

# Language, Space and Power

## A Critical Look at Bilingual Education

Samina Hadi-Tabassum

**BILINGUAL EDUCATION AND BILINGUALISM 55**

Series Editors: Nancy H. Hornberger and Colin Baker

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**MULTILINGUAL MATTERS LTD**

Clevedon • Buffalo • Toronto

**Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data**

Hadi-Tabassum, Samina

Language, Space and Power: A Critical Look at Bilingual Education

Samina Hadi-Tabassum.

Bilingual Education and Bilingualism: 55

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Education, Bilingual. 2. Language acquisition--Social aspects. I. Title. II. Series.

LC3715.H32 2005

370.117--dc22

2005027484

**British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data**

A catalogue entry for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 1-85359-879-8/ EAN 978-1-85359-879-1 (hbk)

ISBN 1-85359-878-X/ EAN 978-1-85359-878-4 (pbk)

**Multilingual Matters Ltd**

UK: Frankfurt Lodge, Clevedon Hall, Victoria Road, Clevedon BS21 7HH.

USA: UTP, 2250 Military Road, Tonawanda, NY 14150, USA.

Canada: UTP, 5201 Dufferin Street, North York, Ontario M3H 5T8, Canada.

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Typeset by Florence Production Ltd.

Printed and bound in Great Britain by the Cromwell Press Ltd.

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# Contents

Introduction . . . . . 1

1 The Research Setting . . . . . 24

2 Language, Space and Power: Examining Metalinguistic  
Conflicts Along the Borderlands . . . . . 55

3 The Cheers: The Ethics of Making Aesthetic Judgments . . . . . 124

4 *Jack, Su Mama Y El Burro*: The Performativity of Race, Gender,  
and Language in a Bilingual Play . . . . . 167

5 The Flow and Movement of Music: Appropriating the Third Space . 217

6 Conclusion: False Binaries and True Dialectics . . . . . 271

References . . . . . 286

Index . . . . . 294

# ***Introduction***

The goal of *Language, Space and Power* is to richly describe the sociolinguistic and sociocultural life of a dual language classroom in which attention is given to not only the language learning processes at hand but also to how race, ethnicity and gender dynamics interact within the language acquisition process. Much attention has been given to the quantitative research supporting the academic success of dual language programs (Collier, 1989; Gandra & Merino, 1993; Lindholm & Gavlek, 1994; Lindholm-Leary, 2001). However, critics of dual immersion programs state that there has been relatively little in-depth examination of the contextual factors in dual immersion development: (1) the quality of education in the minority language; (2) the effects of dual immersion instruction on intergroup relations between students; (3) how dual immersion programs define the relationship between language and power; and (4) how that relationship may affect both language majority and language minority students in the dual immersion classroom (Valdes, 1997). In this book I hope to fill a gap in qualitative research focusing on bilingual education by presenting a close examination of a fifth-grade, Spanish/English, 50/50 dual immersion classroom located in a large urban public elementary school that will be known as PS 2000 in this book. Theoretical issues pertaining to language, space and power frame the book as I examine the power-based tensions and conflicts over the established border between the Spanish and English language in this fifth-grade dual immersion classroom and the kinds of discursive spaces that allow students to talk openly about these border-boundary tensions and conflicts.

The overall focus of the book is to first come to an understanding of the day-to-day discourse in a fifth-grade dual immersion classroom in order to determine where the borders and boundaries lie between Spanish and English; then locate particular classroom spaces, places and times

when the dual immersion students collectively voiced their resistance and counter discourse toward the established structural boundary between the Spanish and English language and the unequal division and distribution of the two languages in their classroom; and ultimately, observing whether the dual immersion students' metalinguistic discussions ever went through a process of negotiation, mediation, resolution and empowerment that lead to a transgressive, empowering *third space* in which they could overcome the inequitable borders and boundaries between the two languages and in which language use and production in the classroom was no longer structured according to a strict binary but was instead fluid and hybrid (Bhabha, 1994). By focusing on how bilingual students conceptualize and understand linguistic divisions and differentiations and whether or not they ever resolve their metalinguistic conflicts over linguistic borders and boundaries, this book explores the ideas and beliefs held by the dual immersion students on language itself and how their heightened self-awareness of language raised them toward a critical consciousness – toward an awareness of linguistic inequities and toward a transcendental understanding of language.

To accomplish these goals, I used a critical ethnography methodology, which allows the researcher to locate points and times of discourse and counter discourse. I sought those metalinguistic discussions and disruptions that openly addressed issues of power struggles over language use and resistance toward linguistic borders and boundaries. I then mapped the spatial trajectory for these metalinguistic discussions and disruptions by locating sites where and when there existed a potential third space of radical openness, a liminal space where differences can be articulated and where critical thinking is encouraged – a third space where micro-revolts can occur beyond the centered binary of the dual immersion model (Bhabha, 1994). Thus, as a cartographer of metalinguistic third spaces, my terrain was the contested terrain of resistance, opposition, tension and negotiation – where the instability of the Spanish/English linguistic borders and boundaries heightened to a great concern in which perhaps the transgression or maintenance of borders and boundaries was magnified (Soja, 1996). Instead of measuring and counting the students' language proficiency rates, this book directs attention to the ideological aspects of linguistic differentiation and inequities and further posits that the dual immersion classroom can be a decentered, fragmentary place of conflicting voices that coexist and collide together and sometimes deconstruct the false binary between the two languages. The following research questions on metalanguage, power/resistance and the discursive third space help frame the ethnographic endeavor of this book:



- (1) When and where do the fifth-grade dual immersion students use metalanguage to voice their resistance towards the structural borders and boundaries between the Spanish and English language and thereby overtly express a conflict with the established borders and boundaries?
- (2) How do the dual immersion students interpret the border and boundaries between the Spanish and English language and its dichotomizing and partitioning process? How do they recognize and account for the differentiation between the two languages through their metalinguistic discussions (e.g., "Why isn't Spanish used during informal social spaces such as the lunchroom or gym class? Why is English used more often during group work?").
- (3) What are the students actually *saying-writing-doing-being-valuing-believing* about the borders and boundaries between Spanish and English during their metalinguistic discussions (Gee, 1992)? What kind of discourse and counter discourse is produced during these metalinguistic discussions?
- (4) What types of power relations and power differentials are established during these metalinguistic discussions? Do the power relations between students and teachers ever shift during the metalinguistic discussions? How do the power relations and power differentials relate to the spaces in which the metalinguistic discussions occur most often?
- (5) Do the students ever reach a threshold point in their metalinguistic discussions, through a process of mediation and negotiation, which can be labeled as a transgressive third space where the structural border between the two languages has opened, shifted, and transformed itself so that the dual immersion students arrive at a transcendental understanding of the two languages that then subsequently allows for hybridization and fluidity between the two languages?

The following sections constitute the theoretical foundation for this book and unfold in layers to reveal how imperative it is to see a dual language classroom as a polysemic text to be analyzed in its many conflicting domains. The metaphysical distance between theory and practice will dissipate soon as we examine a real dual language classroom over an extended period of time, reflecting and describing its topoi, in which even ordinary classroom phenomena have revelatory force. A description of the matrix of linguistic border and boundaries in the dual language immersion model will be the point of origin in our journey to then explain the structure and spatialization of power in this dual

language classroom – all the while revealing something concrete about human nature, the human subject, race and culture.

### **Borders and Boundaries: Dividing Languages Structurally According to Time and Space**

Two-way immersion (TWI) bilingual education is an integrated language immersion program in which students who speak a majority language, such as English, study and learn together in the same classroom with students who speak a minority language, which is often Spanish but can include other minority languages such as Mandarin, Korean and Arabic – depending on the geographic location. Both the language majority and language minority students learn the two languages simultaneously and acquire academic content knowledge through both L1 (English) and L2 (Spanish, Korean, etc.). Dual immersion education is another term used more often to describe TWI bilingual programs but both terms signify the same type of bilingual education program in which two distinct sociolinguistic student groups are fully immersed in learning both the majority and minority language across all content areas and within the same classroom setting. The fundamental aim of a dual immersion program is to teach English-dominant students a minority language such as Spanish in all subject areas, starting early in elementary school, in the same classroom setting, and at the same time that language minority students are learning the English language along with their own native language – thereby building upon both academic proficiency and linguistic proficiency in the majority and minority language for both student populations. There is also reputedly a greater likelihood of cross-cultural dialogue between the two distinct sociolinguistic student groups, both native and nonnative speakers of English, in a dual immersion elementary classroom. Thus, there is potential for a cross-pollination and gestation of both languages and cultures in a dual immersion model that is not inherently found in other types of bilingual programs.

According to researchers at the Center for Applied Linguistics (Christian, 1994), the traditional methods for dividing classroom instruction equally between the majority and minority languages in a dual immersion classroom include the following: (1) division by time in which instruction of each language can occur during half-day, alternate days, or alternate week intervals; (2) division by content in which the language chosen for instruction depends on the subject matter, for example, when Spanish is used solely to teach mathematics and science and English is used solely to teach language arts and reading; and (3) division by staff

in which either there are two teachers who teach the dual immersion class with at least one teacher fluent in the minority language and one teacher fluent in the majority language or where one teacher who is fluent in both languages teaches all the students. The instructional use of bilingual materials also promotes the development of a balanced bilingualism in both student groups.

The two languages in a dual immersion classroom are in turn organized in a structurally parallel way, despite the cultural and historical differences between Spanish and English. Even though English is often endowed with greater power and prestige than Spanish, the two languages are not hierarchically ordered; rather, the dual immersion model configures the Spanish and English language in separate and contrasting but equal and symmetrical relations. Perhaps most important in marking this distinction is the division and distribution of the two languages according to equal numbers of alternate days, half-days and weeks; content area; and teaching staff. A dual immersion classroom can divide the two languages into structured equal halves during the school day by having Spanish instruction in the mornings and English instruction in the afternoons, as well as divide the content areas and teaching staff according to equal linguistic divisions. The dichotomy between Spanish and English subsequently produces a linguistic differentiation through its border-making design in which each language is separated and segregated into its own discrete space and time and is not allowed to mix with the other.

In order to create equal power relations between the majority and minority language, the dual immersion model essentially uses underlying structuralist methods and principles to create a structured linguistic equilibrium in the teaching of the two languages. That is, in order to form a dual immersion program, there is an elementary structure of binary signification, Spanish:English:: – Spanish: – English, on which a dual immersion program rests so that each language is equally recognized and valued (Levi-Strauss, 1976). Like all cultural binary oppositions, the Spanish:English::–Spanish:–English binary constitutes a structure of mutual entailment, one language deriving meaning and existence from the opposite language. A binary axiology is built based on two categories – Spanish and English – and this bifurcation is supported by a structure of classification that has two units made up of both antagonism and similarities, binaries manifested by history and constituted by different sorts of cultural and literary discourse. Structuralism is known as the first wave of *sphere scholarship* that used the separate sphere model to map out real social spaces such as classrooms and schools by separating them into

specific bounded spaces associated with ideological and opposing binary forces, both antagonism and similarities, such as maleness and femaleness, whiteness and blackness and Spanishness and Englishness (Kerber, 1988).

Furthermore, the theoretical approach offered by structuralism emphasizes that elements of language, for example, must be understood in terms of their relationship to the entire system of language, thus there is a part-to-whole relationship formed between the Spanish and English parts and the whole dual immersion model in itself (Saussure, 1965). Moreover, an essential premise in structuralism is that social and linguistic phenomena, like the Spanish and English language in a dual immersion classroom, do not have inherent meaning in themselves but rather can only be sensibly defined as parts of larger governing systems and that the meaning of these languages can be revealed only when larger systems are recognized and understood structurally – the notion that the whole (a dual immersion model) is greater than its parts (Spanish and English). The parts then can only have meaning if they are a fragment of the whole system and are meaningless if they stand on their own explanatory power as parts. In dual immersion classrooms, as well as in other bilingual classrooms where there are two functioning languages, a structuralist model would suggest that the Spanish and English language can only be meaningful in relation to each other and cannot be understood in and of themselves since they cannot stand alone. In order to have meaning in a dual immersion classroom, the majority and minority must form a signifying structural whole; the model is dependent on each of the parts for its identity and does not want a Spanish-only or English-only type of language instruction program. Thus, signification relies on the totality of a dual immersion structure as opposed to solely its internal parts.

Given the situated patterns of equivalence and equality in a dual immersion classroom, the theoretical approach offered by structuralism also emphasizes that meaning in a dual immersion classroom is contingent upon the established strict borders between the Spanish and English language – hence the obsession with classifying and counting instructional time equally according to each language (Calderon, 1996). In turn, the structure of a dual immersion model has to emphasize linguistic “order, accountability, systematization, rationalism, expertise, specialization, linear development, and control” in order to implement a truly democratic program in which each language has equal time and space and follows a binary path of parallel construction (Cherryholmes, 1988: 9).

Furthermore, two key structural notions help establish the democratic character of dual immersion programs: the notion of polarities and the

notion of equivalence (Jakobson, 1990). Polarities constitute the meta-physical force of binary opposition between the Spanish and English language in a dual immersion classroom. Yet, the polarities between Spanish and English share equal ground because of the stated equivalent status between the two languages, especially in a 50/50 dual immersion model. Thus, in order to have equivalency between the two languages, there needs to be a polar opposition between them as well. In other words, structuralism focuses more so on the intermingling relationship of polarity and equivalence between the two languages rather than on the languages themselves as the subject of study. Spanish and English have value or meaning not in themselves necessarily but in virtue of the polar relationship between them; they can only be seen as equals when they are kept at polar opposites within the classroom discourse, separated by days, times, people and content areas. However, what happens when it is necessary to duplicate a structural object such as a dual immersion classroom that is inherently bound by notions of polarity and equivalence?

Even though the objective of dual immersion programs is to create structured equality between the Spanish and English language, the structure of the classroom itself can only be an imitation of equality because that equality between majority and minority languages has never been actually present historically within our national discourse, which still structures society and social institutions according to a monolingual framework in which English is the language of hegemony and dominance and thus has a higher position in the sociocultural hierarchy:

The goal of all structuralist activity, whether reflexive or poetic, is to reconstruct an "object" [the dual immersion classroom] in such a way as to manifest thereby the rules of its functioning of this object. Structure is therefore actually a simulacrum of the object, but a directed interested simulacrum, since the imitated object makes something appear which remained invisible or . . . unintelligible in the natural object. (Barthes, 1992: 65)

It is this recognition that language itself has a history that leads us away from the claim that structures of meaning can be essentially reconstructed in their simulacrums. The structuralist paradigm does not address the historical aspects of inequality between the Spanish and English language, not to mention present inequalities, because structuralism mainly seeks to construct a contingent relationship between the various parts of a structure without recourse to any historical basis for explanation. The equality of languages is achieved in a dual immersion classroom through

the polarity and equivalence of languages; however, it is still an imitation or simulacrum of democracy because Spanish and English did not start off from a historically equivalent space.

Furthermore, there are many other concerns that a structuralist paradigm overlooks such as a lack of concern for the play of difference between languages and how that difference affects the binary structure. The totalizing nature of language as found in structuralism ignores the possibility of referring to the majority and minority language in a dual immersion classroom in terms of their dispersion and differentiation. Instead of emphasizing the principle of difference and disparity between the Spanish and English language, structuralism views a dual immersion classroom design as a normative structure that follows an organizing principle of holism where Spanish and English come together in a complementary form and congruent manner.

In addition, by treating language as a symbolic structure that follows established codes, structuralism also turns away from the speaking subjects of language and their contradictory or conflicting voices as they may be found in the lived experience of everyday speech within a dual immersion classroom. Instead, structuralism constitutes itself as a self-referential system so that "language speaks of itself, its forms, and its objects" and is in turn able to generate connotations that are remote from real human experience in the everyday classroom (Williams, 1999: 58). This, of course, shows how structuralism strips away the speaking subject and the role of discourse and instead turns the study of language into a discipline separated from an actual observation of language use. In treating it as such, structuralism seeks to divorce language from all that lies outside of its system, from all external causes and determinations that may act upon language, from external classroom reality itself.

Structuralism's emphasis on systemic thought further constrains social structures by classifying, ordering and programming them in order to determine and control every aspect of their lives so that there is no room for innovation, creativity and non-conformity (Lefebvre, 1999). Its technocrats or architects presuppose that society should be a rational system and they plan thereafter to make it one as well. Structuralist systems, such as the dual immersion model, with their proposed rational coherence and transparent cohesion, are a technocratic ideal because in practice they attempt to predetermine borders and boundaries and stipulate norms and rules to formulate efficient bilingual education models.

However, the research in this book suggests that the binary between Spanish and English is a false binary; just like all binaries, it can only produce a false consciousness. This book describes instead a fundamentally

unstable and shifting classroom that knows no permanent or solid place for linguistic equality and where the utopian impulse to purge, homogenize and to relocate problematic inequalities is dispelled. By examining the unequal production of language in the classroom as well as the unstable social ties between majority and minority language students, this book takes on a post-structuralist framework by analyzing the non-utopian tensions and struggles along the shifting borderland between Spanish and English. A post-structuralist study then would call into question the binary coherence and stability of a dual immersion classroom by drawing awareness that the bilingual classroom can be a fragmentary place where shifting borders between two putatively equal languages can destabilize and decenter the binary structure proposed in the original model.

The work of post-structural thinkers such as Jean-Francois Lyotard and Michel Foucault has cast great doubt upon the classic, structural notions of what constitutes objective truth, reality, meaning and knowledge in the study of language. Post-structural theorists find it necessary to subvert structuralism by focusing instead on the heterogeneous, the diverse, the subjective, the spontaneous, the relative and the fragmentary since they believe that there is no one objective truth, reality, meaning and form of knowledge within the study of language. Rather, language for post-structuralists is in a constant state of flux where the creation of new and multiple meanings is possible through a series of oppositions and transformations of language itself. They argue that there are no definitive, closed structural boundaries that can build logical categories of language by means of binary contrast; rather, language has a history that becomes a part of the process by which new ideas and meanings come into existence and change its original structure (Bannet, 1989). Moreover, post-structuralists have characterized language and thought processes according to gaps, discontinuities and suspensions of dictated meanings in which difference, plurality and multiplicity and the coexistence of opposites are allowed free play and are not confined by strict borders and boundaries.

The following section is intended to provide a post-structuralist framework for dual immersion programs that abandons the quest for a structural theory of language learning and its discrete analysis of language proficiency and acquisition. Instead, the post-structuralist framework for this book concentrates on situated disunity and metalinguistic conflicts over language use and linguistic borders and boundaries, and how certain speaking subjects within the dual immersion classroom challenged these linguistic borders and boundaries and sometimes shifted them in a

different direction. However, the book should not be seen as an attack or a criticism of dual immersion programs and bilingual education in general. Instead, this book aims to open up the dual immersion discourse in bilingual education research to a post-structuralist sensibility that works at the local classroom level and grounds post-structuralism in the social dynamics of a specific dual immersion classroom extended over time and across multiple spaces.

## **A Post-structuralist Framework for Dual Immersion Programs**

Structuralism is continually criticized by post-structuralist thinkers because its theoretical construct does not account for individual human action or agency, which may conflict with a deterministic structure, such as a dual immersion classroom (Lyotard, 1984). Instead of seeing structures such as dual immersion classrooms as an organized reality that behaves mechanistically in that its structure is rigid with tightly defined relationships, post-structuralists see the structure as a product of individualized human creation or *habitus* that is not necessarily universal in thought processes. Instead, the locally situated dual immersion classroom can be open to dynamics, change, fluidity and even self-contradiction in its meaning-making: "I wanted to react against structuralism and its strange philosophy of action which . . . made the agent disappear by reducing it to the role of supporter or bearer of the structure" (Bourdieu, 1977: 179). Post-structuralism advocates a dissolution of totalizing structures that they feel are falsified and non-subjective; instead, they place emphasis on the subject or agent and its sense of agency and power (Williams, 1999).

Furthermore, in the post-structuralist framework, there is no definitive one-to-one correspondence between Spanish and English in which both languages can be divided equally so that they have equal representation in the dual immersion classroom. In fact, a post-structuralist would claim that there is no determinable relation at all between the two languages because post-structuralism would be highly critical of the proposed unity of dual immersion programs as being always stable. Post-structuralists also refuse the stability of meaning often assumed with structures such as the dual immersion program; instead, they stress its fragmentation – of language, of time, of human subjects, of the dual immersion classroom structure itself. For post-structuralists, all total systemic thought is suspect to a sense of falseness and untruth. Rather, the post-structuralist paradigm consciously acknowledges that classroom reality is fragmented,



multidimensional, uncertain, decontextualized and differentially valued in a manner that promotes conflicts and agonistics (Sarup, 1993). Thus, a post-structuralist paradigm depends on individual meanings and the contexts in which dual immersion programs are applied. This realization, in turn, results in an attempt to reassert the fragmentary nature of classroom reality. Instead of depending on universally structured dual immersion truths, these individual fragmentary meanings are constantly shifting and destabilizing the consistency of its own binary structure. There are no concrete egalitarian dual immersion structures that can create definitive borders and boundaries between one language and another. There are only shifting borders and boundaries, and moving, destabilizing, decentering structures with no false unity. A post-structuralist study then would call into question the coherence and autonomy of dual immersion programs, drawing awareness that the dual immersion classroom can be a fragmentary place.

Within this definition of post-structuralism, Middleton (1995) further states that within one structure there are multiple truths that do not necessarily coalesce with each other and may differ in terms of how much power they each command. Theoretically, a post-structuralist framework states that terms such as *equality* and *egalitarianism* cannot be placed in a structural position. Instead, these concepts are merely tokens in the interplay of power relations between majority and minority languages and majority and minority students since there no longer exists a grand narrative of egalitarianism stating that all dual immersion classrooms are necessarily democratic in nature. The result is a plurality of shifting categories of equality in a dual immersion classroom in which the degree of equilibrium between Spanish and English is always moving and changing within the lived everyday classroom life.

However, an important category in Middleton's definition is *power*, which is a central focus point in post-structuralist thought. Power will be defined in this book according to the argument that power is not a possession or capacity; power is not an institution, a structure, or a force that is endowed in certain people and not in others (Popkewitz & Brennan, 1998). There are many focal points of power within a system that are not contained indefinitely within one structure and one person. Instead, power is a shifting and moving category that constantly changes within a structure: "Power is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of non-egalitarian and mobile relations" (Foucault, 1972: 94). For example, in a dual immersion classroom, there is no duality between those who possess power and those who do not; rather, power passes through and is exercised by individuals and structures alike at all levels of the social