

A Grandmother's Tale of Young Children's Bilingualism: Stir(l)ring the Lings in Early Childhood Education

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1. Introduction

I studied under the mentorship of a great sociolinguist, Joshua A. Fishman. It was Fishman who introduced me to the scholarship of Richard Johnstone. On the one hand, Johnstone was a sociolinguist from Scotland, one who was close to the Scottish Language Policy Division. So, Johnstone's language scholarship added to my understandings of the struggles of language minoritized communities, and of bilingual education and immersion education in Gaelic-medium schools. On the other hand, for over 20 years Johnstone wrote the annual review of language learning and teaching, updating information of publications which covered the topic of language education. Johnstone's scholarship gave us a crystal through which we could look at the impact of different sociolinguistic situations on language learning and teaching.

I remember the first time Joshua Fishman first mentioned Richard Johnstone, a professor at the University of Stirling. Back then, I didn't know much about where Stirling was located, but I was familiar with sterling silver, so Richard's name always evoked images of brilliance and shiny crystals. And yet, at the same time, it was not a solid crystal that Johnstone's work aroused for me, but a perpetual stirring of the linguistic, a complexity of understandings that went beyond a crystallized form of language and thus language learning and teaching. For me, Stirling also evoked "stirring the lings," as every year I imaginatively begged Johnstone to stop adding to the complexity of research on language learning and teaching, so that I could stop questioning my previous understandings. From 1990 to 2010 Johnstone published an annual review of the research, constantly stirring what we knew about language learning and teaching.

The more I read, the more complex the picture became. I came into sociolinguistics thinking that there must be one way to teach language, to learn language, that there must be a crystallized understanding of language. But after all the research that has been done since then, the situation has only gotten more complex. Johnstone never kept it simple or crystal clear. The crystals were only prisms through which to see our own situations in their own light.

It is in the context of this stirring, that today I share some illuminations of the languaging of young bilinguals, this time based on my experience as a grandmother of my six bilingual U.S. Latinx grandchildren — Gia (11), Gabo (6), Charli (6), Isa (3), Alaya (1), Tere (6 months) — there's a

seventh at this writing (Félix, 2 weeks old). They live in three different households. Gia and Charli live in Manhattan, New York. Their parents have both been born in the United States, and their grandparents were born in Spanish-speaking countries, three in Cuba. Gabo, Isa and Tere live in a suburb of New Haven, Connecticut. Their mother is a second generation Cuban American, and their father was born to a white English-speaking family of Italian descent in New York. Alaya and Félix live in Queens, New York. Her mother is also second generation Cuban American, and her father was born in Massachusetts to a white English-speaking family of Jewish origin. I have been fascinated by my grandchildren's bilingual and social development, and how they have negotiated their identities and languaging as they interact in very different bilingual environments. Today, illuminated by Johnstone's crystals of *sabiduría* about the complexity of language learning and development, I share my grandchildren's story and I comment in what is needed so that early childhood education works with these bilingual complexities. I begin with the story of raising three bilingual children, and in some measure of my own story.

2. Children Growing up Bilingual

I cannot claim that my children and grandchildren are like any other Latinx children in the United States or the ones that Ana Celia Zentella portrayed in her book, *Growing up Bilingual* (1997). First of all, my children, and the children of Ricardo Otheguy, my husband and linguist, were born to two Latinx professors interested in bilingualism, and despite the different ways in which we identify ourselves, many consider us white. From the beginning, Ricardo and I were interested in ensuring that our three children — Eric, Raquel and Emma — became bilingual. Spanish was mostly (although certainly not solely) the language of the home, spoken by Ricardo almost always, and me at times. Both Ricardo and I were born in Cuba and arrived in New York City at the ages of 15 and 11 respectively. Raising bilingual children for us was never just about language; it was about ensuring that our children would grow up proud of being U.S. Latinx.

We made sure that they had babysitters who spoke Spanish and that they were engaged in activities with other bilingual children. We visited their families in Puerto Rico and Miami every year. In Puerto Rico they spoke Spanish with their cousins until their cousins learned English, at which point, the languaging became much more complex. But the *tías y tíos* and *la abuela* spoke Spanish to them. They learned to appreciate the warm breeze, the whistling and cliquing of the loud *coquí*s, the *primos* in *la terraza*, and the loud voices that carried to their *abuela* who was mostly deaf. In Miami they heard the cousins' complex languaging, ranging from what was heard as English to what was heard as Spanish. They marveled at the Spanish in their cousins' tongue as they spoke English—"it tastes like lightning" (calqued from the Spanish "*sabe a rayo*,") and their favorite "eating sh**" for their maternal *abuela*'s favorite "*está comiendo m******").

They sang and learned to appreciate the music of Celia Cruz and la Orquesta Aragón, but also of Cuban Americans like Gloria Estefan, and the more recently arrived Albita, as well as many other Latin singers. They danced not only to Shakira and Juanes, but also to Bad Bunny and Daddy Yankee. In New York City, where being Latinx was then mostly being Puerto Rican, they grew up with a proud identity of the many ways in which Latinx people have contributed to shaping their country, the United States.

We moved to a mostly white suburb of New York City when my son was 15 and the girls were younger. There, a different Latinx reality was present. It wasn't easy for them growing up without a social context that supported their identities, but at home we tried, as much as we could, to make them proud of who they were. As all bilingual children who have been minoritized, they went through stages — not wanting to speak Spanish, wanting to speak it, wanting to study it, wanting to live and study in Cuba, being immersed in the business and life of Spanish language radio, studying Caribbean history and the transatlantic slave trade, writing about the Latinx people, culture, history, and market, describing Latinx lives in children's books; and throughout it all, becoming deeply aware of what Flores and Rosa (2015) and Rosa and Flores (2019) have called raciolinguistic ideologies. The processes through which they were racialized through their bilingualism was never lost on them. They have had to endure being watched by the police and victimized by them, being called "hair ball" in school, being told that their college admission was only a result of affirmative action. But throughout it all, they have had the tools to emerge from their childhood and adolescence as proud Latinx children.

3. Y Pasó el Tiempo y Pasó

The sense of being a Latina has changed for me in the 60 years that I have lived in the United States. I take up the verse from the Cuban poet and patriot José Martí's, *Los Zapaticos de Rosa* (1889), to remind us of the long time that has passed and the many things that have occurred in the ocean of my life. I grew up in New York City, at a time when the Latinx community was mostly Puerto Rican. Immigration had not yet become a political issue, since this was before the time of the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 which abolished the quota system based on national origin. Over the years, the New York City Latinx community changed, as especially people from the Dominican Republic joined Puerto Ricans and Cubans, making New York City a truly Caribbean bilingual city. By the time I finished my doctorate and started teaching bilingual education teachers at the public university in Harlem, The City College of New York, the Latinx composition had started to change again, this time welcoming people of Mexican origin, as well as Latinx people from Central and South America. Y pasó el tiempo y pasó and in 2020 the city is approximately 29% Latinx.

As el tiempo pasó, the ideologies about the use of Spanish changed. Despite the raciolinguistic ideologies that always surrounded the use of Spanish, it started becoming evident that Spanish could be an important resource in the city, whether you were working in business, in a hospital, or in MacDonal'd's. As speakers of Caribbean Spanish intermingled with speakers of Spanish across the globe, and as more of those Spanish-speakers became bilingual, understandings about people who spoke Spanish, as well as Spanish itself started to change, shifting the earlier emphasis on what was hailed as the only valuable Spanish —“Castilian Spanish” (Otheguy, Zentella, & Libert, 2006; Otheguy & Zentella, 2012). At the same time, the languaging of Latinx bilinguals became more prevalent, and there was increasing push-back against earlier accounts of the “interferences” of English in the Spanish heard in the city (Otheguy, 2016) and increased understandings of the important sociolinguistic work of the Language Policy Task Force of the Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños in describing the languaging of the East Harlem community of El Barrio (Pedraza, Attinasi, & Hoffman, 1980). Yet, at the same time, other less favorable ideological changes towards the languaging of U.S. Latinx were in the offing (García & Otheguy, 2015).

As bilingual education became institutionalized throughout the second half of the 20th century, the wishes of the community for a just education for their children alongside better housing and more jobs were discarded (Flores & García, 2017; García & Sung, 2018). The bilingual education efforts that the Puerto Rican New York Community had so long struggled for throughout the second half of the 20th century were dismantled little by little (García, 2011; Menken & Solorza, 2013). When Ronald Reagan became president in 1980, one of the first things he declared was that it was totally un-American to be for a bilingual education program that maintained the children’s Spanish (Crawford, 1995; García & Kleifgen, 2018). And yet, Puerto Ricans had been U.S. citizens since the Jones Act of 1916, a product of the island’s colonial status. These Spanish-speaking U.S. citizens were considered “un-American.” Bilingual education programs were shut down throughout the city, substituted instead by English as a Second Language programs where children were taught in English only (Menken & Solorza, 2013). As the bilingual education profession felt the pressure from powerful educational authorities, they made a deal with the devil. Propelled by a global neoliberal economy where many, including the government of Spain, touted Spanish as a marketable resource (del Valle, 2014), some bilingual educators started to claim that the only way forward was to promote a type of bilingual education that would also include English-speakers (Lindholm-Leary, 2001). The intent then was to ensure the social integration of Latinx students with white monolingual English-speaking students. But the reality was moving in the direction of whitening and at the same time controlling again the education of Latinx children.

Even though those who proposed the new “model” of bilingual education, now called “dual language” (with no naming of bilingual) were intent in integrating children who did not speak English with those who

did not speak Spanish, supposedly so that bilingual learning would be two-way, the implementation of the programs worked otherwise. These dual language programs functioned mostly in the early grades and were not many. They were developed for “English language learners” and “Spanish language learners,” ignoring the fact that most Latinx children were born in the U.S., and many were bilingual. Thus, many Latinx children did not qualify for the programs either as “English language learners” or “Spanish language learners.” “Spanish language learners” were thought of as white students, and yet, given the racial composition of New York City, this was not to be. Many critical sociolinguists and educators have pushed back against the dominance of the dual language “model” (Cervantes-Soon et al., 2017; García, Menken, Velasco, & Vogel, 2018). And many have attempted to transform them to adapt to the more complex linguistic and racial reality of the city (CUNY-NYSIEB, 2021; Sánchez, García, & Solorza, 2017).

Despite the continued raciolinguistic ideologies that surround the use of Spanish in New York City, there has been a shift in the way that parents perceive the value of being bilingual. Parents have become less ashamed to speak Spanish in the city and playgrounds, for they join the many multilingual parents who are speaking myriad other languages to their children. And although school continues to value English only, the pride in being bilingual seems to be on an increase, indexed by the many private bilingual pre-schools and schools that have emerged in the city.

After the gentle presidency of Barack Obama, Latinx people suffered from the whiplash of the anger of Donald Trump. But calling Mexicans rapists and criminals, and erasing Spanish from the White House website did not completely silence the Latinx population. True, some Latinx people ended up voting for Trump. And yet, after the Black Lives Matter movement that became a force after the murder of George Floyd in May 2020, more Latinx people became aware of the racialization processes to which they also had been subjected. At the same time, the concept of *Latinidad* and its supposed *mestizaje* became questioned (Salazar, 2019), calling out the racism of many in the Latinx community in excluding those who are Black or Indigenous. Sixty-one percent of Latinx New Yorkers have been born in the U.S., thus, they are neither recent immigrants nor undocumented.

This greater awareness of peoplehood and nationhood accounts for the more positive Latinx identities that my children, and their non-Latinx spouses, display both at home and in public. What others perceive to be English or Spanish is heard in their homes. From their own perspective, however, they are engaging in what I’m calling *translanguaging* (García & Li Wei, 2014; see Otheguy, this book). But before we consider that topic, it is important to understand their lives in the trans-, in the borderlands and *entre mundos* in which they live, a fact brought to our attention by Gloria Anzaldúa (1987).

4. Grandchildren Living and Communicating in the Trans-

Young third generation Latinx children live in a trans-, not only across generations, but also across cultures and languages. Gia and Charli visit their abuelos in Miami for two months during the summer, where Spanish is heard alongside English. The others are not so fortunate, especially since all have grown up during the COVID-19 pandemic where travel to Puerto Rico became impossible. Two grandchildren started Kindergarten this year, and Gia started fifth grade, but school was remote for most of the time, a result of the pandemic. Their schooling is said to be in English only, although many of the families and children, and even the teachers, speak Spanish also. The one-year-old has been in Day Care since she was fourth months old. The owners and directors of the Day Care are Peruvian, and all the caretakers are bilingual, so we suspect that Alaya hears a lot of Spanish there. The three-year old is not going to day care or pre-school and has an Ecuadorian Spanish-speaking sitter. The children's languaging experience in school, neighborhood, and home is not simply in one or another language.

It is interesting that none of the assumptions that we make about family language use hold in these families. Gia and Charli's parents are both bilingual, yet, at this point, the girls are the ones who, among the grandchildren, seem to speak more English. I say at this point because Gia spoke only Spanish until she moved from Miami to New York at the age of three-and-a-half. I know from experience that her languaging will change again as she grows up. She will study Spanish in middle school next year. And both girls have been enrolled in Spanish language weekend classes. Their father, my son, went through a period of not speaking Spanish. Today his bilingualism is in full display, as he interacts in a Spanish language radio that caters not just to Spanish-speakers, but to bilingual Latinx, and to all who enjoy reggaetón and salsa.

Gabo's, Isa's, and Tere's father never spoke Spanish before marrying my daughter, but today he speaks it often to his children. In fact, he often reads to them in Spanish at bedtime. Spanish language acquisition has flowed in this case not from the parents to the children, but from the children to the father. The six-year-old, Gabo, is interested in baseball, but also in fútbol. He watches baseball games in English language TV, but fútbol matches in Spanish language TV. When we play Zingo, the words are printed in English, but there are pictures. Isa does not read yet; Gabo does read in both English and Spanish. We call out the word without bothering to keep it to one language, knowing that it does not make a difference; the only thing that counts is winning the game. When Gabo reads a Spanish-language book out loud to his sister, something he does frequently, he often laughs and talks about it with her using mostly English. When they visit their paternal grandparents, and their other five cousins on their father's side, they understand that part of the family does not speak Spanish; so, they carefully use only the part of their extensive repertoire that overlaps with those grandparents and cousins. My daughter, a historian of Latin America focusing on the role of race, has made efforts to

make her children conscious of their histories as Latinx Americans, and of how language, race and gender have functioned as categories of domination. She looks for books, regardless of language, that engage the children's imagination and creativity, along with their criticality. The six-month old, Tere, just babbles at this stage, but she responds to any human communication, whether from their siblings, their Spanish-speaking babysitter, or their mother and family. She is listening intently, learning to live and speak in the trans- that makes up families.

Alaya Luz is 15 months, but she's already repeating everything she hears. Yesterday she showed me her blocks and repeated every time I said: "amarillo," "azul." But the day before, when I brought her to the park, she clearly told a much older boy who was rough playing in a piece of equipment: "Don't do that," something she must have heard and remembered in her Day Care. She loves to go out and tells me "zapatos" when she sees me, but other times she says "shoes." She is building an extensive vocabulary with synonyms that sometimes to our adult ears are from different languages, but for her they are just her own words. Her mother is a children's author, specializing in Latinx topics. She writes in English with the translanguaging that is so prevalent in the lips of all the bilingual children around her, and of her husband, as he reads to Alaya in Spanish while he speaks to her in English.

5. Grandchildren's Translanguaging

All of my grandchildren, including the 11-year-old, are still developing language. When they hear a new word used in meaningful ways for them, whether that word is said to be from "English" or "Spanish," they repeat it, pick it up, and add it to their linguistic repertoire. Their linguistic repertoire is NOT divided into two boxes — a box that contains Spanish and a box that contains English. Instead, their semiotic repertoire consists of a broad communicative network. That network consists of elements that some may call "linguistic" and others "paralinguistic," and that some may call "Spanish," whereas others call "English." Regardless of the ways that are named as categories, they do not experience them as categories. They experience them as meaning-making resources that are always available for them to play and communicate with, although sometimes only some of the resources are used and not others. They always carry these meaning-making resources with them. In interactions with different interlocutors and in various social situations they use only some of them. Even the baby knows that to communicate a cry might be helpful in some situations and a smile in others. The children know that in some contexts Spanish may be helpful, whereas in others English might be. Yet in other contexts, they do not have to be so selective, and all the resources can come into play. Young bilingual children learn that they live in a -trans; that their language is not simply a box named English and a box named Spanish. Neither is it the addition of two contained boxes. Their language is much more complex, more dynamic, more extensive than a monoglossic box or two monoglossic boxes. They understand heteroglossia from the moment they are born.

They do not have to be taught that language is heteroglossic. They have observed and felt their complex translanguaging practices from the beginning of their own language experience (for more on the concept of translanguaging see García, 2021; García & Li Wei, 2014; Otheguy, García, & Reid, 2015; Otheguy, this book).

As young children who have not yet experienced the privileging of the written word over the oral word, and of the word over other meaning-making systems that include drawing, role-playing, singing, dancing, gesturing, etc., they communicate using their full language repertoire, regardless of whether others say it is verbal and linguistic or relying on modes other than the verbal. They know that multimodalities, just as multilingualism, is their power of expression, and they use the whole network of resources creatively and extensively. They role-play, they put on costumes, they use different voices and gestures, they draw, they paint, they sing, they dance (for more on translanguaging and multimodalities, see Lin, 2019 who speaks about transemiotizing).

Unfortunately, the grandchildren have also picked up on the prejudices and the raciolinguistic ideologies that others hold about their language practices. Even at this young age, some feel uncertain of their use of Spanish when other Spanish-speakers hear them. And some have said that the 3-year-old speaks English “like she just got off the boat.” When an educator heard my daughter speak to my grandchild in Spanish, he asked whether he was an “English language learner.” It is indeed sad that educators can only understand language and bilingualism as binary — English monolingualism or lack of English. So many do not value bilingualism as the gift that it is; in fact their bilingualism is not even recognized. Assessments in schools are in English only, not truly understanding what bilingual children know and are capable of doing (Ascenzi-Moreno, 2018). This is what the decolonial theorist Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2007) has called “abyssal vision,” that is, seeing and recognizing only the dominant side of the line, and opening up an abyss that makes other knowledge systems invisible. Despite the growth of Spanish-English bilingualism in the U.S., it remains unseen or rather seen only as a problem, a danger that threatens a U.S. white monolingual identity (Mena & García, 2020).

6. Early Childhood Education

In the U.S., where the word “bilingual” has become a bad word (Crawford, 1998), young bilingual learners are often referred to as “dual language learners” (Morell & López, 2021). And yet, there’s nothing dual about what these children are doing with language. Indeed, they are operating with a *unitary* repertoire, not a dual one. With that unitary repertoire they might be able to become bilingual speakers, signers, readers, and writers, but their language does not simply have a dual correspondence in their minds (Otheguy, García, & Reid, 2015).

If we insist in the dual, in the separation — psychological, sociological, and linguistic — of language into two separate compartments, we will lose

the battle to raise bilingual children. A dual vision of bilingualism perpetuates a vision of language as an entity, and of bilingualism as the addition of two autonomous entities (Park & Wee, 2012). But language does not function in that way. Language is, as Bakhtin (1981) has said, heteroglossic from top to bottom. If we want to raise bilingual U.S. Latinx children, then we must enable them to understand the power of their translanguaging, raise their critical consciousness about language, and not judge them or evaluate them through monolingual standards.

There has been increasing attention to early childhood education as New York City finally offers free Pre-Kindergarten education to three- and four-year olds. But with the growth of early childhood programs comes responsibility to understand the translanguaging practices that characterize all bilingual speaking, and especially the communication network displayed by very young bilingual children. Early childhood educators must focus on how bilingual children use language to make meaning, rather on whether they are using what they consider to be the appropriate linguistic feature (García, Johnson, & Seltzer, 2017). It is important to ensure that children can use language to play, to tell a story, to express feelings, to solve problems, to ask and answer questions. To do that, early childhood educators must observe and listen to young children closely, and allow them to use language freely, regardless of the mode, that is, whether verbal or gestural, or visual, and regardless of named language. Of course, one of the functions of school is to extend young children's use of language, but to do that requires that they be given many opportunities to language freely and creatively, rather than being restricted to one mode or one way of saying things.

Perhaps the most generative experience for young children is to play. Play provides important opportunities for children to experiment with language, and much attention should be paid to play-based learning. Besides important for young children, it also is a space for teachers to observe children as they make sense of their pretend worlds. Teachers can then observe whether young bilingual children can interact with others, other objects, and communicate using all their semiotic resource network. Teachers can also start to tell what resources the children are using when and why, and what resources they still need so that they can extend their communicative possibilities.

Emergent literacy is an important aspect of early childhood education, but young bilingual children should be encouraged to engage in these early literacy activities bilingually. For example, they should be encouraged to sing and pretend play with their entire semiotic repertoire. But they should also listen to the teacher reading books that are culturally appropriately, whose characters reflect their families, and whose language practices and translanguaging is also apparent.

To do that requires that early childhood educators work with bilingual families and understand their linguistic and cultural practices. The participation of families in early childhood education is crucial; after all, they have been the children's educators in the home, and they alone understand what their children are able to do. Early childhood teachers

must view bilingual families as important partners, as experts on their children, and not just involve them or expect participation. The families must be brought in to share the family's expertise, whether it is understanding the languaging of their children, their histories, backgrounds, their funds of knowledge, their food, their clothing, their playthings.

Unless the institutionalized education of very young children is seamless with the education that they receive in their bilingual homes, children will suffer. The role of early childhood educators in understanding different linguistic and cultural practices is of utmost importance for the future.

7. Conclusion

By revealing the bilingual complexities of my life as a grandmother, and that of my children and grandchildren, I join other scholars who have disrupted the construction of bilinguals as simply the possessors of two named languages. I have focused on what third generation grandchildren *do* with language, and how they develop a linguistic/semiotic repertoire that goes beyond the boundaries of language produced by nationalistic fetishes. Because early childhood education has been increasingly institutionalized, there is today a greater danger that the treatment of these very young children would not acknowledge their complex bilingual practices. Early childhood educators need to understand that the language of very young bilingual children develops as does that of all little children, by providing them with opportunities to play and language creatively.

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