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The one, the many and the Other: representing mono/multilingualism in post- 9/11 verbal hygiene

I begin with one of the questions offered by the organizers of this symposium: ‘If multilingualism is founded on an assumption that we are shifting away from a monolingual perspective, how sound is that assumption? Can one shift away from that which does not exist in the first place?’ My perspective is that of a sociolinguist with a particular interest in language ideologies and verbal hygiene practices (Cameron 1995/in press). I take it that what ‘exists’ encompasses not only empirically-observed linguistic practice, but also representations of language, which often exert a more powerful influence on the cultural imagination than the observable facts of language-use. However assiduously academics may seek to criticize or deconstruct them, ‘monolingualism’ and ‘multilingualism’ undoubtedly exist in the world as ideological constructs, and in my view their existence has material and significant consequences; but it is difficult to generalize about the way in which they are constructed or imagined for different languages, nation-states, historical periods and geographical/social locations. Representations of monolingualism/multilingualism are also representations of particular languages (and people) in particular times and places: that inevitably shapes their form and the cultural work they do. In this presentation I want to explore these points (and problematize the notion of ‘a’ monolingual/multilingual perspective) by examining the ongoing, post 9/11 (re)construction of ‘monolingualism’ and ‘multilingualism’ in the discourses which circulate in contemporary British society.

Questions addressed

How and to what effect has multilingualism been conflated with *multiculturalism* in academic research and public policy?

If multilingualism is founded on an assumption that we are shifting away from a monolingual perspective, how sound is that assumption? Can one shift away from that which does not exist in the first place?

What is the contemporary relationship between monolingualism and the various modern nation-states that historically sought to establish a “unified identity” under that umbrella?

Readings

Cameron, D (2012) ‘Afterword’, *Verbal Hygiene*. Routledge Classics in Linguistics, Milton Park: Routledge.

Duchêne, A, and M. Heller (eds) (2007) *Discourses of Endangerment*. London: Continuum.

Karmani, S. (2009) ‘English, “terror” and Islam’, *Applied Linguistics* 26(2): 262-7.