

From Fluency to Linguistic Incompetence: Humble Reflections on Multilingual Research

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I speak several languages. My own biography is marked by the education policies on language teaching, by the possibilities afforded me to travel by my work and for leisure. For the first ten years of my work as a researcher I operated happily in three-four languages, which I spoke fluently and where I could also affect accent and dialect as well as presenting in academic registers and with sufficient levels of 'native sounding' competence in my speech as to pass when acting in plays in the theatres, which were my field sites. In 2005 I shifted my focus from research in areas where I possessed the competence myself, to researching the process of learning languages and doing so as an adult learner and beginner. The results of this research were the subject of my last monograph in 2007 *Learning the Arts of Linguistic Survival*. Since completing this research I have entered a phase of ongoing empirical and theoretical research in areas which are a long way from my competence and where resource to support language learning and acquisition of linguistic skills is severely limited and highly problematic. This phase of research has been markedly anarchic in nature (a term I use advised and following the anthropologist David Graeber) and has raise many questions regarding the surprising nature of research which is carried out when no language is shared.

In this paper I will describe some of the insights from previous research carried out in situations of multilingual competence and compare these to recent autoethnographic research in several contexts, including languages such as Arabic, Tigrinya, Bilen and Chichewa. I will use tehse examples to reflect on the concept and tenability of multilingualism itself.