

## Multilingualism and its trauma coping potential

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### Introduction

Multilingualism is an inherent part of our societies. With the rise of globalisation and mobility, it is becoming an even more enhanced phenomenon. In many communities, we are experiencing "super-diversity" (Vertovec 2007), a term coined to express the complex diversity that arises from new social patterns that follow immigration. This phenomenon also has linguistic repercussions. Besides the languages that people learn from their parents and their respective environments, we have the addition that marriage, schooling, profession, and specific interests bring. These languages all become part of one's "language repertoire" (Busch, 2012).

Trauma has a consistent place in human experience. Language interconnects with trauma in a complex, multi-layered relationship (Bush & McNamara, 2020). It connects tightly to the emotional charge surrounding one's life and is not neutral (Busch, 2012). Language can be part of trauma and interwoven with the traumatic experience. In this sense, a component of a person's language repertoire, a language that is free of this tight emotional correlation, can pose as an unburned refuge and unleash therapeutic or everyday coping potential.

Research around multilingualism usually focuses on language competencies and rarely on language experience. One step in this direction are the "Sprachbiographien" (language biographies) (Franceschini, 2002). Further, we have the traumatic memory recall studies in bilinguals (Schwanberg, 2010; Marian & Neiser, 2000) that tell us more about this language-dependent emotional relationship. By analysing autobiographical interviews like the one presented in the studies with first and second-generation Jewish immigrants in Israel (Schmid, 2002; Betten, 2010), we glimpse individual cases that bring much-needed context and pose even more questions.

Although direct and extensive research around this topic is lacking, combining literature from the fields of sociolinguistics, applied linguistics, cognitive neuroscience of language and psycholinguistics can illuminate some points that speak in favour of the thesis.

In this essay, the attempt is to give an overview of the literature that exists and conclude the trauma coping potential multilingualism brings. We will do a deeper dive into the definition of a language repertoire, the relationship between trauma and the experience of language, explore the coping potential and end with the impact trauma has on language attrition and acquisition.

### The language repertoire

At the very beginning, let us look at the term "language repertoire" more closely. The idea dates to the "verbal repertoire" of John Gumperz in the early 60s, and it is now an established term used by scholars. However, not all scholars mean the same when using the term (Berthele, 2020).

One way to look at the language repertoire would be through the lens of super-diversity and translanguaging (Busch, 2012; Berthele, 2020). In this context, when we talk about a language repertoire, we are moving away from more rigid, traditional categorisations. We are entering a definition of components of this repertoire that is more fluid and dynamic. In the translanguaging space, language is "a multi-scalar organisation of processes that enables the bodily and the situated to interact with situation-transcending cultural-historical dynamics and practices" (Thibault, 2017). It emphasises the speaker, the communicative intent, and the creation of meaning instead of seeing language as a "centred entity with corresponding formalism, phonemes, words, sentences" (Li Wei, 2018).

In her defining paper on translanguaging as a practical theory of language (Li Wei, 2018), Li Wei states the following as one of the key reasons for her to support the theory:

It sees the divides between the linguistic, the paralinguistic, and the extralinguistic dimensions of human communication as nonsensical and emphasises what the researchers call the orchestration of the neural-bodily-worldly skills of languaging. In particular, it highlights the importance of feeling, experience, history, memory, subjectivity, and culture. Although they do not talk about ideology and power, it is entirely conceivable that these too play important roles in languaging. (Li Wei, 2018)

Bringing the definition of the language repertoire back to this essay's scope: if we pick the meaning of a language seen through a translanguaging lens, we also consider that this repertoire is composed of this type. In other words, in this essay, the term language repertoire also includes dialects, diverse ways of expression that would traditionally fit into the code-switching category, and even most importantly, the fluid and complex structures that the linguistic implications of super-diversity bring. It is impossible to define an exhaustive list of what this term encompasses, but it is important to note that it goes beyond the traditional language view.

There is an additional reason the distinction in language redefinition described above is essential to note. Following the new idea of language, everyone is multilingual. Thus, every person has access to some unburdened language. They could potentially access the trauma coping potential of it, or at the very least, the barrier to acquiring one is lower.

## Language experience and trauma

When one looks for scientific information on language and trauma, one is the most presented with studies and research that revolve around immigrants and refugees. Even in the studies that brush upon this topic in a therapeutic context, the subjects are immigrants. Considering the topic of super-diversity and the modern social dynamics of (post)immigrant societies, it is not a surprise that this is the case. However, migration (especially in the refugee case) inherently carries trauma with itself (Akhtar, 1999). It would be curious to explore the interplay between language and trauma outside of the migration context.

In their paper on multilingualism, trauma and resilience, Busch and Reddemann (2013) highlight the experience of learning a new language upon immigration. They note: "*if the new language is experienced as a safe space, the self-distancing can also be helpful and serve as an opportunity for a new existence or identity, undamaged from trauma.*" (own translation) The same paper emphasises the non-neutrality of language and its emotional charge. In a translanguaging fashion, the authors propose several dimensions of the inner language repertoire: the embodied, the emotional and the

politically-historical. Busch and Reddemann go on to describe how one's language repertoire holds the potential to expand or limit someone's embodied-emotional experience.

Some ways in which language can stand in the centre of trauma and be an inseparable part of it:

..languages that are connected with the deep desire to identify and unite with someone else; languages of longing, from one, is separated by exile, oppression, voluntary or forced assimilation; languages from which one shies away for fear of exposing oneself or because one fears that they could compromise another, languages that one avoids and fears because they are connected with traumatic experiences, with the loss of autonomy and agency.  
(Busch & Reddemann, 2013, own translation)

The potential of a language repertoire component, devoid of this emotional charge, standing as a potentially safe space, also begins to be apparent. If a language is so charged that the mere speaking is potentially life-threatening (like in many extended political conflicts around the world), if one was persecuted, severely or just by a societal exclusion and disapproval for being a speaker of a language, if one's accent or dialect leads to lower job opportunities and worse quality of life, if one connects a particular way of speaking to a part of their life that was traumatic – how can we separate the language from the trauma in these cases? We can also look at other examples. If one was forced to assimilate and abandon the language of their parents, suppress their culture forcefully, how does one feel good in a language that they potentially don't feel like it is their own? The post-colonialist literature speaks of the internal struggles that people experience because of these acts of linguistic aggression. Again, we cannot separate the language from the trauma here.

Even if we step away from such a scale of trauma and move into the individual people's lives that are filled with the trauma of poverty, domestic or sexual violence, we can still see how language and trauma can be tightly knit. In the next part, we will talk about trauma and its manifestations in more detail and elaborate on what an unburdened language is and how it can be used.

## An unburdened language

A study explored how the language of retrieval in bilinguals affects remembering trauma (Schwanberg, 2010). The participants were Spanish-English bilinguals who have immigrated to the USA and learned English as their second language. The researcher asked them to recall a traumatic memory from their lives and talk about it in Spanish and English. After the memory narration and retrieval, the participants needed to rate the intensity of the PTSD symptoms. The study results showed a significantly higher intensity of symptoms when the participants described the event in their first language, Spanish, and a more considerable emotional distance when they narrated the event in their second language, English. The study then concludes that the participants have better access to traumatic memories in their first language and questions what this means for counselling and therapy.

However, upon more careful reading of the study, one can notice that almost every participant mentioned in detail recalls a memory from their childhood. They described an event that happened when Spanish was their primary language. Other studies have explored memory recall too and concluded that memories could better be retrieved in the language that they happened or was the primary language of use at the time (Mairan & Neisser, 2000). Thus, one can argue that it is not the first language's unique access to the memories at display here, but it is most likely the effect of the memories being better retrieved in the primary language of the time they happened.

Despite the questionable conclusion that one always has better access to the traumatic memories in their first language as they suggest, some other parts of this study are illuminating towards establishing the unburdened language theory:

I observed that...the recounting of traumatic memories in Spanish was clearly more detailed, vivid, and often at least twice as long as the English account; moreover, the Spanish memories seemed to be told from the heart. The English memories were often recounted in a detached manner, as though participants were recalling a news story about someone else. (Schwanberg, 2010)

The author of the study mentioned the narration in English as one in a "detached manner", applying slightly negative connotation to that observation. However, if we consider this detachment and combine it with the significant reduction of the PTSD symptoms overall when the events were recalled in English, we start to uncover the trauma coping potential of an unburdened language, in this case, English.

A big question appears here: if traumatic memories are rawer and more accessible when discussed in the language that carries their emotional charge, does the unburdened language bring relief or an obstruction to healing?

Let us consider another case, also from the realm of therapy.

Busch and Reddemann (2013) present a clinical case of a woman living in Germany having immigrated from Corsica. Upon confrontation with her traumatic memories, she would go into an uncontrolled, emotionally dysregulated state. The therapist would advise her to speak to her inner child that she is in Germany, in the present, and that she is safe. It would never work. After several tries in vain, the therapist asked: "In what language do you speak to the girl?". Upon what the patient answered, she speaks to her in German. The therapist then asked her to speak to the girl in Corsican. To the great astonishment of the patient, this worked.

In this second case, addressing the trauma in the language it was coded in was crucial. Besides clearly illustrating the interwoven connection of trauma and language, this example brings an additional perspective to the question about the unburdened language being a relief or an obstruction to healing.

The answer lies in emphasising the potential. A language cannot be separated from the bodily and the emotional. A linguistic safe space can provide relief and distance enough from the overwhelming dysregulation that will enable processing in therapy or unburden the individual to face everyday life in other cases. As illustrated above, this might potentially be a very welcome option for freedom and control to some that need or chose this refuge. To others, addressing trauma outside of the language it was coded in might obstruct their way of healing, whether remembering or self-soothing. Placing the language repertoire and multilingualism at all as an important variable in therapy, one can start using the complex set of options for improvement it brings.

To better use an unburdened language, defining what can pose as one more clearly might help. The case of the Spanish-English bilinguals that recalled a traumatic experience demonstrates that a language learned with a considerable distance from the traumatic memory can have the freeing potential of an unburdened language. How about languages that were part of one's repertoire already?

If we want to attempt to answer this question, we must look at what trauma is and how it manifests in more detail.

Trauma or the traumatic experiences are not the events themselves, but the lack of coping options, the helplessness and the loss of agency that accompany and follow the events.

We have learned that trauma is not just an event that took place sometime in the past; it is also the imprint left by that experience on mind, brain, and body. (van der Kolk, 2014)

Trauma dwells in the realms of the unsayable, and if it can find its way in words, the narratives of the traumatic events are incoherent and disorganised, the memory scattered and primarily presented in sensory flashbacks. When recoding the brains of people recalling and narrating trauma, van der Kolk noticed a significant reduction in the Broca area, one of the brain's language centres. The Broca area went offline whenever a flashback was triggered. He then concludes that "all trauma is preverbal" (van der Kolk, 2014) and goes on to describe the way trauma finds its way into words.

Some further fascinating conclusions pop up on the topic of language and coping when van der Kolk discusses the case of Marsha, a woman that has lost her unborn baby and her 5-year-old daughter in a car accident. Even 13 years after the trauma, her recall of the event was as physically intense as it was on the day and had significant effects on her daily life.

Discussing how to help the woman, van der Kolk (2014) mentions that an option could be "some form of desensitisation". In this case, he means cognitive behavioural therapy and the verbal repetition of the trauma.

The idea of desensitisation and the need for the "numbing", or taking distance from the trauma itself, to quiet down the bodily response that trauma leaves, is the central idea of using the unburdened language. The degree of separation that this linguistic safe space brings has excellent potential to provide faster or easier relief, of course, in the cases where it is applicable.

Our scans had revealed how their dread persisted and could be triggered by multiple aspects of daily experience. (van der Kolk, 2014)

The challenges that traumatised people face in everyday life are significant. It is a constant struggle to keep one in the present, maintain a feeling of safety, leave danger in the past. Following the nature of how trauma is remembered in disorganised sensory inputs, triggers could hide in all aspects of one's everyday life. Using a language that significantly separates one from the trauma and grounds one in the present or just away from that charged bodily and mental space could provide the necessary distance to intercept triggers.

Now that we know more about trauma to return to the original question: if a language that was already part of one's repertoire can serve as an unburdened language and offer the same coping potential.

The traumatic experience imprints itself into memory in a disorganised, sensory input kind of way. The access to rationalisation and narrative is absent when a person experiences a flashback; the bodily sensations take the main stage. As triggers can be persistent and appear in every aspect of everyday life, the traumatised have a tough time keeping "here and now" and entering a degree of separation that reiterates their present safety. In a therapeutic context or a simple run of the daily routine, traumatised people could use anything that aids desensitisation.

What is traumatic is unique to every person, and it cannot be defined or put in a list. Keeping this in mind, let us go back to the language definition that translanguaging offers. We could speculate then that one could find refuge by even linguistically separating themselves from a group or a manner of speech that connects them to trauma while keeping within the traditional language category. We can speculate that one can populate their inner world and shift a big part of their communication with

the language of their schooling if trauma is at home; we can speculate that someone can prefer a language that they spoke as a bi- or a multilingual growing child when the trauma comes from within broader society. What is important is that this language brings the desired desensitisation effect, and that might as well be some of the options one already has before their trauma.

As stated at the very beginning of this discussion, the only literature available on the topic focuses on migration and, in this case, often late-acquired new languages. The immigrants who are participants of the studies also benefit from being immersed in very new environments, with a more significant room for a new identity and freedom. We know truly little what the implications of this are without immigration.

## Trauma and language acquisition and attrition

To reiterate and fully understand how intimately language and trauma are related, we can look at how trauma influences language acquisition and attrition.

### Language attrition

The biographical interviews conducted with German Jews who immigrated before the Holocaust and their children are the focus of several studies done with the idea of exploring language attrition and maintenance (Schmid, 2002; Betten, 2010). These studies aim to answer some central questions. How much is the trauma connected with the German language? Does the attitude towards the language inhibit usage and aids attention? How does this affect the second generation of immigrants? How does language attrition manifest itself?

The answers to these questions are relevant to this essay's topic. It is undeniable that the trauma these people had to go through is immense. It persists for generations. The trauma's interplay with language and how it affects the initial immigrants themselves and their descendants are exceptionally illuminating.

A married couple who had known each other in Düsseldorf long before emigrating, when they were all but children, state that in more than fifty years of marriage they never spoke German to each other, not even intimately."

And another informant says: "Among Jewish refugees like myself we only talk English, since it would seem too intimate to use German."

...It thus seemed to me that the language which many of my informants had to reject not only embodied memories of Nazi persecution, but also of being loved and being secure within their own family.(Schmid, 2002)

In the study's conclusion, Schmid (2002) declares that "these findings speak very strongly for the importance of attitudes in language loss and language maintenance". Markers like the opportunity to use the language or the age at the time of emigration lose out to the speaker's identity, and self-perception or that "someone who rejects that language community – or has been rejected and persecuted by it – may adapt his or her linguistic behaviour so as not to appear to be a member any longer." (Schmid, 2002)

While trauma is not something that is in the focus of the study or is assumed to influence the linguistic choices that the participants have made, there is a high chance that the "attitudes" and "self-perception" discussed are very much linked to their traumatic experiences. In the cases of the married couple that never used German between each other although native speakers and German not being spoken between the Jewish refugees and instead replaced with English - both situations and choices can be alternatively seen as strategies to cope with the trauma that inevitably intertwined itself with language.

Further insights into the German language attrition or maintenance offers the study that Betten (2010) conducted by interviewing second-generation German Jewish immigrants in Israel:

German was often the first, but never remained the best language of the second generation. It can be proved that the degree of the acquired competence and later maintenance, attrition or loss of the language highly depended on emotional reactions to external experiences...

When one reads the interviews in the study by Betten (2010), one can notice how the avoidance or acceptance of the language directly correlates to the linguistic choices of expression that the participants make. Some find neutrality in English for just certain parts of expression (like identity), some enjoy the opportunity to speak German and state it feels like home hearing it around, some have a very difficult time expressing and speak a mix of languages.

It is very likely that the strategy of a linguistic safe space is widely used by different kinds of people in different situations, although not directly researched and referenced as such. In some cases, it would lead like here, to language attrition. In many more cases, it could lead to the creation of new ways of expression, that straighten the connection to this psychological home.

## Language acquisition

Regarding language acquisition, "attitude" is a very known variable. Another well-accepted idea is that trauma affects learning and cognitive abilities in general.

Can trauma bind itself with a specific language and obstruct us from learning it? In this case, we must always speak of a second/third/beyond language, as the languages that we learn in early childhood are learned automatically by the input from our environment.

The answer to this question is yes. One demographic researched on this topic is refugees, concerning learning the languages in the new countries. Refugees experience trauma and stress before arriving in the new country and potentially experience re-traumatisation when dealing with settling and starting a new life. The feelings of helplessness that accompanied the trauma they carried on their journey and before are often reiterated when confronted with the new country's pressure and power relations (Busch & Reddmann, 2013).

...recent neurological research demonstrates that students' level of anxiety influences information transmission and storage. Neuroimaging and neurotransmitter studies demonstrate that under stress, information is blocked from entering the brain's areas of higher cognitive memory consolidation and storage. (Gordon 2011)

Trauma influences the success of (language) learning. In the refugees' case, the possible re-traumatisation caused by the arrival hardships<sup>1</sup> can bring back the feelings of oppression and

helplessness, the inability to express and the lack of voice in the unfamiliar environment. As Busch and Reddmann (2013) suggest in their paper, all that might attach to the language impact its successful proficiency. One can imagine the same effect in immigrant communities without refugee background or even many other people in less extraordinary circumstances.

One way to support language acquisition for traumatised learners and those who have the potential to get re-traumatised in the process, is to implement trauma-aware curriculums and ways of teaching. Removing excessive pressure, allowing more time for processing and memorising and focusing on establishing a safe space for learning should be a priority. In the case of refugees, harvesting the power of the unburdened new language that we might establish if this learning is successful, is an immense added value. By avoiding to retraumatise the learners and connect the feelings of powerlessness to the new language, we open more than just better employment opportunities. We offer an additional tool that could help them with the emotional part of settling in a new life.

## Conclusion

Trauma and language have a complex, interwoven relationship. An unburdened language from one's language repertoire can pose a safe space and an opportunity for distancing from the emotional and bodily dysregulation in the therapeutic and the everyday. Trauma affects language attrition and acquisition.

When it comes to research, there is very little. The only relevant work available that mentions the interplay of trauma and language in this context is the dedicated, persistent publishing of Dr Brigitta Bush cited many times in this essay. If we want to understand how to use the power of one's language repertoire productively in the therapeutic context or provide tools for resilience in everyday life, we must do more research.

An idea for a study would be exploring how PTSD patients with severe flashbacks or dysregulations symptoms, that have already a wider language repertoire benefit from using an unburdened language. Interesting would be to see the effects both in a therapeutic setting, and in everyday life. This would show if the PTSD symptoms reduced when using an unburdened language, and if there is any effect in the improvement of the quality of their life.

Another idea would be focusing on refugees and immigrants that are in the process of learning a new language. In what cases does the new language bring relief? How are the learning circumstances responsible for that?

We could also explore the linguistic habits of people that already employ these strategies. How do they manifest in their way of using language, is the strategy employed in some parts of their life/therapy more and how does that relate to their trauma?

As the language ideologies continue to shift towards a more fluid and open understanding of language and as the super-diversity continues to increase all over the world, we will hopefully start to see more research on multilingualism that doesn't focus solely on competences.

(1) "After they have arrived in their destination country, the situation of legal limbo, poor reception conditions, detention, rejection of the asylum claim, fear of return, the absence of the family,



isolation and lack of integration may also affect applicants' mental health. If they have pre-existing mental health problems, it may lead to re-traumatisation." (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2019)

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