

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Justice and equity for whom? Reframing research on the “bilingual (dis)advantage”

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## Abstract

The search for the existence and nonexistence of bilingual advantages and disadvantages has become a battleground marked by polarized comments and perspectives, furthering our understanding of neither bilingualism as an experience nor cognition as higher-level mental processes. In this paper, I provide a brief historical overview of research examining the cognitive and linguistic consequences of multilingualism and address the assumptions underlying research exploring the bilingual behavioral difference. I aim to illustrate the sole focus on behavioral (dis)advantage fails to reflect the complexity and dynamicity of people’s bilingual experiences, thereby distracting from understanding bilingualism. Responding to the call of this special issue, I describe the necessity to focus on *people* when moving toward a just and equitable future for applied psycholinguistic research. Furthermore, I explain why the nuances of bilingualism need to be recognized beyond binary categorization to advance knowledge about bilingualism and its consequences. To avoid unjust misattribution of a behavioral outcome to people’s life experience and to report research findings in a transparent manner, the myopic representation of the terms “bilingual (dis)advantage” should be recognized and reflected on.

**Keywords:** bilingual advantage; bilingual disadvantage; life experience; people-centered; cognition

The search for the existence and nonexistence of bilingual advantages and disadvantages has become a battleground marked by polarized comments and perspectives, furthering our understanding of neither bilingualism as an experience nor cognition as higher-level mental processes. The expression of different opinions on this battleground does not constitute a debate but rather a controversy with different foci and little consideration for the experience in question. The controversy is most prominent in the examination of whether bilingual experience leads to advantages in executive functions (e.g., Antoniou, 2019; also see an editorial by de Bruin et al., 2021 in a recent special issue in *Neurobiology of Language*) or a disadvantage in language processing (e.g., Runnqvist et al., 2011), the latter being less controversial than the former. The characterization of behavioral performance as *advantage* or

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*disadvantage* masks the accurate reporting of research findings and obscures the nuances of bilingualism as a lived experience. Importantly, these terms erroneously generalize findings associated with bilingualism, communicating an inequitable and unjust portrayal of persons with diverse language experience in an increasingly multilingual world. For many individuals around the world, bilingualism (or multilingualism) is an identity and lived experience (e.g., Wei, 2020). There is no doubt that language experiences shape behavior; the overemphasis on the existence or nonexistence of a (dis)advantage masks the more important intellectual goals of this research endeavor.

The psycholinguistic goals of studying bilingualism and its consequences are two-fold: (1) to examine the cognitive architecture of language representation and processes (e.g., Abutalebi & Green, 2007; Bialystok, 1992; Kroll & Tokowicz, 2005) and (2) to investigate cognitive plasticity as it relates to diverse language experience (e.g., Neville & Bavelier, 1998, 2002 on sign language and deaf individuals). In this paper, I elaborate my stance that the quest to seek a “bilingual advantage” or “bilingual disadvantage” should not serve as a research goal. When relative terms are used, the unintended meaning to “qualify” an individual’s life experience presents an unjust label. At the same time, do we also entertain the idea of a “monolingual advantage” when a “bilingual disadvantage” is observed, and vice versa?

Abiding by the general ethical principles of psychologists (American Psychological Association, 2017) and other research ethics involving human subjects, one should have “respect for people’s rights and dignity” in which psychologists or researchers

“are aware of and respect cultural, individual, and role differences, including those based on age, gender, gender identity, race, ethnicity, culture, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, disability, language, and socioeconomic status” . . . (p. 4).

Social scientists ought to rethink whether the framing of an advantage or disadvantage is one that presents respect and justice for the people. Ortega (2020) has presented a convincing case describing heritage language speakers as an inequitable case of multilingualism, as it relates to the use of heritage language sometimes faced by hostility among majority given a heritage language is often a minority language. In turn, it restricts the likelihood an individual to use their heritage language and adopt their heritage identity. I share a similar viewpoint in that individual language(s) and language experience do not hold inherent prestige, but their status is one assigned by people and society—a point relevant to the term bilingual (dis)advantage in which researchers assign values to a life experience.

In this paper, I opt to use the term “bilingual” to represent persons who speak more than one language, but I acknowledge that many multilingual individuals speak more than two languages. The decision to adopt “bilingual” is due to its prevalent use in the psycholinguistic literature, rather than in reality. I also recognize the use of the term “plurilingual” instead of bilingual or multilingual. Plurilingualism refers to linguistic practices in which languages are interconnected with each other and with an individual’s culture. The term recognizes the speaker’s agency in controlling and using the languages (e.g., Marshall & Moore, 2018) and is often used in

the educational context (e.g., García & Otheguy, 2020). Again, the decision to use the term “bilingual” is to address an audience in applied psycholinguistics and those who are familiar with the literature on bilingualism and cognition.

To begin this position paper, I illustrate the personal and professional lens through which I examine bilingualism. Then, I provide a brief historical overview of research on examining the cognitive consequences of multilingualism, followed by a discussion of the assumptions underlying research exploring the bilingual behavioral difference. I aim to illustrate the sole focus on behavioral (dis)advantage fails to reflect the complexity and dynamicity of people’s bilingual experiences, thereby distracting from understanding bilingualism. Responding to the call of this special issue, I describe the necessity of a focus on *people* when moving toward a just and equitable future for applied psycholinguistic research. In the third section, I explain why the nuances of bilingualism need to be recognized beyond binary categorization (e.g., monolingual vs. bilingual; advantages vs. disadvantages) to advance knowledge about bilingualism and its consequences. Finally, I conclude by highlighting the affordances of existing research that went beyond the controversy, achieving just interpretations without sacrificing scientific rigor. Contingent on the framing of the works, social science research has the potential to empower or subdue others.

### Positionality statement

As the sole author of this position paper, it is important that I share my positionality through which I live as a multilingual person and inquire about multilingualism as a researcher. I speak Cantonese as my first language (or mother tongue) but slowly adopted English as the dominant and most proficient language in my professional and personal interactions. I have lived in two English-speaking countries since my teenage years. Currently, I live in a French–English bilingual city nested in a French-only province nested in a bilingual English–French country. In other words, I have lived as a language minority speaker since my teenage years. This personal language acquisition journey is deeply tied to my professional inquiry of multilingualism.

I studied bilingualism in the developmental and cognitive disciplines of psychology. Part of my dissertation resulted in the paper “Bilingualism is not a categorical variable” (Luk & Bialystok, 2013) and was used to suggest a gradient approach to “quantify” bilingual experiences (e.g., DeLuca et al., 2019; Gullifer & Titone, 2020a), a point that I elaborate in the subsequent sections of this paper. In addition, I have investigated the brain consequences of bilingualism using neuroimaging techniques as well as the practical consequences of bilingualism in the US education system. From these multidisciplinary perspectives, I consider the issue of bilingual behavioral differences intersecting across cognitive psychology and education practices and policies. Despite the reporting of bilingual advantage in cognitive tasks across developmental samples (see Blom et al., 2017 in Europe; and Kapa & Colombo, 2013 in the US for example), children who are minoritized language speakers are constantly the centerpiece of educational conversation in a deficit-oriented framework (e.g., Altavilla et al., 2021 for an example in Basque Autonomous Community; and Abedi & Gándara, 2006 or Shin, 2018 in the USA). As I straddle these disciplines and research from international communities where social contexts of multilingualism are diverse, I contemplate the consequences and interpretations of the research claiming a

bilingual (dis)advantage. Merging perspectives from multiple interested parties, my transdisciplinary research forces me to evaluate the intentional and unintentional consequence of scientific research on the people whom I study, a lens that I use to situate where the bilingual (dis)advantage debate is.

### Situating the problem space

Tracing the research lineage of what is known as the “bilingual advantage” leads to the epistemological roots of this discourse as a bilingual disadvantage in intelligence, a construct that gained research traction with the popularization of standardized assessments. Other extensive readings supplement the brief overview here (e.g., Barac & Bialystok, 2011; Jansen et al., 2021). About a hundred years ago, the study of bilingualism and its cognitive consequences began when researchers reported bilingual children and adults had inferior intelligence (Saer, 1923) and bilingual students suffered from low academic achievement due to a persistent “language handicap” (Manuel, 1935, p. 196). These historical findings might seem improper, outdated, and inappropriate, yet they reflected the social status of minoritized language speakers in predominantly English-speaking societies at the time of the research (Leon Guerrero & Luk, 2021, also see an empirical investigation by Bialystok et al., 2022). The idea that bilingual children endure language handicaps still persists among parents who are considering whether to raise their children to speak multiple languages after a century (Piller & Gerber, 2021)! Historical research on bilingualism and cognition (or intelligence as the focus during that time) was framed with injustice through comparing binary categories, ignoring the use of inequitable assessments (e.g., assessing intelligence tests using paper-and-pencil tasks in bilingual children with no schooling experience), or the linguistic, political, and demographic conditions that confound with bilingualism. However, these early works marked the beginning of research illustrating that there are behavioral differences associated with language experiences. Since Peal and Lambert’s (1962) study, the pendulum has swung to the other side with research reporting a bilingual advantage manifested in adults as faster response times (e.g., Bialystok et al., 2004) and in infants as being able to visually discriminate a language change based on a silent video (e.g., Sebastián-Gallés et al., 2012). Subsequently, a large body of research has focused on seeking the existence or absence of the bilingual advantage or disadvantage (e.g., Folke et al., 2016; Nichols et al., 2020; Sandoval et al., 2010).

Following heated discourse in papers and in conferences, some have suggested that the investigation of bilingual behavioral differences may benefit from clearer theories (de Bruin et al., 2021). Others call for more “ecologically valid” tasks that simulate real-life bilingual behavior (Blanco-Elorrieta & Caramazza, 2021; Poarch & Krott, 2019). These suggestions are reasonable, yet they seem to overlook the role *people* (research participants) play in contributing to the empirical findings. Though refining cognitive constructs and building theory are key for scholarly discourse, ignoring people’s experiences presents neither a just nor equitable framework that furthers current understanding of these individuals’ experiences and the cognitive or linguistic consequences of their experiences. To achieve justice and equity, applied psycholinguistic and cognitive research must shift at least part of its research focus

from processes to *people*. Here, I elaborate on two issues associated with the quest for bilingual (dis)advantage that have become a bottleneck for advancing knowledge on cognitive plasticity as well as on how language and cognition intersect in the human mind. Both issues trace back to the importance of attending to people's multilingual experiences.

### **Assumptions of binary categorization**

The controversy surrounding the existence of a bilingual advantage in cognition or a bilingual disadvantage in language processes hinges on group comparisons between “bilinguals” and “monolinguals.” When using relative terms like “advantage” or “disadvantage,” two assumptions are made *relative to whom* and *on what*: (1) there are at least two groups with different language experiences and (2) there is a behavior in which one group is superior/inferior. Assumption 1 rests on having at least two groups with different language experiences in a study, with the simplest groups being monolinguals and bilinguals. Other groups could also be formulated depending on the research questions, for example, a comparison between those who become bilingual early vs. late in life (e.g., Kapa & Colombo, 2013, Pelhams & Abrams, 2014) or those who have qualitatively different language experiences, such as heritage speakers vs. second language learners (e.g., Montrul, 2010). Whether a bilingual (dis)advantage was observed rests on the defining characteristics of these groups. As reported in previous research, there is a wide range of defining characteristics across research involving bilinguals (Rocha-Hidalgo & Barr, 2022; Surrain & Luk, 2019). The diverse defining characteristics (e.g., onset age of second language acquisition, frequency of use of multiple languages) across studies are not a sign of any research wrongdoing. Instead, this diversity reflects the colorful nature of multilingualism around the world and the rich questions one can ask about multilingual life experiences.

Whenever reporting behavior in which one group shows superior performance, including faster response time, higher accuracy, or higher efficiency, the assumption is that the other group has inferior performance. Here, I focus on the bilingual disadvantage in language processing. In particular, the inferior performance in language processing is often found in one of the multiple languages spoken by multilingual individuals. However, a language may vary in dominance across speakers, and this dominance, as it relates to proficiency and usage, has consequences on language and cognitive processes (Treffers-Daller, 2019). Importantly, language knowledge and usage vary by contexts, as illustrated by Grosjean's (2016) complementarity principle. When concluding a bilingual disadvantage in language processing, typically relative to monolinguals, one must ask if this comparison is fair given bilinguals have less usage and may be tested in a nondominant language. Adopting a more holistic approach by assessing both or all languages could refine the discourse on this disadvantage (e.g., Oh & Mancilla-Martinez, 2021). Other contributions in this special issue and elsewhere have discussed extensively the problem of having a monolingual standard when researching bilingual language processing (e.g., see Rothman et al., 2022; and Genesee, 2022 for a perspective from education).

While I acknowledge binary group comparisons are an elegant and simple way to get a direct answer, the context in which a multidimensional experience leads to categorization cannot be ignored. When shifting the research focus to people and the way

that they become multilingual, it is clear that any investigation of bilingual (dis)advantage needs to consider the social contexts where language experiences occur. Because categorized groups are constructed in heterogeneous ways in the literature and language experience (for both bilinguals and monolinguals) is inconsistently reported, meta-analyses based on group effect sizes become difficult to interpret. Dewey (1938), an American philosopher and educator, has summarized the tendency to think in terms of opposites being somewhat of a disconnection with the reality:

“MANKIND likes to think in terms of extreme opposites. It is given to formulating its beliefs in terms of *Either-Ors*, between which it recognizes no intermediate possibilities. When forces to recognize that the extremes cannot be acted upon, it is still inclined to hold that they are all right in theory but that when it comes to practical matters circumstances compel us to compromise.” (Dewey, 1938, p. 17)

It is undeniable that defining group membership is of utter importance, particularly if the chosen research approach is to compare groups that are not definitively segregated. Though I proposed that “bilingualism is not a categorical variable” (Luk & Bialystok, 2013, p. 605), my intention was to encourage researchers to consider bilingualism as a multidimensional construct and that any group categorization needs to be carefully considered and justified with characteristics on multiple inter-related dimensions. I do not intend for the field to drop group comparisons and solely utilize a spectrum approach as this shift requires large sample sizes that may present an equity challenge for less-resourced labs, particularly for emerging researchers or researchers from low-resource institutions and countries. This is also not to say that only studies with large sample sizes are worthwhile (Navarro-Torres et al., 2021). Well-designed science of any size provides information and contributes to incremental advancement of knowledge. Again, my intention was to highlight the multidimensional nature of bilingualism rather than limiting the choices of research design. Kremin and Byers-Heinlein (2021) proposed the use of a factor-mixture model or a grade-of-membership model to appropriately identify a relationship between bilingual experience and behavioral outcome. This suggestion and others capturing multidimensionality are welcome and should be considered by researchers based on their research questions and sample characteristics. Importantly, research conclusions using these approaches provide an enriched set of findings beyond a one-sided (dis)advantage. In fact, recent studies have already adopted these strategies (e.g., Arredondo et al., 2022 used a person-specific connectivity analysis with functional Near-Infrared Spectroscopy (fNIRS) signal; Calvo & Bialystok, 2021, used a continuum-to-group approach, see the special issue co-edited by Luk & Rothman, 2022) and multiple theoretical accounts have moved forward the discussion to consider bilingualism and neuroplasticity in more complex terms (UBET, DeLuca et al., 2020; Dynamic Restructuring Model, Pliatsikas, 2020).

### ***Behavior misattributed to linguistic experiences***

While the label of “bilingual (dis)advantage” is associated with people, the term arises from behavioral outcomes observed in the laboratory, outcomes shaped by



research design and statistical tests. Using “(dis)advantage” to describe behavioral differences between groups misattributes behavioral outcomes to the experience itself. Despite the narrow context where observations are derived, I do not believe any researchers have the intention to qualify bilingualism as a lesser, inferior experience. I choose to trust that researchers use the terms *bilingual advantage* or *bilingual disadvantage* in good faith to describe the behavior of one group relative to the other. Yet, associating a life experience with advantage or disadvantage without clarifying the nuances and assumptions creates a façade of generalization that is not accurate and, importantly, is unjust for the language groups in question.

In the literature examining plasticity, aerobic exercise seems to provide robust and long-lasting behavioral and neural consequences (e.g., El-Sayes et al., 2019). Nonetheless, it is rarely the case that we associate this experience as the “exerciser advantage,” defining the person with a simplified, normative behavioral label. Another more extreme example is the study of child development and household income. The adverse effect of low income is often associated with the environment, such as neighborhood (e.g., Amso, 2020; Jutte et al., 2021). It would be deemed insensitive to define children by the adverse effects of complex environments. No child chooses to be in low-income homes, and there are systemic factors contributing to social inequity associated with low income and adverse outcomes. Similar issues surround multilingualism. While some choose to be multilingual by actively seeking opportunity (and have access to learning a second language), others adapt to their social environment by becoming multilingual. Cognitive plasticity research rarely ascribes consequences to individuals; research on bilingual (dis) advantage reifies behavioral outcomes as defining labels. Is this a just conclusion when a life experience is qualified as an (dis)advantage?

As Dewey (1938) described, categories perpetuate theoretical extremes that may not be observable in practice. If the categorical nature of language groups is relevant to research strategy, and if in reality, linguistic diversity is fluid and multilingual individuals are more heterogeneous than what can be captured or measured quantitatively in research, we must acknowledge that the terms “bilingual advantage” and “bilingual disadvantage” encompass far more than whether an individual speaks multiple languages. “(Dis)advantage” does not encapsulate the intersectional dimensions of multilingual experience and should not be treated as generalizable to all multilingual individuals. Furthermore, when relative terms are used, it is often with a “control” or “baseline” group termed “monolingual.” The language experience for monolinguals is rarely described in detail and in many cases includes (limited) second language experience (Surrain & Luk, 2019, see Castro et al., 2022 for an empirical case). The fuzziness of bilingual–monolingual categorization across studies thus further blurs the definitive nature of a bilingual (dis)advantage in behavior and homogenizes multilingual experiences that should be recognized as multidimensional and dynamic.

### **Focusing on *people* to examine language and cognition**

The fixation on seeking a (dis)advantage associated with diverse language experience is one that becomes a bottleneck for investigating how language and cognition interact and how cognitive plasticity related to language experience unfolds. Circumscribed by the binary determination of whether performance is deemed better (or worse), research findings become limited and irrelevant to these broader

goals. As I advocate in this paper, understanding language, cognition, and plasticity through the lens of multilingualism is contingent on shifting the focus from seeking the said (dis)advantage to people and their lived experiences in being and becoming multilingual.

***Language experience does not happen in a social vacuum***

Borrowing Dewey's (1931) illustration on the interaction between context, thought, and language, "I should venture to assert that the most pervasive fallacy of philosophical thinking goes back to neglect of context." (p. 206), I consider social context an important factor in studying multilingual experience. When describing participants' language experiences, researchers typically take an individual differences approach to focus on associations with language acquisition history, functional usage of languages, and perhaps self-reported proficiency in multiple languages (parent-report for infants and children). However, language experience does not happen in a social vacuum. Instead, the linguistic interactions between an individual and her environment give rise to diverse language experience (this includes monolingual experience as well). Notably, capturing the social interaction where language contact occurs is not an easy feat. Despite the challenge, shifting the research focus to people requires considerations to the social context in which multilingualism (or language experience in general) occurs.

The dynamic social nature of bilingualism is well documented, though not always recognized or associated with cognitive or applied psycholinguistic research. Hamers and Blanc (1982) proposed the social psychological model of bilinguality and bilingual development. In a subsequent paper, Hamers (2004) elaborated on the interaction and in particular socialization and valorization of language use. Taking a functional linguistic approach, Hamers and Blanc considered the socio-emotional aspect of child language development, in which socialization, internalization, and identity formation intertwined to establish the valorized status of languages spoken by the child and others in her social environment. Hamers highlighted the interaction between an individual's language behavior and that at the societal level, one that she considered to be dynamic and mutually influential. Lanza and Svendsen (2007) have also demonstrated the importance of considering socialization of language use in a Filipino diaspora in Oslo, Norway. By connecting language use with socialization, social networks, and language choices, Lanza and Svendsen formulated the multilingual ideology and identities in this particular context. More recent work examining social networks of multilingual individuals using network science showed empirical and quantitative evidence that language usage changes across contexts and topics (Tiv et al., 2020). Another novel approach in characterizing multilinguals' social interactions quantifies the relative balance of using two languages and derives a measure of entropy to indicate social diversity (Gullifer & Titone, 2020b). Collectively, these studies provide empirical evidence confirming multilingualism as a dynamic experience and that language behavior changes across contexts (Grosjean, 2013; 2016).

Returning to the need to redirect the research focus to people, one remaining question is where monolinguals are positioned in the varying sociolinguistic contexts as they relate to bilinguals? Preliminary findings suggest that ambient



environmental multilingual exposure makes a difference in language processing among monolinguals (Bice & Kroll, 2019, see also Beatty-Martínez et al., 2020 for a similar case for bilinguals) and that monolinguals are not as homogeneous as expected (Castro et al., 2022; also Özsoy & Blum in this special issue). Understanding the diversity in social contexts shaping language experiences can help researchers situate the language experience(s) in relation to social forces pushing and pulling individuals' exposure and use of language and that monolingualism may be more heterogeneous than assumed.

Indeed, Green and Abutalebi (2013) have integrated social interaction into their adaptive control hypothesis to elucidate the cognitive consequences associated with different qualities of social interaction. They described three conceptual scenarios of language use: (1) single-language scenarios where language use is compartmentalized by environment; (2) dual-language ones where multiple languages are used in the same environment, but with different speakers; and (3) dense code-switching contexts where languages are used interchangeably and fluidly. If in practice, social contexts play a role in shaping language experience and these scenarios co-exist and are interrelated, it is not surprising to see that there are mixed findings based on this model (partial support for this model in Singapore: Hartanto & Yang, 2016; 2020; Lai & O'Brien, 2020; no support for this model in Poland: Kałamała et al., 2020). These studies have shifted the conversation from a static comparison between monolinguals and bilinguals and importantly away from a quest for a behavioral advantage or disadvantage. Though there are few converging findings across studies, one must recognize that the "noise" observed here may point to "signal" illustrating divergence at a level that is not captured by our current measures at the individual level. This is where the discussion begins.

### **Research answers do not have to be binary**

Though a binary answer seems definitive, it is by no means the only perspective facilitating the investigation of cognitive and behavioral plasticity associated with multilingual experience. Perhaps limited by the statistical approach on null hypothesis significance testing, it seems that research answers have to be black and white. Recent advocacy on Bayesian statistics (e.g., Kruschke & Liddell, 2018) could broaden the interpretations on findings related to bilingualism and cognition. Additional research approaches such as neuroscience methods, longitudinal or within-person designs, and multilevel modeling can be used individually and collectively to strengthen research designs to answer complex questions beyond unjustified group comparisons.

Employing neuroscience methods, such as functional magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), structural MRI, Electroencephalogram (EEG), or fNIRS, in conjunction with behavioral tasks and/or eye-tracking methods, holds great potential in shifting the narrative from an advantage or disadvantage perspective to more nuanced comparisons. Findings from neuroscience methods focus on the differences in brain function or structure, less so on characterizing whether one group has better or worse brain function or structure. The exploration of brain-behavior correlation elucidates the underlying mechanisms enabling multilinguals to control and use their multiple languages at ease (see recent reviews such as Calabria

et al., 2018). Recent advances in examining resting-state functional connectivity using fMRI (e.g., Gullifer et al., 2018) and EEG (e.g., Bice et al., 2020) illuminate spontaneous and coherent brain activity associated with multilingual experience. These findings do not involve characterizing the experience as an advantage or disadvantage. Another powerful strategy is to adopt a within-subject design to compare multilinguals in different conditions or across time (Salig et al., 2021). In addition, multilevel modeling offers a statistical tool to account for the multiple levels involved in multilingual experiences (Luke, 2022), which could include fixed and random effects of social contexts, communities, and time (e.g., Alvear, 2019; Lauro et al., 2020). None of these suggestions are new as examples are prevalent in the literature. All these studies converge to show that multilingual experiences shape cognitive, linguistic, and learning behavior across the lifespan beyond the conclusion of a bilingual (dis)advantage. Complex, nuanced, and context-relevant findings are necessary to fulfill justice for the people whom researchers describe in research.

## Conclusion

Multilingual experience, like life itself, is vibrant and dynamic. To further our current knowledge of plasticity and cognition, researchers must move beyond seeking a bilingual (dis)advantage to consider other questions about multilingual experiences. I consider the (dis)advantage controversy a bottleneck that overemphasizes a binary answer that is actually complex. Most crucially, its deterministic tone is disconnected from reality, implying a level of unnecessary prestige (or inferiority) and masking the assumptions and mechanics underlying its findings. Quantitative data are a proxy for human behavior. Behind those numbers, there are human faces and experiences that are the center of the investigation. Here, the construct of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991), as illustrated by multiple identity systems, including race, gender, language status, and immigration/refugee status can also be applied to multilinguals who use their languages in different contexts and at different points in their lifetimes, portraying complexity beyond just being bilingual/multilingual.

Researchers have the responsibility to consider, not only whether the process is rigorous, and the theory is evidenced, but also whether the research conclusion is fair and accurate for all participants. In this position paper, I address the shortcomings of fixating on seeking a binary answer of the existence of a bilingual (dis)advantage and the need to shift the attention to *people* in order to achieve a just and equitable narrative to describe a life experience. To avoid misconceptions about when group comparisons are meaningful and informative and when they are not, the rationale for constructing groups should be carefully articulated and justified to ensure equity in comparisons. I end this paper with a quote from Peal and Lambert (1962) who set out to evaluate the bilingual disadvantage in intelligence among children in Montréal but found the opposite when social contexts and other demographic factors were accounted for.

“The results of this study indicate the value of shifting emphasis from looking for favorable or unfavorable effects of bilingualism on intelligence to an inquiry

into the basic nature of these effects. Perhaps further research may profit from this different emphasis.” (p. 21)

After seven decades and a seismic shift in our understanding of justice and equity in research, the bilingual (dis)advantage should not be a conclusion, but rather an opportunity for more nuanced and complex questions. Shifting the research foci to people enriches the scholarly discussions and practical implications to ensure the framing is just and equitable. For many people, language experience is an identity, not by choice but by the need to adapt and live. It is neither just nor equitable to describe a life experience as an advantage or disadvantage.

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