LHUMAINE

N° 5 | 2025
PLURENSA (PLURilinguisme ENSeignement Apprentissage / Plurilingualism Teaching and Learning / Plurilingüismo Enseñanza Aprendizaje)

On plurilingual practices: A French perspective

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Édition électronique :
URL : https://lhumaine.numerev.com/articles/revue-5/2356-on-plurilingual-practices-a-french-perspective
DOI : numerev_2508
Date de publication : 01/06/2025

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Pour **citer cette publication** : VÉRONIQUE, G. D. (2025) On plurilingual practices: A French perspective. *LHUMAINE*, (5). https://doi.org/10.34745/numerev_2508

As a rule, in France and in Europe at large, multilingualism refers to language diversity at the societal level whereas plurilingualism is used when describing language diversity at the individual level. This contribution highlights points of convergence and divergence between English-speaking and French-speaking research on plurilingualism and multilingualism. It introduces to francophone research work on plurilingualism and multilingualism in Europe, both in terms of conceptualization and use in the field of didactics. It surveys the dispute between J. MacSwan and García et al. on codeswitching, translanguaging and plurilingualism. Finally, the paper offers some explanations for the fact that French-speaking research has been little impacted by translanguaging and the debates it stirred in Anglophone research.

Mots-clés :
Multilingualism, Translanguaging, Didactics, Codeswitching, Critical applied linguistics, Language representation, Interlect

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1. Introduction

In this contribution, I would like to highlight points of convergence and divergence between English-speaking and French-speaking research on plurilingualism and multilingualism. It is a rejoinder to the presentation of J. MacSwan in Montpellier, in June 2023 (MacSwan, 2023). I believe that MacSwan's analysis of codeswitching and his polemic against García et al. (2014) on translanguaging provide good illustrations of some of the issues addressed by English-speaking research in the study of bilingualism and language contact. The points of contention between MacSwan and his opponents bear both on the linguistic analysis of codeswitching proper and on the linguistic ideology that enshrines these analyses.

Despite commonalities in the approach of language contact situations in French and English- speaking research, the notion of translanguaging has not impacted French research. I would like to offer some explanations for this difference. In the course of this paper, I shall refer to Moore's survey of European (mainly francophone) and American approaches to plurilingualism and translanguaging from a conceptual and historical perspective (Moore, 2019). Incidentally, Moore (2019) confirms one of the dominant trends of studies on plurilingualism and multilingualism, which is to relate the description of plurilingual practices to issues in multilingual education.

This paper is entitled “a French perspective” because it is mainly based on a selection of publications in French. “French” as used here is in no way related to the well-known “French theory” (Featherstone, 1986). The focus of my contribution reflects my own research interests in applied linguistics and sociolinguistics. I have investigated *inter alia* naturalistic acquisition of French by Moroccan Arabic adult migrant workers, the sociolinguistics of French Creole speaking societies and the teaching of French as second language in post-colonial settings (Destin & Véronique, 2018; Véronique, 2020, 2021).

As a rule, in France and in Europe at large, multilingualism refers to language diversity at societal level whereas plurilingualism is used when describing language diversity at the individual level (CEFR, 2001). Both Marshall and Moore (2016) and Piccardo (2019) provide clear presentations of plurilingualism as seen from a European perspective. Discussion of plurilingualism and multilingualism in French speaking research has involved two interwoven dimensions: i) a critical review of structuralist analyses of language contact as represented, for instance, by Weinreich (1953), and a plea for alternative theoretical approaches; ii) an extended analysis of issues in multilingual education.

This contribution is organized along the following lines. In section 2 of the paper, I sketch the backdrop of research work on plurilingualism and multilingualism in Europe and in France. Section 3 examines the conceptualization of multilingualism and plurilingualism in francophone research. Section 4 discusses the didactics of plurilingualism from a European and francophone perspective. In Section 5, I address briefly MacSwan’s positionality vis à vis codeswitching and bilingualism. In section 6, translanguaging as developed in English-speaking research and the epistemological strife between the proponents of translanguaging *à la* García et al. and J. MacSwan are examined. The final section of the paper sums up convergences and divergences between Anglophone and Francophone research on plurilingualism and multilingualism and lists some pending issues for French-speaking research in this domain.

2. European and French perspectives on plurilingualism and multilingualism: an overview

During the past fifty years, Europe has promoted the development of plurilingualism and multilingualism in this part of the world through the laws of the Council of Europe and of the European Union and through the actions of its dedicated institutions. As pointed out by Vacca (2010), the laws of the Council of Europe and of the European Union although aimed at protecting minority languages and linguistic diversity are only partly congruent. The language policies of Europe as enacted by the Council of Europe and the European Union, and the language policy of the French Republic have sometimes been at odds although France is a major stakeholder of both European institutions. This section outlines a few European initiatives and decisions in matters of linguistic diversity and discuss the current language policy of the French Republic vis-à-vis multilingualism.

2.1 European initiatives on multilingualism and plurilingualism

European action on language diversity has been enforced through the promulgation of specific laws, the support of dedicated research and the development of the teaching of modern languages, including regional and minority languages. Since the 1970's, the Council of Europe has exerted a strong influence on the teaching of foreign languages in Europe culminating in the production of the *Common European Frame of Reference* for foreign language teaching, published in 2001 and extended in 2018. In 1992, the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages was voted by the Ministers of the Council of Europe and opened to ratification by its member states. Some twelve members of the Council of Europe, including France, did not ratify the text. The law was enforced in 1998.

Since 1994, the European Council runs a European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML), based in Graz (Austria) which aims at developing modern language teaching in Europe on the basis of 4-year programmes. Candelier (2006) provides a presentation of two such ECML programmes devoted to the development of awareness of language diversity and multilingualism in education, *Evlang* (1997-2000) and *Janua Linguarum* (2000-2004).

Various research projects have investigated issues of plurilingualism, multilingualism, and language contact in Europe during the past years. To mention but a few, in the nineties, the European Science Foundation, a major European research institution, funded a network on "Code-switching and language contact", headed by Georges Lüdi. In their introduction, to a volume from this network, L. Milroy and P. Muysken (1995, pp. 1-2) commented on the "contemporary setting of bilingualism studies" in Europe and elsewhere, by pin-pointing at least three factors: i) Modernisation and Globalisation have led to the development of national languages in emergent states alongside the international (ex-colonial) languages such as French, English and Spanish. ii) Large-scale language revival has taken place in Europe and elsewhere. iii) International migration from Global South to the rich industrial North has imported new languages to this part of the world, creating new bilingual communities.

From 2006 to 2011, the DYLAN project (Language Dynamics and Management of Diversity) funded by the European Union investigated actual language practices, representations of multilingualism, and language diversity in Europe. It studied the interconnections between social actors' representations of language and multilingualism, the policies of various European states vis-à-vis multilingualism, and actual language practices in Europe. Three types of situations were explored: private-sector companies, institutions of the European Union, and education (Berthoud, Lüdi, & Grin 2013). Among the many results of the DYLAN project, it was shown that the speakers investigated rely both on national languages and minority languages in a very subtle way in their verbal interactions.

In 2012-13, 'Language Rich Europe', another large- scale project funded by the European Commission and the British Council explored the uses of languages in various

language domains including all levels of education, media and press, public services and public spaces and business (Extra & Yagmur, (eds.) 2012). This project also focussed on societal multilingualism.

2.2. Aspects of the language policy of the French Republic

The French state has always entertained a particular relation to languages other than French spoken within its borders. The enforcement of French as an official and national language has been a matter of concern ever since the 16th Century. However, for centuries up to World War II and the demise of its colonial empire, France remained a multilingual entity despite explicit and repeated efforts to promote French as the nation's language. Besides Britton, Basque, Occitan etc. and other regional languages, in the context of its colonial expansion in the 17th and 18th centuries, French-related Creoles developed in French Caribbean and Indian Ocean colonies, leading to diglossia between French and French-related Creoles in these colonies (Véronique, 2023).

The imposition of French to all French residents was finally achieved only during the first half of the 20th Century, but regional languages maintained themselves to some degree. Decolonization in the sixties has led to a reorganization of political, economic and cultural relations between France and the states once included in its defunct colonial Empire, through institutions such as *Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie* (Véronique, 2011, 2013). Because of its colonial history, of its present-day political situation (overseas France include different plurilingual polities) and because of international migration from the Global South, present-day France has to face the social and linguistic outcomes of multilingualism.

France is still reluctant to adopt an overly welcoming policy towards its regional languages despite the national Deixonne Law of 1951 (recently repealed in favour of new legislation) which opened the way to the teaching of regional languages in its national education system. France has not ratified the European Charter on regional languages but has been led to define a more liberal language policy in overseas France, which is *de facto* and *de jure* more plurilingual than continental France. Bertile (2020) argues that languages spoken in overseas France are both regional languages of the French Republic and local languages whose statuses are defined by the rules and regulations of each of the polities concerned.

3. Conceptualizing plurilingualism and multilingualism: Francophone perspectives

Much efforts in Francophone Sociolinguistics and Applied linguistics have been devoted to the study of languages in contact and codeswitching (see *inter alia* Boyer 1991; Billiez (éds.) 2003). Amidst the theoretical issues raised (see for instance, Gasquet-Cyrus et al., 2010), alternative proposals to Saussure's idealization of *langue* (language) and *parole* (speech) as they transpire from work on language contact, have been in the foreground since the 1990's. These proposals hinge on the idea that the crucial issue in the study of languages in contact is to account for the use of available linguistic

resources in specific contact situations. The theoretical proposals to be discussed below are close in intent but do not lay the same emphasis on the notion of plurilingual repertoire. French-speaking research addressed issues of plurilingualism and multilingualism in quite similar terms to those that led to the emergence of the notion of translanguaging in English-speaking research. However, because of the autonomous development of francophone work and of the antecedence of its questioning, the notion of translanguaging has little impacted research on plurilingualism and multilingualism in the French-speaking world.

3.1. Bilingual language practices

J. Boutet (1994) was one of the first proponents of *pratique langagière* (language practice), which emerged as an early alternative to Saussure's dichotomy of *langue* (language) and *parole* (speech).

> "[…] the notion of language practices refers to the fact that one and all language activities are in permanent interaction with the social situations within which they are produced […] the notion of language practices implies that these are both *determined* by social situations, and that they produce *effects* therein." (pp. 61-62).

In Boutet's analysis, language practices are an important component of social *praxis*, shaped by its dynamic nature. The notion of language practice has later been applied to bilingualism research as *pratiques langagières bilingues* (bilingual language practices).

3.2. Bilingual speech and Interlect

In 1986, Lüdi and Py developed the notion of *parler bilingue* (*bilingual speech*) to account for a type of speech where linguistic resources from languages in contact (i.e., codeswitching, borrowing and transcodic markers) are used to produce new forms of speech. In 2007, G. Lüdi extended the meaning of the notion of *parler bilingue*, which was replaced by *parler plurilingue* (*plurilingual speech*) in relation to the plurilingual repertoire of plurilingual social actors (Lüdi, 2007, 2008).

In his critique of the notion of diglossia as applied to the linguistic description of Creole societies, Prudent (1981) also developed an alternative view on code-mixing and code-switching, coining the notion of *interlecte* (interlect). Prudent (2005, p. 362) provides the following definition:

> "Interlect […] (is) this moment defined as a dynamic discursive space, which exhibits the incidence of numerous codeswitchings, code-mixings, interferences, accumulations of French and Creole at points in utterances which "grammars of languages" do not have the capacity to describe.

De Robillard (2013) compares the pros and cons of interlect and bilingual speech.

3.3. Plurilingual competence and plurilingual repertoire

Following D. Hymes (1984), D. Coste (1991, 1998, 2001) has been instrumental in promoting the investigation of "observable plurilingual practices and observable representations of plurilingualism and (…) (the) plurilingual skills underlying such practices and partly marked by these representations." (Coste, 2001, p. 192). In the wake of work on the acquisition of third languages, Coste (2001, pp. 196-197) posits that

> "[…] the languages present are neither equal in terms of degree of mastery, nor in terms of order and methods of acquisition, nor in terms of the representations that can be attached to them. But in this complex configuration of mastery, it is licit to consider that certain of these languages play a pivotal role, of support language, of reference language […]".
>
> "[…] neither the mother tongue nor other learned languages are completely out of play in the exercise of plurilingual competence, however heterogeneous the latter may be. A certain epilinguistic monitoring is maintained, which makes it possible to activate, if necessary, the knowledge and know-how specific to a language regarding the use and learning of another language".

Following this perspective, codeswitching or rather transcodic markers (*marques transcodiques*) may be considered as instantiations of plurilingual competence. In the wake of Coste *inter alia*, Moore and Castellotti (2008, p.18) defined communicative competence as:

> "[…] the ability to resort *in situ* and in action to a repertoire made up of plural and diversified resources which enables the speaker to recognize and assert himself/ herself as a multilingual social actor, capable of managing imbalance and evolving circumstances, according to his/her local interpretations of the situation and of his/her intentions."

3.4. Summary

The difference between the notions discussed above lies mainly in the context from which they originated and in their scope. Interlect has mainly been propounded to account for the relation between a Creole and its lexifier language. As for "bilingual or plurilingual speech" and "bilingual language practice", these notions are attempts to account first and foremost for the pragmatics of bilingual speech as instantiated in social contexts and for the relation between bilingual representations and bilingual speech.

4. Didactics of Plurilingualism: Francophone perspectives

Coste, Moore and Zarate (1997) is probably the seminal paper that fostered the emergence of plurilingualism in language teaching in the French and European school systems. Coste (2001, 2003), Castellotti (2001a and b) and Moore (2003) have all highlighted the guidelines and changes ushered by this paper and which have been

conducive to the emergence of plurilingual didactics:

- i) plural approaches in language teaching aim to foster plurilingual competence, which is to be distinguished from the teaching of monolingual skills in a range of foreign languages.

- ii) The distinction between first/mother tongue and foreign language must be thought anew.

- iii) The acquisition of a third or fourth language involves different mechanisms from those mustered during the process of second language acquisition.

From the point of view of classroom methodology, plural approaches promote code "alternations" and inter-linguistic "bridges" (*inter alia* Castellotti & Moore 2005, Prudent, Tupin, & Wharton (éds) 2005). They advocate plurilingual methods, especially in the practice of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). Plurilingual teaching devices follow at least two caveats: i) develop plurilingual skills in the learners; ii) enhance a holistic approach to their language repertoires. French-speaking research on plurilingual education (see *inter alia* Candelier, 2003; Gajo, 2001; Moore, 2003) has emphasized the role of language representations and of language awareness in relation to the use of two or more languages in the classroom (as it is the case in Andorra and Val d'Aoste, for instance).

In her analysis of the development of the notion of plurilingual competence, Moore (2019, p. 45) posits that Coste, Moore and Zarate's proposal fostered a Copernican revolution in plurilingual teaching in Europe, defining anew the goals of language teaching and reinstating social considerations and the learner as a person, in language acquisition theory. Moore (2019) emphasizes the convergences between French research work on plurilingual competence and work on translanguaging in the English-speaking world, because of their common rejection of the 'monolingual ideal' and of the norm of the native speaker as the received social norm.

In Zarate, Lévy and Kramsch (eds.) (2011, p. 414), didactics of plurilingualism is defined in the following terms:

> "Didactics of plurilingualism and pluriculturalism is a means of teaching not only a foreign language to those who do not speak it, but of diversifying and relativizing such traditional notions as L1 and L2, native and non-native speaker, mono-, bi- and plurilingual individuals, national languages and cultures, universal language, standard language, spoken and written language, as so many social and historical constructs. In order to teach any standard language, didactics of plurilingualism must situate that language in its historical plurality and in relation to the politics of its diffusion over the centuries."

Candelier and Castellotti (2013) also emphasize the difficulty of providing a simple definition of the didactics of plurilingualism. They stress the fact that the relevant issue

is not the number of languages taught in a given classroom setting but rather how the languages taught interact in the classroom. Because of the need to adapt the teaching of plurilingualism to a diversity of social contexts and because of differing linguistic needs, Candelier and Castellotti (2013, p. 208) highlight the plurality of educational and linguistic goals in plurilingual teaching. They claim that they can be no other type of foreign language didactics but the didactics of plurilingualism (Candelier & Castelotti, 2013, p. 212).

5. J. MacSwan on codeswitching and bilingualism: a summary

Following Grosjean (1982), J. MacSwan adopts a holistic perspective on the acquisition and use of multiple languages and claims that bilingualism and translanguaging must be vindicated. He discusses the use of multilingualism in a variety of social settings and claims that translanguaging may prove to be a useful pedagogical construct in foreign language classrooms. As a matter of fact, MacSwan (2020) advocates that codeswitching should be licit in the classroom following the New Concurrent Approach of Jacobson (1981) (Cenoz & Gorter, 2021; Jacobson, 1981; MacSwan & Faltis (eds), 2020).

As a generative linguist, J. MacSwan develops a minimalist approach to the study of codeswitching in terms of *i-grammar* (MacSwan, 1999). Although MacSwan acknowledges research work on codeswitching as language use or performance which describes the sociolinguistics and the pragmatics of codeswitching in context, he is mainly concerned with the descriptive and theoretical issues of the analysis of codeswitching as language structure or competence. As a minimalist, J. MacSwan supports the idea that the grammar of codeswitching should not be confounded with the linguistic repertoire of the bilingual speaker. MacSwan upholds a "constraint free approach" to the analysis of codeswitching, implying that the grammaticality of code-switched sequences does not result from the application of specific codeswitching rules such as the equivalence principle (Poplack, 1980), but from "independently motivated principles of grammar" as it is the case, for instance, of constraints on the phonetic form of codeswitched sequences (MacSwan, 2020).

J. MacSwan (2017) advocates that a "multilingual perspective on translanguaging", including codeswitching, is a positive contribution to the education of minority and racialized bilinguals. This is precisely the main subject of dispute between J. MacSwan and Otheguy et al. (2015) *inter alia.* Although J. MacSwan welcomed O. García and Li Wei (2014) early work on translanguaging. He is more critical of later versions of translanguaging shaped by "abyssal thinking". In matters of linguistic ideology, MacSwan's is critical of non-grounded linguistic ideology and of the misuse of deconstructivism (McSwan & Rolstad, 2024). Strangely enough, because of his linguistic persuasion, J. MacSwan is led to ignore *de jure* the oft-raised issue of "named languages" (Pennycock, 2006). This polemic will be discussed in section 6.

6. Languaging and translanguaging: An Anglophone perspective on languages in contact

Languaging first and translanguaging later, are notions that have been brought to the fore in English-speaking literature mainly in the context of second language acquisition research (Swain, 2006) and of multilingual teaching, especially in Wales (Baker, 2003). Similarly to the use of “language practices” in French-speaking literature, the notions of languaging and translanguaging in English-speaking research imply both issues of ideology, i.e. an on-going debate on named languages and on theories of language, and of description of language contact. It is beyond the scope of this contribution to survey all the issues involved in the recourse to languaging and translanguaging (but see *inter alia* Makoni, 2012; Cenoz & Gorter, 2021). The paper will restrict itself solely to aspects of the conflict between MacSwan (MacSwan, 2017, 2024) and Otheguy, García and Reid. (2015).

6.1. Languaging and Translanguaging

García and Li Wei (2014) trace the origin of ‘languaging’ back to Becker (1988, 1991) and Maturana and Varela (1998) and define it as the capacity (i. e. the social practices and actions) mustered through the agency of social actors in specific language situations. Following the ‘multilingual turn’ (May 2013), García and Li Wei promote the notion of translanguaging which, according to them, “goes beyond the notion of multicompetence of bilingual speakers” (García & Li, 2014, p. 22). According to these authors (García & Li, 2018), translanguaging is related to the concept of “plurilingualism,” as defined by the Council of Europe but “whereas plurilingualism emphasizes the varied use of named languages of nation-states, translanguaging proposes a disaggregated view of language as the meaning-making features that human beings use. These, of course, sometimes are bundled together in what we know as named languages, but sometimes fall beyond the constructed definition of a single named language”. Piccardo (2019) opposes this restrictive view of plurilingualism.

García and Li Wei contend that “translanguaging are *multiple discursive practices* in which bilinguals engage in order to *make sense of their bilingual worlds”* (García & Li, 2014, p. 22). Thus, according to these authors, translanguaging differs from code-switching. It should be viewed as “the discursive norm in bilingual families and communities” (García & Li 2014, p. 23).

6.2. Translanguaging and racialized bilinguals

García et al. (2021) deepen their analysis of translanguaging through an analysis of language education for racialized bilinguals. Adopting de Sousa Santos’ (2007) notion of abyssal thinking as a mode of rejection of the other World by the Northern affluent society, they pose that working in a translanguaging perspective on education, overcomes the defects, limits and harms of abyssal thinking, i. e. turning racialized bilinguals into non-visible entities. García et al. (2021) point to major differences between their conception and both the European notion of plurilingualism and the notion of codeswitching as defined by MacSwan; García et al. (2021) blame these authors and notions for ignoring bilinguals’ effective languaging practices.

6.3. Aspects of an epistemological strife

Otheguy, García and Reid (2019) contrast a translanguaging approach that upholds that the linguistic practices of bilinguals are unitary and do not correspond to the boundaries set by two or more socially named languages, with the "dual correspondence theory" of two languages co-existing in the bilingual mind as represented for instance by J. MacSwan. Otheguy, García and Reid (2019) question the existence of languages. The ultimate point of this position is to be found in Pennycock (2006) *inter alia* who would rather focus on language landscape or semiotic assemblages rather than "named languages" (Pennycook, 2017). Otheguy, García and Reid (2019) challenge J. MacSwan (2017) both on empirical grounds, claiming that some usages of bilingual Latinx speakers that his model would deny as illicit are in fact licit, and on theoretical ground, indicating that reference to generative grammar and *i-language*, does not preclude reference to two distinct grammars in the bilingual speaker's cognition.

According to MacSwan and Rolstad (2021, p. 7), early work on translanguaging by García grounded on empirical work has turned in its later versions into an ungrounded ideological theory, mainly under the influence of Pennycock's criticism of "named languages" as colonial inventions. MacSwan and Rolstad (2021) argue that Otheguy et al. have modified their analysis of translanguaging under the influence of Pennycock's deconstructivism. Against a deconstructivist approach to translanguaging, MacSwan and Rolstad (2021, p. 7) refer to European research work on plurilingualism and advocate recourse to this notion and to plurilanguaging. In a response to MacSwan and Rolstad (2021), Pennycock (2024) calls for *critical engagement* when discussing critical theories. He questions the fact that modernist epistemologies, such as the one defended by MacSwan, are in a position to understand multilingualisms in the Global South.

7. Discussion

Despite dissatisfaction with Saussure's dichotomy of *langue* and *parole*, and its replacement by notions such as language practices or bilingual practices, French-speaking research work on multilingualism and plurilingualism has devoted little space to the epistemological and ideological underpinnings of its positions. This difference with Anglophone research may be partly due to the fact that critical applied linguistics as developed by Pennycock (2001) has exerted no direct influence in the francophone world. A critique of the global North approach to multilingualism has not prevailed in European and francophone research on didactics of plurilingualism.

In francophone research literature, epistemological discussions bearing on linguistic theory have remained on the outskirts of the field of multilingualism and plurilingualism studies. For this very reason, the bulk of research on translanguaging also has not exerted any significant influence on the didactics of plurilingualism in France and Europe. Instead, much attention has been paid to the language representations of plurilingual speakers in francophone research. However, plurilingualism as promoted in Europe has been subjected to criticism by proponents of translanguaging because of its ideological bias towards named languages.

Although plurilingualism is endorsed as a desirable goal in language education in Europe and in France, much remains to be accomplished to achieve this goal at least in the national French education system. Besides curriculum and teacher training issues, other questions are pending. Given the linguistic diversity of France, especially of overseas France, a real plurilingual school organization needs still to be enacted. Decisions have still to be taken vis à vis the teaching of regional languages in overseas France (Véronique, 2020). Besides, as many ex-colonial powers, the French Republic has to re-define its policy towards the teaching of the French language in post-colonial settings. Although little reference has been made to translanguaging and to the debate it stirred in the English-speaking world, Francophone research work stands still in need of developing further research on plurilingualism and multilingualism.

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