languages, with different needs and patterns of use emerging from new cultural and sociolinguistic contexts. Treating proficiency as a discrete construct can have far-reaching consequences as it determines access to and participation in society, particularly in terms of social integration and employment, where bi/multilingual proficiencies and patterns of speech may be disregarded or greeted with suspicion (Human Rights Commission, n.d.).

The approach

The present study employed an investigative framework that draws on socio-cultural theory (Lantolf, 2000; Norton, 2001), an ecological view of language use and learning (Van Lier, 1996, 2000) and insights from social psychology. This contextually grounded theoretical perspective was adopted to explore migrants' own notions of proficiency and to develop an alternative explanatory model, which takes into account actual practice and functions of language in use (*pragmatic*) as well as normative notions that possibly underlie such practice (*autonomous*).

The emphasis on perceptions of proficiency in ML to the exclusion of the host language may represent an artificial separation at variance with a holistic perspective, and it appears inconsistent with the notion of bi/multilingual proficiency. This emphasis was adopted partly for the purpose of limiting the scope of the study. More importantly, the specific interest in ML aimed to provide insights into ML-related issues and to complement the one-sided focus of applied linguistics on SLA (Johnson & Johnson, 1998). The approach adopted here is not intended to reinforce the notion of bi/multilingual people as multiple monolinguals.

How do proficiency and self connect?

Both notions, proficiency and self, are a matter of self-perception, and they are linked in the sense that language contributes to self-construction. In situations of flux such as migrant contexts the question arises what impact changing linguistic repertoires and diminishing opportunities and rights to speak in ML have on people's sense of self. Much is known already about the role of language for identity, but the notion of identity is closely associated with labels such as nationality or ethnicity and may not be broad enough to explore a deeper, more

essential perception of self constructed through language. The notion of self was adopted as an overarching concept that incorporates speakers' identities to create a more interesting research angle, which integrates socio-cultural, linguistic and psychological dimensions. The study therefore sought to answer what proficiency in ML means to its speakers in the first place and to what extent migrants' self-knowledge and their *continuity of being* (Fishman, 2001) relies on the use and functional ability in ML.

Thus, a key assumption underlying the thesis is that ML proficiency ultimately involves subjective evaluation, particularly from the perspective of the speakers themselves. Speaker perceptions may not necessarily match a monolithic four-skills model, particularly if reading and writing abilities have become less relevant in contexts where ML remains primarily a means of oral communication or one of symbolic importance, rather than functional value. After all, language facilitates agency through which individuals construct their subjectivities in social interaction, and the *feeling* that one is proficient may in fact be more important than actual technical skills measured by proficiency tests. It is therefore important to understand the extent to which ML may be an element of what defines a person, beyond labels of identity.

The purpose of the study

The purpose of the study was to achieve the following objectives:

1. To investigate respondents' normative orientations to MLP in relation to functions and uses deemed to be relevant in the New Zealand context.
2. To identify context-specific dimensions of MLP (notions of proficiency).
3. To explore the affective dimension of ML and its role for self-construction.
4. To develop a user-based research design to promote an emic perspective.

The overall research design and methodology adopted to achieve these objectives are explained in detail in Chapter 4; this includes the research questions (4.2.1). Approval for conducting the research was obtained from the Massey University Ethics Committee in February 1999.

The scope of the study

The current thesis is limited in the sense that the investigation pertains to the specific New Zealand environment. However, there may be similarities, which allow for comparison with other migration contexts. The scope of the investigation was expanded in terms of multiple ethnolinguistic representation in the sample, which increased the range and depth of views, rather than being limited to a specified community. Also, the integrated perspective contributed to a cross-disciplinary approach that enriched and helped broaden the examination of issues and the interpretation of data.

Outlook

An overall recommendation of the study relates to a shift in thinking towards an increased recognition of the world as a bi/multilingual context and, associated with that, investment in bi/multilingual outcomes. One of the challenges for investment in languages in the New Zealand context arises from a situation where policy making is committed to Māori/English bilingualism under the provisions of the Māori Language Act 1987 (Māori Language Commission, n.d.). This situation presents an opportunity too in that the social, cultural and linguistic gains of knowing more than one language have already been acknowledged, although cultural sensitivities, first people's rights and the potential for resourcing constraints are likely hurdles. Given the complexities of increasing ethnolinguistic diversity within New

Zealand society, there is an urgent need to address language issues in the long term, which also requires political input and will have to be dealt with as part of a debate on integrating bicultural (i.e. Māori/English) and multicultural realities.

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CANDIDATE'S DECLARATION

This is to certify that the research carried out for my Doctoral thesis entitled "Language, Migration and Continuity of Being: Notions of Migrant Language Proficiency and Self-Concept among Multilingual Migrants in Aotearoa-New Zealand" in the School Of Language Studies, at Massey University, Turitea, New Zealand is my own work and that the thesis material has not been used in part or in whole for any other qualification.

Candidate's Name:

Ute Gerda Walker

Signature:

Ute Walker

Date:

23 12 / 2004



SUPERVISOR'S DECLARATION

This is to certify that the research carried out for the Doctoral thesis entitled "Language, Migration and Continuity of Being: Notions of Migrant Language Proficiency and Self-Concept among Multilingual Migrants in Aotearoa-New Zealand" was done by Ute Gerda Walker in the School Of Language Studies, Massey University, Turitea, New Zealand. The thesis material has not been used in part or in whole for any other qualification, and I confirm that the candidate has pursued the course of study in accordance with the requirements of the Massey University regulations.

Supervisor's Name Cynthia White
Signature Cynthia J. White
Date 20/2/04



CERTIFICATE OF REGULATORY COMPLIANCE

This is to certify that the research carried out in the Doctoral Thesis entitled "Language, Migration and Continuity of Being: Notions of Migrant Language Proficiency and Self-Concept among Multilingual Migrants in Aotearoa-New Zealand" in the School Of Language Studies, at Massey University, New Zealand:

- (a) is the original work of the candidate, except as indicated by appropriate attribution in the text and/or in the acknowledgements;
- (b) that the text, excluding appendices/annexes, does not exceed 100,000 words;
- (c) all the ethical requirements applicable to this study have been complied with as required by Massey university, other organizations and/or committees, which had a particular association with this study, and relevant legislation.

Please insert Ethical authorisation code (s) here: MUHEC 99/6

Candidate's Name: Ute Walker
Signature: Ute Walker
Date: 25 February 2004

Supervisor's Name: Cynthia White
Signature: Cynthia White
Date: 25/02/2004