

Cognitive Contributions to Plurilithic Views of English and Other Languages

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Monolithic views of languages predominate in linguistics, applied linguistics, and everyday discourse. The World Englishes, English as a Lingua Franca, and Critical Applied Linguistics frameworks have gone some way to counter the myth, highlighting the iniquities it gives rise to for global users and learners of English. Here, I propose that developing an understanding of 'plurilithic' Englishes informed by cognitively oriented linguistics (including generativism), can complement and consolidate valuable but often divisive socially oriented efforts to 'disinvent' named languages. I acknowledge problems associated with mainstream generativism, but argue that a complete repudiation of mentalistic notions of language is unhelpful. I suggest that a modified 'polylingually constituted' version of the Chomskyan I-language concept may be useful, capturing the bottom-up nature of individual language resources and drawing a clear contrast with folk ontologies of English as a named monolithic system (N-language). The emerging epistemological integration suggests that learning and use are determined by individuals' local experiences as non-conformist mental appropriators of external social practices, rather than by top-down notions of proficiency in monolithic national, foreign, international, or supranational varieties.

INTRODUCTION

The conceptualization of human language as being divisible into a countable number of discrete systems goes almost completely unquestioned outside of general and applied linguistics. But even within linguistics, the assumption underlies much theory and practice.¹ Sociolinguists are, of course, sensitive to the dimensions of inter- and intrapersonal linguistic variation and have expended considerable energy studying and understanding language mixing and hybridity through contact. Applied linguists too have long been aware of the difficulty of pinning down 'a language' (or 'language variety') for practical purposes, especially in language policy and planning, language education, and additional language teaching. And yet continuing projects for 'language codification' and the fixing of L2 proficiency assessment standards attest to the power (and perceived utility) of the 'monolithic myth' of language.

The most active and effective refutations of monolithic views of English have come so far from social theorists and applied linguists, especially those working within the frameworks of World Englishes (e.g. Kachru 1992) and English as a Lingua Franca (*ELF*; e.g. Jenkins 2007). In mainstream linguistics and psycholinguistics, on the other hand, there is little evidence of interest in, or awareness of, these discourses.² Regrettably, those seeking the broadest possible understanding of the non-monolithic nature of human language, uniting cognitively and socioculturally oriented scholarship rather than forcing a choice between them, continue to be disappointed. For example, there is little cooperation or sense of common cause in the area of additional language learning, largely split between cognitively and socioculturally oriented research communities ('parallel SLA worlds' in the words of Zuengler and Miller (2006)). Some socioculturally oriented scholars who recognize the relevance of SLA for World Englishes and ELF (Sridhar and Sridhar 1992; Kachru 1994; Jenkins 2006a; Zuengler and Miller 2006) have pointed to a certain myopia on the part of their cognitively oriented colleagues. But it is not exclusive to the cognitivists. Although there have been isolated examples of openness to the possibility of fruitful engagement with cognitively oriented scholarship, such as that shown by Mesthrie and Bhatt (2008: 156–75), those concentrating on sociolinguistic and sociohistorical issues have not shown much enthusiasm for it.

Whether restricted to the sociocultural or the cognitive sphere, a monochrome vision of human language will inevitably be an impoverished vision, despite its simplifying utility for limited local purposes [an argument I have made for linguistics in Hall (1992, 1995, 2005); and for applied linguistics in Hall *et al.* (2011)]. My intention here is to make a contribution to efforts to 'bridge the paradigm gap' [in the words of Sridhar and Sridhar (1992)], by identifying apparently incompatible concepts from both 'sides' which may in fact be complementary and, indeed, mutually reinforcing. Specifically, I harness ideas from theoretical linguistics and psycholinguistics to support sociolinguistic arguments (from World Englishes, ELF, and Critical Applied Linguistics) for a reappraisal of English Language Teaching theory and practice. Some readers who have already made up their minds one way or another about the research methods and epistemologies they are willing to entertain will no doubt find much of the argumentation naive or perhaps even reactionary. But the readers I wish to engage with here are those applied linguists who do not 'belong' to one camp or another, have not yet made up their minds on all the issues, and—maybe—see some advantage in not doing so too readily.

The article is organized as follows. Before developing the main argument, I identify some of the ways that different uses of English have muddied the metadiscursive waters and attempt to offer some clarity on the matter, at least with respect to the terminology used in this article, so as to be able to engage with as many readers as possible from different orientations within applied linguistics. In the core section, I acknowledge fundamental weaknesses in the work of some linguists, with their reification of named languages and

their uncritical belief in what Rajagopalan (1997) has termed the ‘apotheosis of the native speaker’. But more constructively, I go on to identify and redeem some useful concepts that have been developed in generative linguistics and psycholinguistics, and demonstrate how they can enrich the discourse on plurilithic Englishes. As a framework around which to develop the argument I analyse a set of four assumptions from Makoni and Pennycook’s (2007a) critique of linguistics applied and unapplied. In the penultimate section, I use the emerging perspective to corroborate and support new ways of thinking about language proficiency and non-conformity and argue that they may be deployed to contest reactionary and unrealistic ELT policies and practices as well as, more broadly, the social inequalities perpetuated by the monolithic myth of English.

THE PROBLEM OF LANGUAGE IN ENGLISH

Unfortunately, the monolithic myth is particularly hard to grapple with, let alone contest, given the vocabulary available for doing so. Indeed, the field is plagued, in the words of Saraceni (2008: 23) by ‘notions that [have been] somewhat obfuscated by misinterpretation or by polysemic ambiguity.’ There are two big problems. First, there is a major confusion between language, polity and place in the minds of linguists and laypeople alike, not helped by the fact that English and other languages use names for nationalities (or dominant ethnicities) as names for the major languages associated with them.

A second and more serious problem for linguists is that the English word *language* can be used to express a number of inter-related concepts, including the following:³

- 1 The language capacity: a *species property* (as in ‘The evolution of LANGUAGE’ and ‘It’s hard to express deeply felt emotions through LANGUAGE’).
- 2 I-language (‘internal language:’ cf. Chomsky 1986: 21–46): individuals’ long-term *mental representations* of this property, ultimately represented in *neural circuits* in different configurations and states of activation (as in ‘Her LANGUAGE development was normal’ and ‘His LANGUAGE has been affected by a stroke’).
- 3 Linguaging: *events* and *practices* in which individuals’ mental representations are used for communicative and expressive/indexical purposes in specific social contexts (as in ‘Her LANGUAGE was warm and comforting’ and ‘The LANGUAGE of global business’).
- 4 Speech, writing, and/or sign: external (physical) *manifestations* of the mental representations activated during these socially situated events and practices (as in ‘The child’s LANGUAGE was slow and hesitant’ and ‘Sign LANGUAGE can be analysed on video’).
- 5 E-language (‘external language:’ cf. Chomsky 1986: 19–21): the activated elements of mental representations externalized in events, i.e. *expressions*,

texts, or *utterances* (as in ‘The LANGUAGE of the ruling was ambiguous’) and these *collectively* across individuals and events, as represented in a *corpus* (as in ‘This is a frequent collocation in the LANGUAGE’).

- 6 N-language [named language(s)]: named *social constructions* of discrete group resources conceived as: (i) shared systems of mental representations (as in ‘The LANGUAGE they’re learning is Totonac’); (ii) situated practices (as in ‘French was the global LANGUAGE of diplomacy’); and (iii) physical manifestations (as in ‘The LANGUAGE we heard was Yoruba’).
- 7 P-language (‘Platonic language’: cf. Chomsky 1986: 33): discrete (often named) *abstract systems*, independent of mental representation, social event/practice, or physical manifestation (as in ‘That’s not a word in the LANGUAGE’ and ‘Even native English speakers don’t speak their LANGUAGE properly’).

The technical terms I-, E-, N-, and P-language, although clumsy (and perhaps controversial for some applied linguists because of their association with Chomsky) are in fact relatively transparent, and will be further defined in the next section. *Languaging* is a more intuitive term which, although recorded in *Webster’s Dictionary* of 1913, has only recently started to gain currency in linguistics [sometimes with a more restricted sense than the one intended here: cf. Swain (2006)]. Where I believe the distinction to be unimportant, I will use the word *language* unadorned.

Turning now to the word *English* (and every other language name), we note that it is often ambiguous between N-language and P-language. In both usages, *English* generally names a monolithic entity, whether it is the non-linguist’s single system (the so-called ‘standard’) with various dialectal variants, or the linguist’s normally more level playing field of a family of (monolithic) ‘varieties’. The practice of using *English* to express the concept of a single system of linguistic norms is often carried over, at least implicitly, to the plural form *Englishes*, which when taken to mean the collection of Inner Circle and indigenized Outer Circle varieties, falls into the monolithic trap. So-called *pluricentric* approaches to English and other majority languages (Clyne 1991), welcome as they are, still suggest countable, monolithic *centres* (cf. Pennycook 2009: 200–1). For this reason, I welcome—and appropriate—Pennycook’s (2007) coinage *plurilithic* here.

COGNITIVE CONTRIBUTIONS TO DISINVENTION

The way we think (and talk) about language and languages represents the greatest obstacle to socially and cognitively oriented projects which aim to contest the monolithic myth—to ‘disinvent and reconstitute’ language(s), in the words of Makoni and Pennycook (2007a, henceforth M&P). These scholars, and the contributors to the important collection they have edited (Makoni and Pennycook 2007b), provide the socially oriented project with a provocative but immensely valuable critical manifesto. I share their goals of

disinvention and reconstitution (for many of the same activist reasons), but strongly believe that the position can also be advanced to new audiences from the less ideologically directed perspectives of mentalist linguistics and psycholinguistics (cf. Hall 2005: 97–108). The disinvention strategy that I advocate here both complements and contests M&P's project, by building on the discourses that general linguistics and applied linguistics already engage in, rather than dismissing any of the multiple, overlapping strands from which they are woven.

Recognition and advocacy of plurilithic perspectives on English (and other N-languages) is in everyone's interests, except for those with a political or economic interest in the coupling of language with national 'brands'. A plurilithic view provides a framework for understanding and articulating the linguistic rights of the marginalized numerical majority of users of 'non-standard' and 'non-native' varieties. It facilitates choice and flexibility in the outcomes of language learning. It allows applied linguists to understand the needs of user populations, both individual and group based. And it helps free general linguists (including descriptive, socio-, and psycholinguists) from distortions in language data and theoretical constructs arising from artificial norms and folk beliefs. Applied linguists have a particular responsibility for considering the plurilithic view, given their multiple and shifting roles as theorists, practitioners, mediators between the two, and regular interlocutors with clients and agents for social change. It is for this reason that I argue here for a combined effort, drawing on the whole spectrum of language-related experience and scholarship, and especially the potential contributions of linguistics and psycholinguistics.

I start by exploring the possible vindication or rehabilitation of some ghosts in the closet of linguistic ideas, with a view to advancing the case for plurilithic Englishes without throwing theoretical babies out with ideological bathwater. To provide a framework for discussion, I have selected a particularly divisive passage in M&P. I have done this because although I warmly welcome their call for the 'disinvention and reconstitution' of N-languages, I do not believe that their accompanying monolithic assessment of applied linguistics and general linguistics is (i) quite as helpful or (ii) completely accurate. M&P (35) claim to have '[...] clearly embarked on a different trajectory from applied and unapplied linguistics', disciplines they associate with the following four features:

- 1 a 'belief in the existence and describability of discrete languages';
- 2 the 'positing of languages as systems that exist outside and beyond communicative acts';
- 3 the 'location of language within the heads of people'; and
- 4 the 'use of disembodied texts to represent language use'.

In their explicit dissociation from applied linguistics and general linguistics, M&P run the risk of throwing *nurseryfuls* of babies out with—undeniably—*gallons* of dirty bathwater. My intention in this section is to identify plurilithic

babies and monolithic bathwater in mainstream linguistics and psycholinguistics, addressing each of the four coordinates of M&P's 'new trajectory' in turn, under the headings *Fiction*, *Fact*, *Mind*, and *Method*.

Fiction: English exists as a describable, discrete language

M&P's disinvention project holds that English and all other N-languages are sociohistorical fictions and need to be 'disinvented'. This is an objective I share, and yet as both a general and applied linguist I recognize the nature and strength of the challenge it entails. The natural (uninvented) existence of describable, discrete N-languages does appear to be tacitly assumed in much, perhaps most, work in general and applied linguistics, but this is not exclusively due to ideological commitment or conditioning. It is evident, for example, that in generativism it is a methodological expedient, rather than a fundamental premise (cf. Chomsky 1986:16–17; Jackendoff 2007a: 27). In any case, the fact that separate languages are assumed in practice by generativist linguists is no reason, *a priori*, to dismiss Chomskyan theoretical concepts out of hand if they may be of use to plurilithic language enquiry. This holds especially if we are not to burn bridges with those theoretical linguists who advocate partnership with other paradigms and fields (e.g. Jackendoff 2007b).

Noam Chomsky (1965:3) is, of course, conventionally 'named and shamed' as the prime suspect in criticisms of linguistic monolithism (cf. Rajagopalan 2004). After all, it was he who, in *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*, posited 'an ideal speaker–listener, in a completely homogenous speech-community, who knows its language perfectly.' A plurilithic reassessment of Chomsky's views on the ontological status of English and other languages, however, can identify some useful, even essential, concepts for a balanced disinvention project which is open to, and takes seriously, the extensive body of work in cognitively oriented linguistics.

Although Chomsky's now notorious statement has been seen by many as self-evidently preposterous, it has been consistently misinterpreted, partly because Chomsky himself had not at that time been sufficiently clear about the methodological intention behind the apparently fantastic idealization (cf. Hall 2005: 198). Two decades after *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*, Chomsky (1986) provided a more explicit statement about how he perceives the object of his programme of linguistic enquiry. He coined the terms *I-language* and *E-language* to distinguish between mind-internal versus mind-external conceptions of language. The *I* also stands for *individual*, and in Chomsky's (1986: 15) programme, the object of study is the knowledge of language encoded in an individual brain, rather than a sociopolitical construct—the 'pretheoretic commonsense notion' that I am calling N-language—or some Platonic ideal system which, like pure mathematics, is completely ungrounded in cognition *or* culture (what he called P-language). For Chomsky, human language is like a biological organ that can be studied in the same way as the heart or liver. But we can readily appreciate, of course,

that this simile is inappropriate for I-languages (as well as N- and P-languages), because although anatomical structures do not vary significantly in their morphology and function at the level of the species, I-languages patently *do*.

I-languages constitute systems of declarative knowledge which, by their very nature, must align with those of other members of the species in a common intersubjective communicative space. Unlike biological organs, distinct realizations of the language capacity in individual minds are *locally modulated*, through the dynamic effects of the culturally situated social interactions in which individuals participate (cf. Tomasello 2003). This proposition entails that individual I-languages, unlike purely cognitive capacities such as vision, must be *jointly* tuned by internal and external factors during the maturation–socialization process, hence the social construction of (widely differing) N-languages (sometimes perceived, or artificially normed, as P-languages). Vygotsky understood this and was right to draw attention to the fact, for example, that thought and communication may be mediated by socially determined word meaning (although he has very little to say about I-language itself; cf. Vygotsky 1986: Chapter 7).

Many readers will be comfortable with the notion of ‘language’ as I-language, characterized by the following three features:

- it is biologically embedded;
- it is constrained at the level of the species; and
- it develops automatically in all human beings who are exposed to (and are able to process) speech or sign used in social interaction around them and with them.

But the mainstream generativist brand of I-language is less palatable for most applied linguists. A major reason for this is the monolithic idealization it requires: applied linguists know that I-languages in the real world are variably calibrated to the particular conventions of communicative competence common to the relevant groups and/or discourse contexts within which users participate, and that they vary one to the next because each individual has different usage experiences and learning trajectories. The problem with traditional generative accounts is that the so-called mental objects they seek to describe, which they call collectively by their N-language names (‘English’, ‘Italian’, ‘Korean’, etc.), are in fact *idealized I-languages* (Figure 1), thus effectively indistinguishable from P-language. The theoretical accounts they develop are based on data from a subset of the set of closely overlapping actual I-languages used by a small group of educated speakers operating monolingually and monodialectally. Furthermore, the I-language data characterized have themselves been consciously or unconsciously filtered and fashioned by non-linguistic social conventions.

These essentially methodological weaknesses of the mainstream generative enterprise are due in part to monolithic contamination, but—crucially—they do not compromise the theoretical integrity or utility of the I-language concept. And in fact, many linguists working in alternative generative frameworks

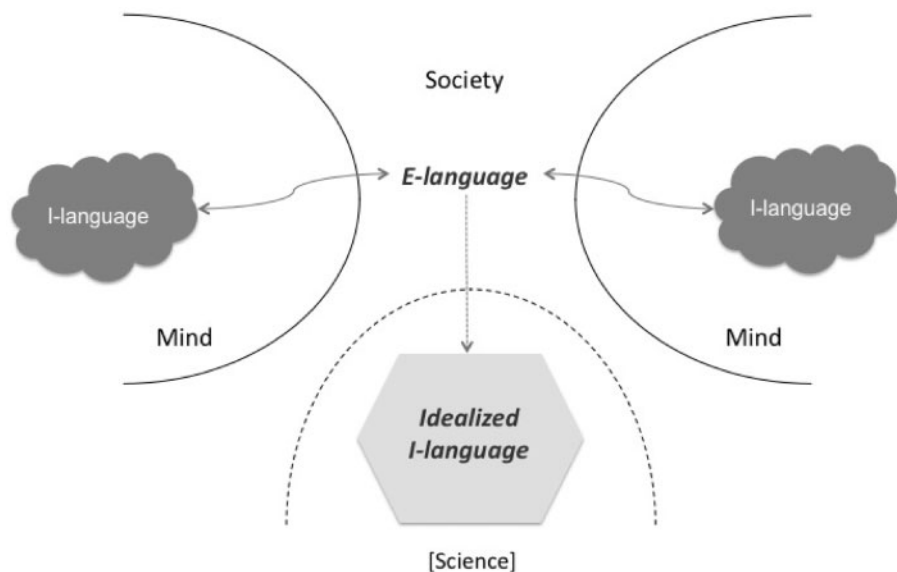


Figure 1: *Idealized I-language, a social construct of science, not a property of minds*

do attend more explicitly to the cognitive realities implied, but so often left unrealized, by the Chomskyan approach (e.g. Bresnan 1982; Goldberg 1995; Culicover and Nowak 2003; Culicover and Jackendoff 2005). But even within mainstream generativism, linguists explicitly acknowledge the plurilithic nature of language(s). For example, in their introductory text on 'biolinguistics' (cf. Chomsky 2007), Isac and Reiss (2008: 15) write:

If we take the mentalistic approach seriously, then we have to admit that there is no entity in the world that we can characterize as 'English.' There is just a (large) bunch of people with fairly similar mental grammars that they can use to communicate in a way that is typically more efficient than between what we call Japanese and English speakers, because the so-called English mental grammars are more similar to each other.

Other generativists undermine N- and P-language idealizations by using dialect and 'nonstandard' data as a matter of course (e.g. Henry 1995; Kayne 2000; Rupp 2005), promoting the use of generative theory in an understanding of 'socially realistic linguistics' (Wilson and Henry 1998). Finally, Ray Jackendoff and colleagues (e.g. Ghomeshi *et al.* 2004; Culicover and Jackendoff 2005; Jackendoff 2007a; Kuperberg *et al.* 2010) have been developing and applying a significantly revised and broadened generativist account of language as an integral facet of cognition *and* social action, and have reached out to scholars with widely different approaches and orientations.

Regrettably, however, where an additional language is involved, as in explicitly generativist SLA research, the monolithic approach becomes merely *bilithic* (in the same way that much World Englishes research appears unwilling to acknowledge the legitimacy of a shift from pluricentrism to *acentrism*). In most cognitively oriented SLA research, the principal issue still appears to be not what kinds of hybrid I-languages (or multi-competence) learners may actually be constructing, but whether they can acquire a monolithic native-speaker system (Jenkins 2006a). This is invariably taken as ‘Standard (UK or US) English’, but could easily be expanded to an endonormative Indian English, Nigerian English, or China English, to the same effect. We return to this in the penultimate section.

To conclude this section, I think it may be acknowledged that in generative linguistics there is—contra M&P—no belief in N-languages. Instead, there are methodologically motivated abstractions away from shared products of the language capacity (common elements of I-language systems). Generativists understand that these systems have developed as a result of common social experience. Although the approach as developed in mainstream generativism has inevitably resulted in possible idealizations to P-language, alternative generativist approaches can be consistent with fundamental tenets of usage-based models of acquisition and competence. According to this potential consensus, exposure to, and participation in, group languaging is what permits new members of the group to construct and tune their own I-language to a configuration which allows them to engage in communal languaging with other members (Tomasello 2003; Culicover and Jackendoff 2005; Bybee 2010).⁴

I believe that a conceptual consensus of this kind, acknowledged by general and applied linguists working in both cognitively and socially oriented frameworks, could yield a broader plurilithic project of disinvention and reconstitution capable of attracting a greater number of scholars from different paradigms. At the same time, however, pressure should be maintained on linguists to address the methodological weaknesses and monolithic assumptions that weaken and obscure their theoretical models.

Fact: English I-languages are systems outside communicative acts

Some scholars in general and applied linguistics adopt positions which imply that language has no existence outside languaging events (e.g. Harris 1981; Hopper 1998; Johnstone 2002; Johnson 2004; Thorne and Lantolf 2007). Johnstone (2002: 235), for example, argues that ‘[t]o think of discourse as “language use” means imagining that “language” could exist prior to being “used”’. And Johnson (2004: 172–3) deduces that language must be viewed ‘not as an abstract system of morphosyntactic structures but as *speech*’. I think such views are unsustainable, and as harmful to the plurilithic enterprise as a belief in the existence of ‘an ideal speaker–hearer’ or ‘a perfectly homogenous speech community’.

When individual English users awaken after a dreamless night asleep and start languaging in different discourse settings, their speech is not only dependent on and determined by current needs and context. It is also, patently, drawing on large amounts of stored knowledge, mental distillations of previous E-language experience: in other words, I-language. Unsurprisingly, the separate existence of language systems in minds is often implicit, yet left unacknowledged, in social activity oriented treatments. For example, in his proposal for a new 'dynamic' model of Englishes, even Pennycook (2009) is unable to sustain the notion of English only as transient Englishing. He refers there to 'resources in English' and 'the semiotic resources available to speakers', which are *used* in Englishing, and these presumably exist outside of communicative acts. I would suggest that the notion of I-language represents a way out of the apparent dilemma faced by those scholars who: (i) know that English is not a monolithic system, but (ii) are asked to believe that therefore English is *only* languaging activity, and yet at the same time (iii) realize that there must be a sense in which Englishes *do* exist even when not in use.

Now briefly to the next part of M&P's indictment: if English *does* exist outside of *Englishing*, in what sense is this mentally represented social resource *systematic*? The word *system* is normally used to refer to something which is complex (made up of multiple parts) and structured (non-arbitrary). So neither a bowlful of noodles nor the chopsticks used to eat it are normally taken as systems, since the former is complex but unstructured, and the latter is structured but not complex. In this everyday sense of the term, I-languages are systems: non-arbitrary states of biologically constrained neural networks, the developing structure of which can be described in terms of units governed by complex principles or patterns of combination, and which interlocutors draw upon as they co-construct (aspects of) meaning through speech, writing, or sign.

The memorizing of units perceived as more or less simplex and unstructured [idiomatic expressions, multi-word expressions, utterance schemas, and the like: cf. Pinker (2000) and Wray (2002)] does not present any challenge to the notion of I-languages as examples of systematicity. In the generativist I-language model of Culicover and Jackendoff (2005), for example, the separation between lexicon and syntax (words and rules) is rejected in favour of a continuum, consistent with usage-based linguistics (e.g. Tomasello 2003).⁵

Equally, the notion of I-language is not incompatible with the fact that linguistic systems are dynamic, emerging through experience, and changing with every iteration of use, as argued in Complexity Theory and Dynamic Systems Theory. It is true that proponents of the former assert that 'the language system and its use are mutually constitutive' (Larsen-Freeman 2010a: 51) and advocates of the latter defend a view of language as 'reflexive activity' in which it 'is not an abstract autonomous entity itself' (de Bot *et al.* 2007: 10). But in Larsen-Freeman's (2010b: 67) view, language is a 'complex adaptive system in which every use of language changes the language resources of the learner/user, and the changed resources are then potentially available for the next speech event'. And, in line with the plurilithic I-language concept I am

advocating, de Bot *et al.* (2007: 19) question ‘whether individuals really have similar L1 *systems*’ (my emphasis, C.J.H.). In other words, mentally represented language systems exist between languaging events, even if they are constantly in flux (see Batstone 2010:12–8).

I conclude, then, that we must be able to separate the mutually shared elements of users’ I-language systems from their deployment (and contextual enrichment) in languaging events. It is the more-or-less stable features of the overlap between adult systems that descriptive linguists seek to describe, as idealized I-language. From a combined sociocognitive perspective, the richly grounded explanations of languaging provided by pragmatics and discourse analysis *complement*, but cannot *replace*, descriptions of (inevitably idealized) I-languages. Without *both*, a useful account of how language is developed and deployed in action would be inconceivable, and although a completely comprehensive account may never be possible, a combined sociocognitive view will bring us closer to this goal.

Mind: English is located within the heads of people

The previous section argues that a maximally coherent and comprehensive characterization of language must include a notion like I-language, which is by definition located within people’s heads. But the more particular claim to be pursued here, given M&P’s comments and my response so far, is that cognitive embeddedness is in no way irreconcilable with the plurilithic view. Indeed, the whole thrust of my argument has been that the fullest and most accessible way to disinvent English and other N-languages is by seeing them as a function of *both* the contents of people’s heads *and* the sociocultural practices of the groups these people belong to. And, furthermore, that an acknowledgement of this fact can only bolster the plurilithic project. To demonstrate this, I now turn from linguistics to psycholinguistics. Psycholinguistics is particularly well-placed to furnish planks to bridge the paradigm gap, because it takes for granted the cognitive embeddedness of language but has regularly been critical of generativist conceptualizations of it (e.g. Marslen-Wilson and Tyler 1987; Hall 1995; Tomasello 2003).

It is now the almost unanimous consensus of psycholinguists that lexical memory in bi- and multilinguals comprises a single complex network, rather than separately represented systems. The evidence, not only from impairment, but also from a vast body of results from experimentation and neural imaging, suggests that multilingual lexical networks are arranged according to various dimensions of form and use (such as initial phoneme or level of frequency of access), rather than by N-language (cf. Heredia and Brown 2004; Hall *et al.* 2009 and references therein). Put simply: word forms are not stored in separate N-language boxes in the head; instead they are mentally ‘tagged’ for the communities or functions they are conventionally used in, on the basis of each user’s accumulating experience. So for a German–English bilingual, a word form such as *Gift* will end up being tagged for use in both ‘English’ and

'German' situations (in the latter it means 'poison'). There is, in fact, abundant experimental evidence for the unconscious co-activation of such 'interlingual homographs' (Beauvillain and Grainger 1987) and also of near homophones across languages with different scripts (e.g. Gollan *et al.* 1997; Ota *et al.* 2009).

The ways individuals learn to *use* word forms in sentences may also be (N-)language-neutral. For example, a Spanish–English bilingual's experiences of the word forms *dar* and *give* (translation equivalents) may lead him or her to construct a single 'syntactic frame' (or *lemma*) for both. He or she will activate this frame in subsequent languaging in order to deploy *dar* or *give* in E-language structures containing three nominal arguments (subject, direct object, and indirect object). So although the memory representation for the word *forms* will be tagged for 'English' and 'Spanish,' respectively, their associated *frame* representation will be tagged for both. Indeed evidence has been accumulating recently which suggests that aspects of *grammar* may also be non-selective in multilinguals (e.g. Hartsuiker *et al.* 2004), even in languages which are completely unrelated (e.g. Shin and Christianson 2009).

Thus, diglossic users of more than one language may be said to have an I-language which is 'polylingual' (Jørgensen 2008), with each contributing subsystem tagged for different uses, just like a monolingual's repertoire of registers. Indeed, it may be more helpful to talk of 'I-registers' to refer to the subset of elements of an individual's I-language repertoire that are associated with certain interlocutors, functions, or domains of use, independently of whether the individual is monolingual or multilingual [cf. Cook's (1992) notion of multicompetence and Blommaert's (2010: 103–6) concept of 'truncated repertoires']. This psycholinguistic disinvention of English and other N-languages holds as much for *learners* as it does for *users*. For example, I and colleagues have proposed a model of early states of the developing mental lexicon in learners of English which revolves around the idea of hybrid lexical structures, involving promiscuously 'parasitic' mental representations which are blind to monolithic notions such as L1, L2, or L3 (e.g. Hall 2002; Hall and Ecke 2003; Hall and Reyes 2009; Hall *et al.* 2009; cf. also González Alonso 2012). Early on, our use of the term 'error' betrayed implicit monolithic assumptions (we used 'non-native-like usage' in some later work); however, the model is fully consistent with both cognitivist and plurilithic assumptions, viewing individual experience as the locus of linguistic realities (as opposed to the abstract plane of N- and P-languages).

This stance is commonplace in much of the psycholinguistics literature on multilingualism of the last couple of decades. Take for example de Bot's (2004) multilingual model of language production, which incorporates 'different languages' into Levelt's (1989) monolingual model in two places: (i) at the pre-linguistic, communicative intention stage; and (ii) as separate 'nodes' in multilinguals' linguistic memory. In the formulation being explored here, these 'languages' correspond to 'I-registers'. Although de Bot uses N-language tags in his model, on 'language nodes' such as 'English' or 'Dutch', it does not really matter how he labels them (neural networks do not come labelled).

In our minds, we associate different subsets of I-language elements together, for certain purposes, situations, and interlocutors, in a systematic way. Research on code-mixing and switching (Myers-Scotton and Jake 2001), bilinguals' language modes (e.g. Grosjean 2001), as well as everyday experience, routinely shows that speakers are unexceptionally successful in deploying these subsets selectively and appropriately for context. What is important for us in conceptualizations like de Bot's is that neither English nor any other N-language a multilingual user might be said to 'know' has a discrete and separate mental representation in the speaker's mind. Indeed, de Bot states (29):

It should be clear that in this model 'a language' is a highly idiosyncratic constantly changing collection of elements. It has little to do with what a language is according to grammar books and dictionaries, and individuals may vary extensively with respect to their respective versions of the language.

In sum, a cognitive view, acknowledging that English resides in people's minds as (dynamic) I-languages, not as N- or P-languages, strongly *reinforces*, rather than denies, a plurilithic view of English.

Method: Can 'disembodied texts' represent the use of English?

In the past couple of sections, I have argued that it is entirely consistent with socially oriented conceptualizations of English and all other living languages, to claim that they exist when not in use, are located in the minds of their users, and are represented there as systems, rather than as just memories of languaging events. 'Disembodied texts' may provide some evidence for these systems, but have little to tell linguists about how the systems are *used*. Languaging has transient manifestations in speech, signing, and writing events, although only writing leaves also an enduring, atemporal external representation of the I-language structures deployed. Samples of speech and signing events may be re-represented for study by linguists in non-transient forms (transcriptions and/or audio/video recordings), optimally accompanied by more-or-less thick descriptions. But of course none of these is a complete representation: all are disembodied to some extent. The least 'embodied' E-language data are invented sentences, such as those used by most generativists, but these, like phonologically well-formed non-words used in psycholinguistics, are legitimate and necessary for the investigation of how languaging *can* happen, as well as the ways in which it already has. This is, essentially, the difference between Widdowson's (1997: 138) notion of *virtual English* on the one hand, and languaging as recorded by conversation analysis or corpora on the other.

Corpora are championed by many applied linguists as more 'authentic' (less disembodied) representations of language than descriptivists' intuitive data. But of course the validity of this claim depends on which reading of 'language' we have in mind. Corpora record languaging events across many unconnected

users, and so generalizations using them reflect E-language. In this sense, they are not useful for characterizing Englishes and other languages as uninvented I-language systems (cf. Kachru 2008: 1–2). They can, however, tell us a great deal about the extent to which elements of I-languages are shared, conform to norms, or are variable, across users and uses (the *International Corpus of English* and *Vienna Oxford International Corpus of English* are excellent sources for this kind of work).

Many applied linguists are also inclined to believe that psycholinguistics provides a more ‘valid’ characterization of I-languages than generative linguistics, because it focuses on (indirectly) observable languaging, measured quantitatively in strictly controlled conditions, rather than on socioculturally filtered intuitions about language structures existing independently of situational context. For example, reaction time data may well play a significant role in assessment of learners’ developing I-language, as discussed by Marsden (2009). But outright rejection of intuition-based linguistic data and analysis is unwarranted if we want to explain what users’ I-languages *can* do as well as what they *have* done. In any case, there appears to be little meta-analysis to show that data from speaker intuition conflict with experimental data.⁶

All current research methodologies give only a partial and distorted view of the mental representations and social practices underlying and enacting English. None can claim to give a ‘complete’ or context-free characterization of their stated object of study. M&P’s complaint that general and applied linguistics use disembodied texts as evidence for English is thus warranted, but the nature of evidence for Englishes disinvented is just as compromised, *especially* if the existence of I-languages is denied or disregarded. I believe that the combined methods of theoretical and applied linguistics, sociolinguistics, corpus linguistics, and psycholinguistics offer the best chance of fully understanding plurilithic Englishes and Englishing, and of consolidating this understanding into an account which is accessible to non-academic agents of social change.

LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AND NON-CONFORMITY

In this last section, I make some observations about how language learning and teaching might be informed by the inclusive plurilithic view of English I have begun to sketch here on the basis of a cognitively oriented critique of M&P’s disinvention project. I have embraced the fundamental tenets of their position, but problematized some of their more dogmatic and divisive arguments and assumptions, trying to bridge rather than deepen the paradigm gap that undoubtedly exists between socially and cognitively oriented applied linguistics. The incorporation of mentalistic constructs that I have advocated leads inevitably to a view of language learning which is characterized by the *appropriation* (not the *acquisition*) of an E-language (not an N- or P-language) in order to construct an I-language which serves the user’s locally determined, socially embedded languaging purposes.

We should start by recognizing that the belief in, and use of, native speaker-defined proficiency levels is inconsistent with the view developed in the foregoing. Widdowson's (1994: 384) lucid exposition of the myth of native speaker ownership of English includes the following fundamental insight on proficiency:

You are proficient in a language to the extent you possess it, make it your own, bend it to your will, assert yourself through it rather than simply submit to the dictates of its form. [...] So in a way, proficiency only comes with non-conformity [...].

The idea that non-conformity signals control is a cornerstone of plurilithic approaches to English (cf. Bamgbose 1998). It is also at the heart of psycholinguistic understandings of language change through child language acquisition: the generational construction of I-language systems in the minds of users on the basis of linguistic experience (along with other affordances) in the social environment they are exposed to and participate in. Modern Englishes are different from each other and from the Englishes of earlier centuries because during acquisition and life-long usage generations of users have constructed their own cognitively embedded I-language systems out of the socially embedded languaging of *other* speakers, who had previously developed their own systems on the basis of experience with still *other* speakers, *ad infinitum*.

Widdowson's (1994) formulation of proficiency essentially as success in active appropriation rather than in passive acquisition is both psychologically and socially real and is a powerful concept in the collaborative applied linguistics I am championing here. And yet its profound implications for educational policy and social justice go unrealized by many applied linguists and language professionals concerned with additional language pedagogy. The traditional concept of proficiency held by almost all stakeholders presupposes monolithism through the assumption of a normed target variety, outside the learner's mind: an N-language, idealized as P-language. This assumption, and the corollaries that 'foreignness' is undesirable and that non-conformity (error) means deficiency, are taken for granted by ELT professionals around the globe, as well as being implicit in scholarly research too [examples can be found in Knapp (2002: 229) and Granger (2004: 132)].

Conceptions of language learning which assume proficiency in a target variety as the desired outcome are inherently deficit models, even where the target variety assumed is not 'standard' native-speaker English. For example, statements about ELF still occasionally suggest a conceptualization of it as a kind of N-language, the forms of which learners may seek to learn and therefore attain different levels of proficiency in. This is observable in Jenkins' (2009: 202) use of the terms *competent*, *legitimate*, *proficient*, and *errors* in the following passage about variability of forms (*items*) in ELF languaging:

[...] ELF distinguishes between *difference* (i.e. from ENL) and *deficiency* (i.e. interlanguage or 'learner language'), and does not

assume that an item that differs from ENL is by definition an error. It may instead be a legitimate ELF variant. This does not mean, however, that all ELF speakers are proficient: they can also be learners of ELF or not fully competent *non*-learners, making errors just like learners of any second language [...].

In the final sentence, ELF is presented as a target, parallel to ‘any second language’, which learners may aim for, and may show lack of proficiency in through errors. Some speakers may be ‘not fully competent’ in it. On my reading, such a portrayal is only compatible with ELF as N-language, not ELF as languaging or I-language. This is inconsistent with the position generally held in the paradigm (e.g. Jenkins 2000, 2011; Mauranen and Ranta 2009; Seidlhofer 2011; Cogo and Dewey 2012), according to which ELF is a set of resources and strategies for successful languaging, which may or may not be associated with the recurrence of specific N-language norms (or I-language forms). Firth (2009) reaches conclusions about ELF which are parallel to the ones I am developing here, from a different, but I believe ultimately reconcilable, set of premises. He rightly points to the plurilithic potential of ELF scholarship ‘to question [...] the idea of language as a bounded, unitary “thing” with a fixed code and a transcendent framework of exogenous norms’ (165).

For *teaching*, many will protest that codified N- or P-language norms are absolutely, urgently, necessary. Modiano (2009), for example, has argued forcefully for a pragmatic, ‘variety-building’ approach, as an application of Kachruvian sociolinguistics (cf. also Bamgbose 1998). Codifying a set of norms which reflect local identity and communicative needs as targets for learning/teaching is an enterprise which may be both pragmatically and ethically motivated, to the extent it is possible. But a ‘target variety’ remains an unreal (invented) concept, neither socially nor psychologically accessible. Individual learners are expected to (and assume they must) internalize an N- or P-language, a monolithic body of knowledge which ‘belongs to’ others and is used for purposes that are not necessarily their own. Actual outcomes of instructed learning are I-languages that, if the learner has sufficient motivation, aptitude, and opportunity, can functionally converge toward those of others with whom the learner needs/wants to interact. But seldom do they approach convergence on the ‘target variety’ [cf. Parakrama (1995), discussing Sri Lankan English, or Mollin (2007), discussing Euro-English].

At this very early stage in plurilithic thinking, there are no immediate recipes for teaching. The place to start might be inviting teachers to reconceive their traditional role and consider becoming facilitators of ‘[...] an alignment of [learners’] language resources to the needs of a situation, rather than reaching a target level of competence’ (Canagarajah 2009: 928)—in other words, to help learners develop appropriate I-registers. This would embrace many different scenarios, of which the following is a random selection:

- helping school pupils in Nigeria to recognize, and be able to accurately deploy, the features of Nigerian English used in mainstream education;

- teaching ELF accommodation practices to learners in Mexico requiring English for local tourism industry interactions, giving feedback on appropriacy, efficacy, and fluency; and
- helping Indonesian EAP learners preparing to study in an Australian college to construct an English that can align with expected writing practices, by giving feedback on 'accuracy'.

As far as assessment goes, the implication of the plurilithic view appears unambiguous and is, perhaps, of universal application: we should explore the feasibility of measuring success in performing the linguistically mediated *tasks* which are appropriate to the requirements of the learner, rather than assessing *competence* in any N-language variety or P-linguistic system (cf. Troike 1983; Jenkins 2006b).

In sum, language professionals might reflect on the feasibility of:

- teaching to multiple user-determined outcomes, that is, to the construction of adaptable I-languages usable in specific contexts, rather than to a single set of external N- or P-language norms; and
- assessing the non-linguistic *effects* of learners' languaging, not the nature of the I-languages that support it.

CONCLUSION

The 'language disinvention and reconstitution' proposals led by M&P rightly contest the 'language as fixed variety' assumption, but from a stance which, regrettably, spurns mentalist linguistics and cognitively oriented applied linguistics. In this article, I have suggested that monolithic views of languages and language varieties can be contested without rejecting cognitively oriented frameworks out of hand. I have proposed that an understanding of plurilithic Englishes which is open to, and informed by, linguistic and psycholinguistic concepts can facilitate the radical reconceptualization of language learning/teaching that Pennycook (2007, 2009) and others call for, and lay the foundations for a new public understanding of the value of *all* English users' linguistic capital. According to such a view, all language learning and use is determined by the local experiences (and goals) of individuals who are non-conformist mental appropriators of external social practices. This view therefore challenges the idea of learners as acquirers of proficiency in monolithic national, foreign, or indeed international or supranational varieties.

The reconceptualization of 'English', 'the English language', 'English language teaching', 'language teaching', and 'language' that I have sketched here is different from M&P's in that it contests and problematizes, but does not stigmatize or reject. Its inclusiveness, I believe, may give it a better chance of being adopted by members of the broader general and applied linguistics communities, as well as practitioners and 'clients'. If this proves correct, the likelihood of gradual changes in our collective mindsets is increased. This

collective awakening is going to be necessary if real changes in social and professional practices are at some point to follow.

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NOTES

- 1 Cf. *Ethnologue*, for example, which counts 6909 'known living languages' (Lewis 2009).
- 2 Harris (1981) is a notable exception. Papers in Toolan (2009) discuss implications of Harris's approach for language teaching.
- 3 Le Page and Tabouret-Keller (1985: 188–93) provide a partially corresponding, but cognitively detached, taxonomy; Cook's (2010) taxonomy embraces the cognitive perspective, but still differs in important respects.
- 4 Usage-based approaches to language (e.g. Tomasello 2003; Bybee 2010) collectively reject or at least downplay the claim that language acquisition involves an innate component which is specific to the language capacity. The issue is patently moot, characterized by a broad spectrum of evolving positions even within the generativist school (cf. e.g. Larson *et al.* 2010). It has little direct bearing on the cognitively untenable and critically problematic status of the N-language concept, so will not be addressed further here.
- 5 Culicover and Jackendoff (2005: 39–40) state clearly that: '[T]he learner stores current analyses of novel heard utterances in the lexicon. The learning procedure then attempts to construct new and more general lexical entries, in which common parts of existing lexical entries are retained and differing parts are replaced by a variable. This makes the new lexical entry function as a schema or rule that encompasses existing entries and permits construction of new utterances.'
- 6 On the basis of an extended consideration of generative and psycholinguistic treatments of so-called long-distance dependency structures in English, Phillips and Wagers (2007: 754) conclude that 'linguists and psycholinguists are exploring the same cognitive system, albeit with different tools.'

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

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