

From the Editor – The Quietening of Languages: How Can We Celebrate and Welcome Them?

Gertrude M. Tinker Sachs
Senior Editor
Georgia State University, gtinkersachs@gsu.edu

The Atlanta Journal Constitution (AJC) published recently an article extracted from the *New York Times* called “Battle to Save Seke” (de Freytas-Tamura, 2020). This article was published under the theme of *Understanding Native Tongues*. I was disheartened to read about the forecasted loss of the Seke language, one of the 100 endangered languages of Nepal. Most of the Seke people are speaking Nepali and other Tibetan languages. According to the [Endangered Language Alliance](#) website, the total number of Seke speakers is estimated to be around 700 in the world, with some 100 of them living in New York City. For numerous political, economic, and social reasons, Seke is being lost, and in New York, one reason is that younger speakers’ language loss is being accelerated by moving away from the small existing community to seek jobs. The year 2019 was declared the International Year of Indigenous Languages by the United Nations (UN), and in December of last year, the President of the General Assembly, Tijjani Muhammad-Bande, noted that “Despite UN efforts throughout this year to highlight the daily disappearance of mother tongue languages across the world, challenges persist nonetheless” (UN News, 2019b, para. 1).

Linguistic Neo-Imperialism and Indigenous Languages

The UN rights experts report that “of the 7000 indigenous languages spoken today, four in 10 are in danger of disappearing” and they have called for “a decade of action to reverse the “historic destruction” of age-old dialects” (UN

News, 2019a, para 1). In looking at the disappearance of languages, Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson (2010) contended that the conditions for languages are influenced by factors such as:

The relative isolation of the speakers from speakers of other languages; the self-sufficiency of the group (the extent to which they need to trade with others for basic needs; whether they can grow and collect what they need all year round and so on; the availability of jobs without the need to migrate; the existence of material resources of interest to outsiders in the area, and their exploitation (logging, oil, mining and the like). (p. 8)

However, the authors also note that some languages run the serious risk of being lost because of linguistic neo-imperialism. Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson (2010) define linguistic imperialism as “operating through structures and ideologies and entailing unequal treatment for groups identified by language.” Linguistic neo-imperialism is, on the other hand, “how linguistic capital is managed, how information flows toward or away from territorial entities through trade, commerce, capital thereby serving the interests of the corporate world and the government it influences” (p. 82). One of the results of linguistic neo imperialism is that people believe that they must sacrifice their own language for the dominant one – the “neo-imperial language” because it will help them get ahead in life. For some linguistic groups, this may result in a subtractive language shift or what Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson (2010) called “*linguistic capital dispossession*” (p. 83).

This linguistic capital dispossession can be seen not only in the loss of endangered languages but also in the loss that many bi/multilingual children experience because their language is subjected to invisibility by school and country. The U.S. census clock shows that with a birth every nine seconds, at the time of writing, the U.S. has a population of more than 329,439,524 (as of March 26, 2020). It is the third most populous country in the world after China and India

respectively (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). After English, the second most spoken language at home in the U.S. is Spanish followed by Chinese, Tagalog, Vietnamese, and Arabic (Zeigler, & Camarota, 2019). In 2018, 67,268,668 people spoke a language other than English at home in the U.S. In Georgia, from 1980 to 2018, there was a growth of 952% (131,720 in 1980 to 1,385,411 in 2018) in the number of people speaking a language other than English at home, which constituted 14% of the population in 2018 compared to 3% in 1980 (Zeigler & Camarota, 2019). Imagine if all these people and their children felt that their languages were welcomed and celebrated in schools and community spaces?

A big question for this editorial is just that: what would the United States be like if languages other than English were welcomed and celebrated in schools and in public places other than the home? The introduction presented previously gives us an inkling of the statistical numbers and the researched and theorized aspects of languages spoken. What follows are the actual experiences and insights of three bi/multilingual speakers who live here in Georgia. The first is Georgia author Nury Castillo Crawford who consented to be interviewed for this editorial and the other two are in our featured article “*Testimonio y Teoria: Creating Bridges with Bilingual Communities in Dekalb County*” authored by A. Jyoti Kaneria and Christian Valdez.

Interview with Nury Castillo Crawford

First, I discuss some of the insights gleaned from my interview with Nury Castillo Crawford. Castillo Crawford came to the U.S. as a young child with her parents. She is author of the popular bilingual text *3,585 Miles to be an American Girl* and co-author with Demetrius Motion Bullock of *Sofia and Vivi: A Bilingual Children’s Book: Big Sister*. I give excerpts from our conversation followed by brief commentaries.

The interview with Nury Castillo Crawford (indicated in the excerpts as “NCC”) took place at my home on November 6, 2018, around lunchtime. Emboldened words in the transcription indicate that they were spoken or stated emphatically. When Castillo Crawford arrived, we had a bit of lunch sitting at my kitchen table, and after lunch, we moved over to my sitting room where we talked for almost 90 minutes. Castillo Crawford talked candidly with me (indicated as “GTS” in the transcription) about how to get to know “the Other” who might be from cultural and linguistic groups different from your own. In this first excerpt, Excerpt 1, she expands on Othering.

Excerpt 1: Othering

NCC: I feel like “the Other” in my life doesn’t necessarily revolve under a specific demographic but more of people that are closed minded in terms of global thinking or even being open minded to other cultures. I feel like there are other people that, due to their own personal background knowledge, don’t know anything about Latino people and categorize “Latinos” under one umbrella. I’m an optimist, so I think it’s due to the fact that they lack experiences, and they don’t know other people, um, that don’t look like them and because there’s been a narrative widely shared with the lack of knowledge, you buy that narrative. Um, and many times when I speak to my friends that are Latino, like me, I feel bad. And I tell them, like, I kind of feel bad for those other people because I feel like if they knew me, they might, I think they’d like me. I think, like, you know of they all think like, “that’s way optimistic for me,” but that’s what they think.

GTS: So, you were saying “the Other” in your life would be people who don’t think like you? Not open minded like you?

NCC: Well, I think that they just, they have limited experiences to other cultures, so therefore, it’s hard for them to empathize with other people’s challenges or struggles. And I feel like if they were a little bit more open minded, they might be more empathetic.

GTS: Ah, do these people belong to any particular ethnic group?

NCC: I don’t—I don’t think it’s more about ethnic. I think it’s more about lack of experiences and lack of background knowledge.

GTS: So, they can be any group of people coming from any class or any race or any gender?

NCC: Well yeah, I do. But I think that since we're living in the United States of America and my experiences with people that lack that have been "American," so yeah, I just feel like it's people in the U.S. because even other people in other countries—one of the things that I always talk about is how language is more than just grammar and vocabulary and knowing some words. Language is part of culture and culture is part of language. And so, many times "Americans," because we live in America, they praise other Americans for learning another language. You know, it's like, "Oh my gosh, like, you know another language" or "You know three languages." It's like the biggest thing in the world, you know? But they don't, the same praise doesn't go to people who come to this country with a language and are learning English. That's still another language, but it doesn't feel like someone who comes to this country as an immigrant gets the same praise and the same accolades for having another language in there . . . so I think part of that, I think it's like limited knowledge on their part.

I believe that many of the ailments of our world today have to do with our "unknowing" of those who are different from ourselves in some way. We also buy into a grand narrative of the Other without ever knowing the person who is "othered." I wanted to start the conversation this way to get Castillo Crawford reflecting on this and how she views othering based on one's limited experiences and limited knowledge. I believe too, it has to do with issues of race, class, and history as well as country of origin. Castillo Crawford expands on this idea of intersectionality in Excerpt 2.

Excerpt 2: Intersectionality

GTS: Is it regarding people who come from certain countries, or is it immigrants in general [that] this perception about not privileging their speaking of another language?

NCC: I think just based on what I've been seeing and hearing and experiencing, I think it's just immigrants that come from third-world countries. From countries that some Americans feel like, because they don't know either, they don't know, they buy into this idea of, they think third-world country, even a third-world country has its rich areas or has an area of people who are making good money.

I mean, we can go into that, too, which I don't approve of. Like, you know, they, for example, people think, like, there's **literally** people that think Africa is a country and not a **continent**, and they want to group everybody in Africa into one vision of starving children when that's not the case. It's like, you know, there's so many countries in Africa, and there's so many rich countries in Africa, and I always, like, baffled by that kind of thing. Same mindset about South America. They think all of South Americans, I guess, are wearing big *sombreros* or something when there's so many, there's countries in South America, and there's a couple of countries in South America that are predominantly white Latin American people, and even in Mexico, there's white Mexicans and people don't understand that. And I think it's because a narrative has been written and people that have limited experiences and therefore have limited, uh, they don't have an open mind and they have limited ideas and whatever, uh, about culture, etc., they buy it because it's easier to just buy **that** than do your own research and find out about what the people in those countries or continents are all about.

GTS: So when we talk about that the so-called third-world countries and the way they are perceived by Americans in general, um, under the privileging of certain groups speaking certain languages, who may not necessarily come from the third world, are you also talking about a darker skin color? Or are those white, for example white Mexicans, how are they perceived by Americans? Or is it only we are talking about darker-skinned people?

NCC: Right. Well, I think in general most people would think that it is the brown skin or the darker skin immigrants from wherever they come from, but I **know** Latinos that are white, and the minute they open their mouths and they have that thick accent, Americans look down on them, too. Like, and especially, they say they speak Spanish it's just, and I don't know if it's because of the climate that we're currently living or not. But so yeah, generally you would think it's just the brown people, but I personally know people that are Latino, that are **white** Latino, that get that, too. So, I feel like it's more, I think it stems from the color thing first, but I think eventually it's just like, okay, everybody's just grouped.

Castillo Crawford speaks about the differential treatment Americans and immigrants receive when they speak additional languages. Why is the immigrant's language not affirmed while those who are learning (an)other language(s) are regarded as something wonderful? Castillo Crawford recognizes the intersectionality of language with race, culture, country of origin, and class.

Castillo Crawford names ignorance as a cause of Othering. She also believes that Othering is built upon the foundation of dominant narratives perpetuated in society. Castillo Crawford expounds further in Excerpt 3.

Excerpt 3: Dominant Narratives

NCC: Because sometimes when people, when those other people, they don't think about the human side. They just think about what they think is right and wrong and what they've been hearing. The narrative that they're selling that the people in my community are illegal . . .

GTS: Yes, the dominant narrative . . .

NCC: . . . killers, drug dealers, and we're stealing the government's money, when it's not true. When I came to this country, my dad worked night and day. He had blisters, his hands were bleeding, but he worked night and day to get us out of that one-bedroom—five of us in one bedroom. And we did! And by the time he got us out, we had a house and a car. It was a beat-up car but he knew how to fix cars so that was amazing. So, I think that when people think of, you know, Latino-Hispanics, they automatically think that, and so I just try to help them see, like, I'm just like you. I love my family, too.

Castillo Crawford is adamant about the negative stereotypes being perpetuated by dominant groups in society about minoritized groups. She believes that we need to see ourselves in others to become more empathetic people. She feels the pain of the negativity. She moves on to tell another story from her own life, her real narrative from personal experience, in Excerpt 4.

Excerpt 4: The Real Narrative from Personal Experience

GTS: Right, right. So, tell us about your community? What would you like for us to know about your community?

NCC: Oh, my gosh. **Hard working, big dreamers, persevere.**

GTS: They're big dreamers in which way?

NCC: I always considered my parents the original dreamers, and **I** am the dream. I feel like they sacrificed everything.

GTS: Yes.

NCC: Their life, their family, the little they had, just to try to give me something better.

GTS: Right.

NCC: To give me the opportunity to fly.

GTS: And you're the only child?

NCC: I'm the oldest.

GTS: The oldest, okay.

NCC: So, I carried my other two around—

GTS: Right.

NCC: Because I'm the oldest.

GTS: Yeah.

NCC: And they would tell you the same thing.

GTS: Right.

NCC: They would tell you, like, "Yeah, she did." Because **I** went to the parent teacher conferences. **I** helped my brother with homework. I refinanced my parent's house before I was 14. Taught my mom how a drive before I was 13. Like, I feel like my parents **believed** in me.

GTS: Right.

NCC: And um—

GTS: Were you the language broker for your parents?

NCC: I was.

GTS: Yes.

NCC: I was. But my mom and dad, my mom had very limited education.

GTS: Right.

NCC: But even then, I reminisce about the support she gave me, and I try to reiterate that, with parents, whether they're Latina, or non-Latino, um, and I tell them, you don't have to know **anything**. Like, literally, not everything. I mean **anything**.

GTS: Right, right.

NCC: You don't have to know anything that your kids are learning. My mom didn't know a word in English.

GTS: Right.

NCC: But I would get home, and she would tell me to read because I was supposed to read.

GTS: Right.

NCC: I mean, I didn't know any English either. But I had the book that teacher gave me. And she would stop cooking because she was always cooking it seemed like, and she'd tell me to read, and I would, and she literally would be **teared up**, and she'd be smiling. And she'd be like, you're so smart. Your English is so good. And of course, I ate it up. But now as a grown up, I'm like, I didn't know any English! I probably sounded horrible. (*Laughter.*) But, so that's **not** the point, I tell people. You know, **self-confidence** is more than half the battle.

GTS: Right.

NCC: And my mom had an elementary education, didn't have a job and didn't know any English. But she instilled that in me.

GTS: Right.

NCC: And believed in me and told me I was the smartest, bravest girl in the world.

GTS: Yes.

NCC: You know? And so, I feel like that is so powerful.

GTS: Right.

NCC: And if you don't—it's like, you don't have to know everything. My youngest son took calculus his junior [year] in high school. And I remember looking at it, and I saw him working on it in the dining room table, so I knew it was serious because usually he just goes to his room, and I was like, "Oh my gosh, he must be having trouble." And I was like, "Are you having trouble?" He was like, "I'm gonna look it up." And I was like, "Okay." Now I'm looking at it like, "Oh my gosh, like, that totally looks like ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics." (*Laughter.*) I don't know what that is." But I was like, "Oh, Marquitos, I have, I have cookies in the fridge. Want me to make you some cookies?"

And he was like, “Okay, yeah.” So, like, I baked cookies and gave him milk and sat next to him. Literally **just** sat there.

GTS: Yeah.

NCC: And he ate his cookies. He didn’t [unclear] still looking like hieroglyphics.

GTS: Yeah

NCC: Hieroglyphics!

GTS: Yeah. (*Laughter.*)

NCC: So, like, I didn’t know anything, but it didn’t matter. I **just** sat with him.

GTS: That is the important thing that you want to convey to people, the fact that you were supporting him, and **he felt** your presence.

NCC: Yeah. [Unclear].

GTS: And knowing that you were egging him on just as your mom was, was egging you on. Right?

NCC: Right. And so, I think it’s **so** important for parents to understand that even when we talk about supporting your kids work with education, I’m not saying you have to know anything. I’m just saying you have to be patient and love on them and **be present**.

Castillo Crawford makes an important point in Excerpt 4 for those immigrant parents who may feel “less than” because they do not speak the dominant language. She states clearly that parents do not need to speak English but can support their children in loving ways by being present as their children complete the school tasks. Our final Excerpt 5 looks at Castillo Crawford’s activism and community engagement.

Excerpt 5: Activism and Community Engagement

NCC: I am an extremely **proud** Latina. I, part of me, and part of who I am as a leader is supporting my community.

GTS: Yes.

NCC: I was talking to the Latin American association as I was driving here, and they're, they're having their youth leadership thing on Saturday. And, um, the young man said, basically, like, "Do you sleep?" And I said, "When it comes to my community, I guess I'll sleep when I'm dead." I said, "Because if I can support, I'm gonna support." So yeah, I am a proud Latina. American. I believe in culture and language being integrated. And it's, you can't have one without the other. Um, I'm a proud mother of three young men. And, and I advocate for anything that has to do with education because I, I'm a believer that **education** is the game changer. And if we can help our communities understand that—it's harder than people think—then we'll be able to move forward.

Castillo Crawford works hard in her community and believes in the power of education. Our charge as ESOL educators and advocates of culturally and linguistically diverse students is to help them feel as empowered as she is. Indeed, Castillo Crawford's interview has highlighted challenges to some of the debilitating ways of thinking about those whose culture we may not know. In conclusion, she implores us to become educated about others and recognize that culture and language are inextricably intertwined. When we empower the child in our schools and communities, we empower the language and help that language to survive and thrive outside of the home.

Featured Article: "Othered" Children and Adults

The interview with Castillo Crawford highlights othering, intersectionality, dominant narratives, the real narratives from personal experiences and activism and community engagement. From these lens, we know that othering and dominant narratives can be negative and debilitating. But, if we as educators can learn from the personal experiences of our students we can then serve to empower them. This is what the authors of our featured article do in telling us their stories. Kaneria and Valdez are educators of transnational parents from India and Mexico. We hear their *testimonio* of growing up in Georgia as "Othered" children and adults. They draw on critical socio-historical,

linguistic, and cultural lenses to theorize their experiences. Their stories are rich with intersectionality of language, race, class, and country of origin. They, like Castello Crawford, hope to inspire and empower educators of transnational children to see the linguistic and cultural resources they bring to school and draw on them to teach.

Kaneria and Valdez's article was used at the first preconference writing institute for teachers (Tinker Sachs, 2019a) on October 25, 2019, and at the *GATESOL in Action* presentation (Tinker Sachs, 2019b) at the GATESOL Conference on October 26, 2019, in Suwanee, Georgia. The readers at these sessions were very receptive to the paper, and I hope that the readers of this edition of *GATESOL in Action* will give a favorable response as well. We welcome more teacher writers to submit their work, and we thank our reviewers for their work on this edition.

Concluding Thoughts

In closing this editorial, I return to the question: what would the United States be like if languages other than English were welcomed and celebrated in schools and public spaces? Of course, it depends on what we mean by welcomed and celebrated. For me, *welcomed* means given the power to be recognized by empowering legislation, and *celebrated* means drawn upon by teachers to affirm identity and deepen teaching connections where possible and allowed in classrooms and in community places. It would be a "gentler and more humane" United States where linguistic resources are built upon to promote self-efficacy and civic engagement. This climate would result in the *awakening of languages*, not the quietening of languages with which we started this editorial. I hope this editorial and this edition of our journal serve to enliven the conversation on the dangers of language loss and subtractive bilingualism and the need to celebrate

and welcome others who are culturally and linguistically different from ourselves.

I close with the words from the United Nations Rights experts who implore all educators not to contribute to language loss or subtractive language shift or linguistic capital dispossession. The experts call for “UN member States to recognise, protect and promote indigenous languages through legislation, policies and other strategies in full cooperation with indigenous peoples,” and for the “sustained support for bilingual and mother tongue education . . . access to health, employment, judicial and other public services in the languages of indigenous peoples, including through cyberspace and the internet” (UN News, 2019a, para. 8).

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