Monolingualism: The unmarked case

Elizabeth Ellis
University of New England

School of Languages, Cultures and Linguistics
University of New England
Armidale, NSW 2351, Australia
liz.ellis@une.edu.au

Abstract
It is frequently observed that bilingualism and multilingualism are more common in the world than monolingualism, and yet, as Romaine (1995) points out, it is rare to find a book with the title ‘Monolingualism’. Linguistic theories have often assumed monolingualism to be the norm (Pavlenko, 2000), and this view is often held by individual monolinguals who are speakers of a dominant language such as English (Edwards, 1994). This paper will review three representations of monolingualism in the applied linguistics literature. The first is as an unmarked case, against which bilingualism and multilingualism are set as the exception. The second representation is of monolingualism as a limitation on cognitive, communicative, social and vocational potential (Kirkpatrick, 2000; Crozet, Liddicoat & Lo Bianco, 1999). Perspectives from language policy documents in Australia are presented to illustrate the second representation. The third and most critical representation employs metaphors of disease, sickness and disability to portray monolingualism as a pathological state (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000a; Oller, 1997). This latter strand of literature critiques the influence of the monolingual perspectives held by those who wield authority in language policy and in education. The paper concludes with a call for the development of a framework within which to understand monolingualism and its social and educational effects.

Key words: monolingualism, language ideology, language attitudes, English language teaching, hegemony.
1. Introduction

Many writers on bilingualism and multilingualism make the point that there are estimated to be far more bilingual and multilingual speakers in the world than there are monolinguals (Baker & Prys-Jones, 1998; Hamers & Blanc, 2000; Crystal, 1987; Dewaele et al., 2003). A villager in rural Kenya or a businessman in Mumbai may conduct their daily business in five or six languages or varieties, and find in this nothing remarkable. There are over a hundred languages spoken in Vanuatu, (Lynch & Crowley, 2001) and it is clear that most people use several languages on a regular basis. Yet, as Romaine (1995) points out, in the introduction to her book Bilingualism, it would be strange to find a book with the title Monolingualism. This paper has just such a title, and it sets out to investigate the phenomenon of monolingualism, and attempt to ask why it is seldom the subject of scholarly publications. One explanation for why such a title might be considered unusual is that linguistic theories have traditionally assumed monolingualism to be the norm, and thus invisible (Pavlenko, 2000; Romaine, 1995). This is often also the view of monolinguals themselves who are speakers of a world language such as English.

In this paper I would like to first consider how monolingualism might be defined, explain the proposition that it is ‘the unmarked case’, and then go on to look at three main ways in which monolingualism has been constructed and represented in public debate. The first representation is that which I term ‘the unmarked case’, the normal situation, or the baseline against which bilingualism and multilingualism are set as the exception. This tends to be the view found in dominant societies, particularly, but not exclusively, English-speaking ones. The second representation is of monolingualism as a limitation on cognitive, communicative, social and vocational potential. This representation emerges from linguists whose concern is to promote the learning of foreign languages. The third and most critical representation is of monolingualism as a pathological state: as a disease with symptoms which manifest in educational and social language policy and practices. This is the position taken by some writers who examine the sociopolitical contexts of language use, and are concerned to expose the ideologies surrounding language policy and practice. I will then explain what I see as the importance of developing a theoretical construction of monolingualism.

2. Defining monolingualism

General dictionaries and specialist linguistic dictionaries define monolingual variously as follows:
MONOLINGUALISM: THE UNMARKED CASE

monolingual
(adj) “able to speak only one language” (Macquarie Dictionary)
(adj) “said of a person/community with only one language, also unilingual” (Crystal, 1987: 425)

(n.) “1. a person who knows and uses only one language.
2. a person who has an active knowledge of only one language, though perhaps a passive knowledge of others.” Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics (Richards & Schmidt, 2002)

Other terms occasionally seen are monoglot “that speaks, writes or understands only one language” (Shorter Oxford Dictionary) or unilingual, which Crystal (1987) also gives as a synonym for monolingual.

In one sense these definitions are unproblematic, but we gain a hint of complexity, appropriately enough, from the Richards and Schmidt definition, which suggests that a person can have a passive knowledge of other languages and still be monolingual. Even the most cursory reading of the literature on bilingualism will introduce the reader to the commonly held view that bilingualism eludes easy definition, and to definitions which have ranged from one extreme (of double native-like proficiency) to the other (of a few words in a second language). So Bloomfield’s (1933: 56) well-known definition is “(...) a native-like control of two languages”, while Diebold (1964) maintained that incipient bilingualism begins with the recognition of words in another language. Edwards (2004a) begins his paper on bilingualism by saying “Everyone is bilingual. That is, there is no one in the world (no adult, anyway), who does not know at least a few words in languages other than the maternal variety”. It is also common to be unilingual (eg in English), but bidialectal, for example in Standard English and Aboriginal English, and there is certainly theoretical support for regarding this as a type of bilingualism (Eades, 2003). Even the most monolingual of speakers has access to different registers, and thus has experience of social and linguistic variation. However, if we wish to identify ‘monolingualism’ as a phenomenon, and distinguish ‘being monolingual’ from ‘being bilingual’ we have to draw a line somewhere.

It is now accepted by many that bilingualism is best regarded as a continuum (Haugen, 1969) and it follows that the point on the continuum which separates a bilingual from a monolingual will vary according to the interests and focus of those proposing it. In my research on the language background of Australian teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL) (Ellis, 2002, 2003, 2004a, 2004b), I have found the most useful definition to be the broad one proposed by Hamers and Blanc (2000: 6):
Bilinguality is the psychological state of an individual who has access to more than one linguistic code as a means of social communication: the degree of access will vary along a number of dimensions which are psychological, cognitive, psycholinguistic, social psychological, sociological, sociolinguistic, sociocultural and linguistic.

Working from this definition, an individual is monolingual who does not have access to more than one linguistic code as a means of social communication. Using this as a working definition means, of course, that we must see monolinguals, too, as being placed on a continuum, ranging from someone who can say ‘guten Tag’ or ‘selamat pagi’ up to someone who has studied one or more languages but falls short of being able to communicate in them. I also want to make it clear that when I use the term ‘bilingual’ I am not adhering to the lay (mis)usage meaning someone who speaks two languages equally perfectly (such creatures are rare), but using it in the sense in which Cook (1999) uses the term “L2 user” –or, as stated above, someone who can use more than one linguistic code for social communication. This includes those who have learned a second or foreign language formally. Some readers may object to the inclusion of those with communicative competence in a foreign language in any definition of ‘bilingual’, but it is hard to find an agreed theoretical basis for supporting such an objection. There are to my knowledge no widely accepted definitions of ‘bilingual’ which have as necessary features early acquisition, emotional investment or frequency of use of both languages which might exclude such ‘foreign language’ speakers. It may be more useful to characterise bilinguality along a number of dimensions (Hamers & Blanc, 2000; Valdés & Figueroa, 1994) including age of acquisition, manner of acquisition, frequency of use, emotional attachment or affiliation, (Rampton, 1990), level of proficiency viewed as a dynamic process over time (including attrition and re-establishment), domains of use, patterns of medium selection (Torras & Gafaranga, 2002) and so on (Ellis, 2003). I therefore argue that while no single definition will serve all purposes, since it might exclude many varieties of experience within the parameters mentioned, the above broad definition (Hamers & Blanc, 2000) has a useful place in attempting to determine how monolinguality might be distinguished from bilinguality.

1 Hamers and Blanc (2000) use the term ‘bilinguality’ to refer to the language repertoire of an individual person, reserving the term ‘bilingualism’ for the societal use of two or more languages.
3. ‘Unmarked’

Markedness is a linguistic concept which has been applied to properties of a language which are more or less frequent, versatile and/or morphologically indicated (Ellis, 1994: 420). Hence, in English, the article form ‘a’ is unmarked (or, for some theorists, less marked) and the form ‘an’ is marked -because ‘an’ occurs less frequently, can only occur before vowels, and has an extra sound /n/.

The term ‘unmarked’ has been used more widely than this in a social sense, and has featured in, for example, discussions of gendered language. The first critics of sexist language pointed out that the generic ‘he’ was seen as the unmarked form (eg “the applicant must supply his resume . . .”) resulting in the representation of women as exceptions or oddities (eg “three people, one a woman, were injured when a car overturned . . .”). This usage, common in English language newspaper reports three decades ago, suggests that the male is the prototypical (or unmarked) ‘person’ and the female is the unusual, or the ‘marked’ person. It is this sense of the normal, the expected, or the unremarkable which I intend to convey by the use of the term ‘unmarked’. It is that-which-does-not-need-to-be-stated, let alone questioned. Another way of theorising this idea of normalcy or invisibility is by drawing on Fairclough’s (1992) term “naturalisation of a discourse type”, which refers to the building up of a socially normalised way of thinking and talking about something to the point where it is seen as obvious, common sense and the only natural way to view the phenomenon.

4. Monolingualism: The unmarked case

Something which is taken for granted does not tend to have a literature describing or examining it –hence the dearth of books entitled Monolingualism (Romaine, 1995). Edwards (1994) claims that many speakers of a ‘powerful’ language of wider communication such as English take for granted that monolingualism is the normal state of affairs, and that those who use two or more languages are the exception. Pennycook (1994) argues that the spread of English is often regarded by monolingual English speakers as “natural, neutral and beneficial”. Christ (1997), too, maintains that populations of developed countries whose language is a language of international communication “live with the impression that their own language is the normal case which speakers of other languages must adjust to” (Christ, 1997: 221). Gogolin (1994), in her examination of multilingual schools in Germany, terms this view a “monolingual habitus”, drawing on Bourdieu’s (1977) notion of ‘habitus’ as strategic practice which is structured by a social environment.
It is only in the questioning and critiquing of the accepted state of affairs that the phenomenon becomes visible. It is through the writings of critics, then, that we start to perceive that linguists have traditionally been among those who see monolingualism as normal—an irony indeed.

Both Kachru (1994) and Sridhar (1994) have criticised the discipline of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) for assuming a monolingual starting point. Sridhar and Sridhar (1986: 5) point out that “SLA researchers seem to have neglected the fact that the goal of SLA is bilingualism”, and it is also true to say that they have tended to include third and subsequent language acquisition with SLA, assuming that the processes are the same. This assumption is now being challenged by a generation of researchers into third language acquisition (see, for example, Jessner, 1999). Sridhar (1994: 802) refers to the “monolingual blinder of the dominant SLA paradigm” and suggests that in traditional SLA the learners’ other languages are “shadowy presences” with at best “nuisance value”. He goes on to say that

The fact that most of the dominant models of SLA have been developed in predominantly monolingual Western countries is not merely a historiographic curiosity. It has made them constrained by Western cultural premises.”

(Sridhar, 1994: 803)

There is much evidence, (and in the last decade, not a little critique), of the fact that in the worldwide English Language Teaching (ELT) profession, dominated discursally if not numerically by teachers trained in “core” (English-speaking) countries (Phillipson, 1992) the ideal and prototypical teacher is a monolingual native speaker (Howatt, 1984; Phillipson, 1992; Holliday, 1994; Widdowson, 1997). I have argued elsewhere that if the teacher is not monolingual, s/he is expected by the norms of the profession to act as if s/he is (Ellis, 2003, 2004b). The very normality of English-only monolingual teaching means that where there is a limited amount of bilingual ESL teaching, it is often poorly understood.

Crystal points out that monolingualism is regarded as the norm by many in Western societies:

People brought up within a western society often think that the monolingualism that forms a routine part of their existence is the normal way of life for all but a few ‘special’ people. They are wrong. Multilingualism is the natural way of life for hundreds of millions all over the world. (Crystal, 1987: 360)

and Edwards (2004b) explains that this is no accident. He claims that a “monolingual mindset” can be traced to 19th century Europe, and the rise of the nation state, when
one dominant group at the core achieved political and economic control of the periphery (…) European views on language were transported to the colonies, helping to perpetuate the monolingual myth. (Edwards, 2004b: 1-2)

Writers in linguistic anthropology have begun to critique what Silverstein (1996) calls “monoglot standardization” in the U.S.A., seeing in this an expression of a desired unity and uniformity of the nation-state. Blommaert (2004) draws on history and social science to argue that a single language is an important precursor of modernity, assisted by print capitalism (Anderson, 1991). Print capitalism became the instrument of language ideologies which are, Blommaert argues, socially and culturally embedded ideas of language and how it is used. Piller (2001) and Eades et al. (2003) draw on such arguments to examine how ideologies of national and linguistic identity in both Germany and Australia result in practices in assessing citizenship eligibility for refugees and migrants which are not compatible with what we know about multilingual realities.

Piller points out in relation to language testing for naturalization purposed in Germany that

(...) the legal provisions as well as the testing practice in the naturalization interviews are guided by the assumption that any (monolingual) native speaker can judge the proficiency of a second language speaker.

(Piller, 2001: 272)

While Eades’ work with Aboriginal interpreters in Australia and her collaboration with forensic linguists in other countries leads her to conclude that

(...) legal systems in these countries [those studied by the scholars whose work she cites] generally assume monolingualism: for example, where interpreters are used in courtrooms, the official transcript records only the English utterances, so that the original utterances, in a language other than English, have no legal status.

(Eades, 2003: 115)

Eades (2003) cites authors who claim this is also the case with Hebrew in Israel and with Danish in Denmark, and argues that this assumption of monolingualism in the legal system can lead to a lack of understanding of what it means to be bilingual, compromising the possibility of justice by, for example, leading courts to exclude bilingual potential jurors.

Blommaert and Verschueren (1998) suggest that “the dogma of homogeneity” is entrenched in European views, and they explain this as:

a view of society in which differences are seen as dangerous and centrifugal and in which the ‘best’ society is suggested to be one without intergroup
differences. In other words, the ideal model of society is monolingual, monoethnic, monoreligious, monoideological.

(Blommaert & Verschueren, 1998: 194-95)

The dominant model of economic, financial and political globalisation is based on English monolingualism, argues Blommaert (2004), and others point out that the emergence of English as a dominant world language has strengthened the convictions of some English-speaking monolinguals that learning another language is unnecessary (Crystal, 1997; Kirkpatrick, 2000). Edwards (1994) refers to a perverse pride in monolingualism, rarely made explicit, whereby British and American monolinguals complain they have no aptitude for foreign languages:

[this complaint] (…) is usually accompanied by expressions of envy for those multilingual Europeans, and (sometimes) by a linguistic smugness reflecting a deeply-held conviction that, after all, those clever ‘others’ who do not already know English will have to accommodate in a world made increasingly safe for Anglophones. (Edwards, 1994: 60)

It is via glimpses and critiques such as these, plus, of course, the observation of multilingual societies elsewhere, that we see that the normality of monolingualism is indeed a construction, or a “monolingual ideology” (Blackledge, 2000). There is no serious literature which claims that speaking more than one language is undesirable. Such a position comes into being through public policies which neither fund nor promote language learning, and which misunderstand and undervalue bilingualism, as we shall see in a later section.

5. Monolingualism—an absence of skills

There is a body of literature which frames monolingualism as consisting of a lack of skills. This is generally not stated overtly, since this view also tends to start from the first perspective: that monolingualism is the norm contrary to which language learning must be vigorously justified and defended. The views examined here come largely from authors and organisations who promote foreign language learning in schools and universities, but also from language policy scholars who write not only of the place of foreign language learning, but also of the role of community language learning and the value of the maintenance of ‘heritage’

---

2 There are, however, certainly attempts to argue that children will suffer if their education takes place in more than one language (see, for example, the proponents of ‘Official English’ in the U.S.A.).
languages. Since the terms used vary widely between countries and learning contexts (second language, foreign language, modern language, language other than English, additional language, community language, heritage language), there is a place for the use of ‘L2’ and “L2 user” (Cook, 1999) which can include all these when generalisation is necessary, without denying the very real nature of different language-using and language-learning contexts. The premise of the authors examined in this section is that L2 learning (sometimes by growing up bilingual but more usually considered as studying a language through formal education) confers a large number of benefits, and therefore being monolingual means missing out on these. Much of this literature is positive and forgiving –after all, anyone can cease to be monolingual by learning an L2– and since the authors come from a tradition which encourages everyone to learn languages, they assume a welcoming rather than a hostile stance. In this section I will consider policy statements and other documents from Australia over the last 25 years which make claims for the benefits of L2 learning. These benefits, we can assume, are unavailable to monolinguals.

The earliest policy statement reviewed for this paper was one jointly issued by the Australian Linguistics Society and the Applied Linguistics Association of Australia in 1981. The paper was a response to a government paper which maintained that languages need not form part of a core curriculum for Australian schools (ALS & ALAA, 1981). The statement was wide-ranging and contained educational arguments, sociopolitical arguments and personal/family arguments for the place of language learning in education. The authors argued that a monolingual core curriculum would ill-equip young Australians to be part of a multicultural nation, leading to attitudes which would deride the linguistic and cultural heritages of Australia’s diverse population. There were a number of important initiatives throughout the 1980s defending and supporting the role of language learning as part of a civil society, and these culminated in the development of the National Policy on Languages (NPL) (Lo Bianco, 1987), perhaps the most detailed, coherent and far-reaching such document in the Australian context and still widely cited outside Australia.

The NPL stated that “second language study [is] intrinsically valuable (…) as educationally, culturally and intellectually enriching” (Lo Bianco, 1987: 124), and goes on to say that this is true for all languages, whether they are community languages (ie spoken by immigrant communities), indigenous languages or languages of international use.

The NPL was replaced by the Australian Language and Literacy Policy (DEET, 1991). This policy has been widely critiqued as devaluing languages (Clyne, 2005; Moore, 1996), and framing second language learning only in terms of acquiring
English literacy, but it does state that language learning can result in a better understanding of one’s first language and stimulate rigorous thinking and memory (DEET, 1991). A statement on Languages Other than English (LOTE) was issued by the Australian Educational Council (1994) and contained 14 benefits of language learning, including the development of language analysis skills and cross-cultural skills. Other policy or strategy statements on which space does not permit elaboration include those by the Modern Language Teachers’ Association of Queensland (MLTAQ, 2002) and the National Asian Languages Strategy for Australian Schools (AEC, 1994).

All of these variously mention the well-established benefits of learning a second language which were well-summarised by Lo Bianco (1987) as:

- enrichment (cultural and intellectual),
- economic (relating to vocations and foreign trade),
- equality (social justice and overcoming disadvantage),
- external (relating to Australia’s role in the world).

Language study is credited with assisting cognitive processes as it constitutes an “intellectual stimulus” and includes “new ways of thinking and learning and organising knowledge” (ALS & ALAA, 1981: 24). It can “(…) help learners to understand that there are alternative ways of conceiving and labelling the physical universe (…)” (Gibbons, 1994: 3). Bilingual children show greater cognitive flexibility and creativity in problem-solving (Lambert & Tucker, 1972). Language learning provides an “analytic and communicative skill that enhances learning in other fields” (Baldauf, 1993: 125). Byram (1999: 93) maintains that other languages “provide access to different bodies of knowledge which are unavailable to the monolingual speaker”. Learning other languages involves processes of “metaphorization” (Kramsch, 1996) and “hypothesis forming and testing” (Corder, 1981).

Two further aspects of the benefits of language learning are the “apprenticeship” notion (Hawkins, 1999), meaning that learning one language makes it easier to learn others, since one acquires learning skills, allowing one to “(…) compare language systems and (…) develop different language learning strategies [from monolinguals]”. See also Postmus (1999) who found that bilingual learners of Mandarin had more advanced metalinguistic abilities and were more strategic in their learning than learners who entered the course as monolinguals. An oft-overlooked aspect is the pleasurable one: Clyne (2003) terms this “intrinsic motivation”, Hawkins (1999: 134) calls it “the sheer exhilaration of the journey into a foreign language and a foreign culture for its own sake” while Kramsch puts it much more eloquently, describing how multilinguals:
take intensive physical pleasure in acquiring a language, thrill in trespassing on someone else’s territory (...) multilingual speakers create new discourse communities whose aerial existence monolingual speakers hardly suspect.

(Kramsch, 1997: 365)

The literature which researches and defends the benefits of having two languages, either through second language study, or growing up bilingual, is substantial, and I have only touched on it here. It claims intellectual, cultural, social, emotional and economic benefits for both individuals and society. We must presume that none of these benefits are available to the monolingual, but there are two points to be made to qualify this. First, it was stated at the outset of this paper that monolingualism is best regarded as a continuum, from total monolingualism up to the possession of a level of L2 knowledge just short of that which could be described as being an “L2 user”. Hence some of the above benefits may accrue to a monolingual with some language study or expertise. Many of the above policy statements acknowledge that some language learning is better than none, but that many of the stated benefits accrue only to those who develop high-level facility in a language. Second, several authors are at pains to point out that language learning does not inevitably confer all of these benefits (particularly in regard to claims of ‘cultural sensitivity) but it certainly provides potential for them (Liddicoat, 2002; Lambert, 1999). How far that potential is realised depends on the individual and also on whether the social and economic infrastructure exists to permit individuals to use their skills. You may be a highly-qualified speaker of six languages, but if you do not speak English in Australia or French in France you are likely to be cleaning toilets for a living.

Now let us consider the statements of authors who explicitly look at the disadvantages of monolingualism. I include these authors in the second representation of monolingualism –as consisting of a lack of skills, since they are essentially arguing from the same premise as the authors considered above: that language learning is beneficial to the individual and society. The difference is that they explicitly examine the downside of failing to learn languages, but the worldview is the same: language learning is a good thing to be encouraged by governments and education systems, and to fail to engage in it constitutes a missed opportunity.

Kirkpatrick (2000) maintains that those who speak only one language are disadvantaged in the global job market and in business, as do Mughan (1999), Peel (2001) and Djité (1994). Crozet, Liddicoat and Lo Bianco (1999) doubt the ability of monolingual speakers to become truly interculturally competent, since they lack access to other cultures’ norms and world view as represented through language. Peel (2001: 14) laments the narrowness of perspective of monolingual English-
speakers in an increasingly multilingual world, arguing that if they do not understand how languages work and how they differ, they will never understand other peoples beyond a superficial level. He calls a monoglot world “a world of terrifying blandness” stripped of the subtlety and negotiation involved in multilingual communication. This limitation is pointed out by Liddicoat (2002) too, who maintains that while English is a useful part of a person’s repertoire, English alone is not enough. Snow and Hakuta (1992) argue that the English-speaking tendency to view monolingualism as the norm has both individual and societal costs. Monolingual children miss out on the opportunity to develop an early appreciation of language, and the cognitive and linguistic flexibility referred to in the bilingualism literature (Hamers & Blanc, 2000; Baker, 2001).

The benign explanation for why (at least in most English-speaking countries) language learning is not more valued is that monolinguals just do not see the benefits. Baldauf (1993) points out that many Anglo Australians do not see why they or their children should learn a second language, while Djité (1994) attests to a similar disregard among businesspeople.

English-speaking Australians are well-known for believing they cannot learn languages, as revealed by a statement by the Australian Linguistic Society:

[i]t appears to be widely believed in Australia that foreign languages are essentially unlearnable to normal people, and that Australians have a special innate anti-talent for learning them. (ALS & ALAA, 1981: 15)

The then Australian Minister for Immigration, the late Mr. Al Grassby, made the same point even more graphically a few years earlier, referring to:

the view that the Australian born (…) suffers a mutation of the genes so he [sic] can never adequately learn a second language (…) for an Australian to have a second language is some kind of treason (…). (Grassby, 1977: 2)

This view is not unique to Australians, as can be seen from Edwards’ claim quoted earlier, that languages are just too difficult for (British) speakers of English. Other languages, and their speakers, can also be seen as a threat. While the xenophobia of the White Australia Policy and the general distrust of immigrants’ languages and cultures (Ozolins, 1993) gave way to more inclusive policies of the 1970s and 1980s, it can be argued that the post-2001 perceived threats to national security have led to a renewed suspicion of difference in language and culture. Crystal (1997) points out another stumbling block, the “linguistic complacency” of English-speakers and a “genuine, widespread lack of motivation” linked to the spread of English as a global language.
Before going on to look at the third representation of monolingualism, I want to reflect on the purpose for doing this analysis. After all, why victimise monolinguals? Do we risk creating a new form of discrimination against people who have not been fortunate enough to be brought up with two languages or had the educational opportunities to study them? The problem is, that, as suggested earlier, it tends to be monolingual discourses, in powerful Western nations, and particularly in English-speaking nations, which dominate discussions in educational and social policy. It is often monolinguals who are formulating policy on bilingual education and on ESL provision for immigrants and refugees. Monolingual perspectives dominate in educational testing, in curriculum development and in the perennial discussion of the ‘problem’ of literacy among young people. Monolingual worldviews of language and dialect infect our policies and processes of determining the origin of refugees (Eades et al., 2003) and the application of these policies can lead to statelessness, imprisonment or even death. These are not small stakes.

That is why I argue that it is essential to interrogate the phenomenon of monolingualism: to bring to light how its worldview might affect many aspects of society. Perhaps applied linguists should pause in our worthwhile endeavours in promoting language learning, in arguing for the retention of Asian and European languages in schools, in trying to make politicians understand that ESL needs are not the same as literacy needs, in defending parents’ rights to bring up their children bilingually, in maintaining community languages, in fighting for funds to research dying languages. Let us turn the spotlight in the other direction and ask – why is it necessary to defend what seems to be the natural tendency of humankind – to use more than one language? Let us ask who the other side is and what they stand for. The aim should certainly not be to vilify individual monolinguals, and thereby create a new class of pariahs. Instead, our aim should be to better understand how monolingual discourses operate unseen in our governing bodies and our professions so that we can better counteract them.

6. Monolingualism – a pathology

The third way of representing monolingualism I wish to consider here is by far the most controversial. The authors who take this view frame it as a dangerous and pathological state rather than a normal way to be (the first representation) or a simple absence of skills (the second).

Of these authors, Skutnabb-Kangas (1996, 2000a, 2000b) gives the most detailed justification for such a view. She lists four common myths: that monolingualism is normal, desirable, sufficient for communication, and inevitable at
both a societal and individual level. She outlines the arguments for each of these and then proceeds to refute each in turn (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000a, 2000b). She argues that monolingualism at a societal level is a social construction which has been used to marginalise various groups of people (those who do not speak the dominant language, or who speak varieties which are not socially valued), and that at an individual level it is the result of misguided educational policies and linguicism. In other words, the monolingual individual is so because he or she has suffered from lack of opportunity to learn (or maintain) a second language through discriminatory policies and practices. Ultimately, she maintains: “Like cholera or leprosy, monolingualism is an illness which should be eradicated as soon as possible” (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000a: 185). While Skutnabb-Kangas is vociferous in making this point, and has been criticised for “loaded and (…) inflammatory language” (Handsfield, 2002: 549), she is not the only one who sees monolingualism as a pathology. Oller (1997) employs the discourse of disability to suggest that monolinguals suffer from a kind of language blindness. Seeing the world only through one language or dialect means that they are unaware of how language shapes and reflects both thought and social structures. He terms this condition “monoglottosis” and calls it:

(…) a general unawareness of the languages or dialects that must be called upon to make sense of the surface-forms of speech or other signs that enable communities to share abstract meanings (…). Monoglottosis is a special blindness towards the general dependence of all sign-users on such conventions in some particular language/dialect. (Oller, 1997: 469)

Oller has a particular purpose in making this observation, which is referred to below in examining what authors say are the effects of monolingual perspectives, but regardless of his purpose, his statements about monolinguals are intended to have broad applicability. Other terms used to frame monolingualism as a sickness or a dysfunction are “monolingual myopia” (Smolicz, 1995), “monolingual reductionism”, “monolingual stupidity” and “monolingual naïvety” (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000a). Handsfield’s (2002) critique of Skutnabb-Kangas’ work includes the charge that she criticises monolinguals as abnormal and intellectually and morally deficient. Whether or not this is a justified criticism, there are grounds for making it.

6.1. The effects of “monoglottosis”

A further and key dimension of arguments maintaining the paucity of the monolingual experience is that which critiques the effects produced by a
monolingual perspective. Clyne (1991b) remarks, for example, that multilingualism has been largely overlooked by the majority of writers on Australian multiculturalism, simply because most of the authors are monolingual. They simply do not see, or perceive the relevance of, the many-language abilities of sections of the population. So, too, Crozet, Liddicoat and Lo Bianco (1999) argue that multiculturalism viewed from a monolingual perspective can only result in a shallow, voyeuristic and ‘othering’ view of culture. ALS & ALAA (1981: 14) describe cultural awareness programs which do not include a second language as “an illusion of monolinguals”. Their statement rejects the notion of a monolingual school curriculum on the grounds that it disadvantages Australian students compared to their overseas counterparts, and that it is all too compatible with attitudes which denigrate other languages. Snow and Hakuta (1992) found that one effect of monolingual educational policies is that minority children lose their first language, which could have been maintained at much less social and educational cost than teaching new languages from scratch. Another effect of monolingual perspectives is that bilingual transition classes act as a “revolving door” between monolingualism in L1 and the ‘achievement’ of monolingualism in L2 (Snow & Hakuta, 1992: 390). In fact ‘bilingual’ is now almost a synonym for “educationally disadvantaged” in the USA (Crawford, 1992).

Lo Bianco (1999), in his analysis of an Australian Federal Parliamentary Hansard transcript, marvels at the Federal Education Minister’s lack of grasp of what ‘bilingual’ means and his constant reframing of ‘bilingual education’ in the Northern Territory as a kind of English literacy methodology for Aboriginal minorities. Lo Bianco does not say so explicitly, but such a persistent redefining suggests not only ignorance arising from monolingualism, but also an invidious political monolingual agenda. This process, he states, removes the possibility of constructing bilingual education using indigenous cultural, human rights or linguistic frameworks. Lo Bianco concludes: “Literacy (coterminous, but silently, with English literacy) serves as a superordinate category organising all specialist interventions in minority language education in Australia today” (Lo Bianco, 1999: 46, emphasis in the original).

Skutnabb-Kangas (2000b) and Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas (1995) level the charge of ‘linguistic genocide’ against the monolingual elites who make language and educational policy. They argue that monolingualism leads to an inability to see the value of language survival, and causes children to grow up

---

3 Hansard is the Australian Federal Government’s official audiotaped and transcribed record of Parliamentary proceedings. In this paper, Lo Bianco takes a discourse analysis approach to the Minister’s construction of ‘bilingual education’.
believing that to succeed it is necessary to choose between their languages. Oller’s (1997) critique of “monoglottosis” (above) arises from his attempt to counter the prevailing view that IQ tests are free of language bias and to show that they do indeed have cultural bias expressed through language. In his view, the result of ‘monolingual blindness’ on the part of the test-makers and test administrators has been to wrongly ‘diagnose’ bilingual and minority children as ‘learning deficient’, ‘retarded’ or ‘semi-lingual’ (Oller, 1997). Valdés and Figueroa (1994) argue a similar case, conducting a careful and systematic review of the assumptions and logic behind educational testing and concluding that these are informed by the view that monolingual language proficiency is the norm, and that bilinguals can be tested using the same approaches and instruments. This is despite the fact that Grosjean (1985) laid the theoretical foundations in for viewing bilingual proficiency as being more complex than a supposed ‘double monolingual proficiency’ and for the argument that it should therefore be measured and researched in different ways.

These authors suggest that since those who make language and educational policy in developed countries and often for developing countries (in the case of international aid projects (Holliday, 1994; Forman, 1994) are usually monolingual, they are in a powerful position to enforce a monolingual viewpoint.

While all the above authors write about monolingualism in the general population and among policy-makers, Skutnabb-Kangas (2000a) also turns her attention to ESL teachers.

To me, monolingual ESL teachers are [by] definition incompetent to teach ESL: they simply lack several of the capacities or proficiencies that a learner needs and can reasonably expect from the teacher (…) a starting point for all ESL teachers is to eradicate monolingualism among themselves.

(Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000a: 37-39)

This is a radical, and, in my view, indefensible statement. There is more to being an effective teacher of ESL than having a second language. However Skutnabb-Kangas takes a provocative stance, I believe, in an attempt to shake the established presumptions of the profession, and with her next point I concur. She goes on to say that teachers need “first-hand experience of having learned and [of] using a second or a foreign language (…) [a] bilingual or multilingual native speaker is thus better able to understand what the learners experience than a monolingual one” (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000a: 38). My own research bears out this proposition: that other things being equal, a teacher who is an L2 user has greater linguistic, sociocultural and empathetic resources to draw on in ESL teaching than does a monolingual teacher (Ellis, 2002, 2003, 2004a, 2004b, 2006).
However, it is not the individual teacher who is the villain, but the monolingual discourse of the profession, as Phillipson (1992) points out in his analysis of the development of the ELT profession over the last century. He argues that it has privileged both the native speaker (who is not expected to be other than monolingual) and a monolingual (ie English-only) methodology. He claims that “[a] monolingual methodology is organically linked with linguist disregard of dominated languages, concepts and ways of thinking. It is highly functional in inducing a colonized consciousness” (Phillipson, 1992: 187).

7. Conclusion

This paper has presented three different representations of monolingualism. The first is as the relatively uncontested normal state of a human individual, or the unmarked case. This view, although mainly prevalent in Western, and English-speaking societies, dominates despite the fact that the majority of the world’s population is estimated to be bilingual or multilingual. One explanation is that it is a consequence of the rise of the European nation state, later exported to their colonies, and another is that powerful English-speaking nations are both the producers and beneficiaries of English as a global language, and they tend to be monolingual.

The second view is that which is prevalent in those who wish to promote foreign language learning (and by some whose concerns are ‘community languages’ (Clyne, 1991a) and are keen to argue its benefits of intellectual, cross-cultural, social and economic kinds. Monolinguals here are seen as lacking access to these benefits, but this view is not particularly critical. Monolinguals are potential language students to be courted: the as-yet-unconverted.

The third view described here is that of authors who see monolingualism as powerful, hidden and insidious. They employ metaphors of disease and disability to reconstruct what monolingual speakers see as normal into a deficit. A certain lust for revenge is discernible in some of these writings, a desire to turn the tables. For too long language minorities in Western societies have been marginalised and patronised and had their potential limited: now it is the monolinguals’ turn, they imply. Such a critical approach finds its mark with some, gaining attention where none was forthcoming, and it alienates others (Handsfield, 2002).

Whether or not one wishes to align oneself with the third view, I argue that monolingualism is deserving of study as a phenomenon in its own right, and not just as the invisible and unexamined corollary of bilingualism. In Australian language policy in the twenty-first century applied linguists and educators are having little success in defending language study, language maintenance and bilingual education.
Perhaps further examination and publicising of the causes and effects of monolingualism might contribute to an awareness of the sources of silent but powerful opposition to societal and individual multilingualism, and to possibilities for resisting it.

Many of the claims of scholars quoted here about the pervasiveness of monolingualism and its effects on social and educational policy are untested, existing mainly at the level of assertion. One reason for this is perhaps the lack of a clear research framework within which to research monolingualism. Certainly it is a ‘linguistic ideology’ which needs to be studied not only by linguists but also social scientists, historians and cultural theorists. Another reason, though, is perhaps that for the majority of writers in language and social policy there is simply no established framework for recognizing it as a phenomenon. Hence I make no apology in this paper for not providing empirical evidence to support the contention that monolingualism is “the unmarked case”, but call for further exploration of it. Monolingualism, like bilingualism, is a complex phenomenon whose nature and effects are manifested across a range of social disciplines, and to make sense of it we need to draw on the range of analytical tools employed by social scientists as well as linguists.

**Bibliographical references**


Ellis, E. (2003). Bilingualism among teachers of ESL: A study of second language learning experience as a contributor to the professional knowledge and


