Susana A. Eisenchlas and Andrea C. Schalley

2 Making sense of “home language” and related concepts

1 Introduction

Reviewing the different conceptualisations of terms used in the field of bilingualism is complicated by ambiguity and diverse disciplinary, geographical, and ideological perspectives. Even a cursory look at the literature reveals a plethora of terms referring to bilinguals/multilinguals and the languages they use. Common terms for these languages include “majority” vs. “minority language”, “first” vs. “second language”, “environment/mainstream” vs. “home/community language”, “foreign” vs. “immigrant/heritage/ancestral language”, “native language”, “dominant language”, “language other than X” (X being the “dominant” language of the country) and “mother tongue”. Although these terms are frequently used as synonyms in academic and popular debates, they encode subtle (and not so subtle) conceptual distinctions. However, the precise delimitations of these terms are not clear, and none appears to be able to capture the different dimensions encountered in research and practice. There is no one-size-fits-all term that can be drawn upon, in line with Wiley’s (2014: 19) remark that “any attempt to apply a single label to a complex situation is problematic.”

Despite these definitional challenges, we need to explore and problematise the terms and their underlying concepts. As Skutnabb-Kangas and McCarty (2008: 3) argue:

The concepts we use are almost never neutral. In contested arenas such as bilingual education, words and concepts frame and construct the phenomena under discussion, making some persons and groups visible, others invisible; some the unmarked norm, others marked and negative. Choice of language can minoritise or distort some individuals, groups, phenomena and relations while majoritising and glorifying others. Concepts also can be defined in ways that hide, expose, rationalise or question power relations.

In this chapter, we use “bilingual” to refer also to “multilingual”, as the issues we discuss are relevant to all who operate in more than one language.¹ Bilingualism can be studied as an individual and as a societal phenomenon (Cenoz 2013; Edwards 2013). It has been investigated through diverse disciplinary perspectives.

¹ However, we also acknowledge a burgeoning literature suggesting that multilinguals should be studied separately, focusing in particular on the impact of bilingualism on the acquisition of additional languages. See Cenoz (2003) for an overview.

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with research drawing on linguistics, psycholinguistics, cognitive psychology, sociology, education, speech pathology, and other related fields. Each discipline raises specific questions and constructs its object of inquiry according to its paradigms, so the absence of both a uniform view of the phenomena under investigation and consistent terminology to refer to them is not surprising.

The lack of terminological consensus has theoretical implications. As Grosjean (1998) noted, research on both bilingualism and its potential benefits is plagued with conflicting results, which may stem partially from imprecision both in terminology and in identifying moderating factors that may impact on bilingual achievement (e.g., age of onset, socioeconomic status, and languages used). This may have deleterious consequences, since many educational decisions at the macro level of language policy planning – including issues such as teacher training and professional development – could be based on misleading research findings.

There are also practical implications, as can be seen in education, clinical practice and other areas (De Houwer and Ortega 2018). Education policies in many Anglophone countries, for instance, have traditionally taken a deficit view of the languages of bilingual children. This can affect teachers’ expectations of such students (Pulinx, Van Avermaet, and Agirdag 2015), leading, e.g., to wrong diagnoses of learning difficulties, which are often attributed to the linguistic diversity to which a student is exposed when other non-linguistic factors may be at play (see Cheatham and Lim this vol.). This conceptualises additional languages as handicaps that prevent students from achieving their full potential.

This chapter aims to help set the scene for the handbook by discussing terminological choices in the literature on bilingualism. Research on bilingualism has continued to reach into new contexts, so a single chapter cannot adequately address all the terminological issues raised by the many terms currently in use. We therefore restrict our discussion to the terms used in contexts most relevant to this handbook, and by corollary, to the scholarly fields most closely related to the handbook’s topic: (applied) linguistics and education.

We begin by asking, “what does it mean to be bilingual?”, and discuss methodological and theoretical difficulties in trying to answer this question without ambiguity (section 2). We then critically evaluate the terms used to refer to the non-mainstream languages in the bilingual’s repertoire that are most commonly encountered in the field of home language maintenance and development (section 3). Section 4 compares and contrasts the distinctive characteristics of the selected terms, anchoring them in a multi-dimensional space comprising linguistic and speaker dimensions as well as social and affective ones. Finally, we explain the choice of “home language” for this volume – for lack of a better alternative – in the chapter’s conclusion in section 5.
2 What does it mean to be “bilingual”? Definitions and challenges

In his now classic book, *Bilingualism: Basic principles*, Baetens Beardsmore argues that “bilingualism as a concept has open-ended semantics” (1986: 1). He regrets that definitions are continually “being proffered without any real sense of progress being felt as the list extends” (Baetens Beardsmore 1986: 1). Definitions range between maximalist and minimalist perspectives, based on the threshold of linguistic competence a speaker is expected to attain to be considered “bilingual”. The maximalist or narrowest view considers bilingualism as “native-like control of two languages” (Bloomfield 1935: 55–56). This is the definition of the mythical, idealised, “true” bilingual.

Yet, most researchers realise that this high expectation is seldom met. They propose more realistic, yet somewhat vague, views of a bilingual, such as “someone who operates during their everyday life in more than one language and does so with some degree of self-confidence” (Miller 1983: x). Similarly, Li (2008: 4) defines a bilingual as “anyone who can communicate in more than one language, be it active (through speaking and writing) or passive (through listening and reading)”. Edwards (2004: 7) offers a minimalist perspective, opening his article on the foundations of bilingualism with the claim:

> Everyone is bilingual. That is, there is no one in the world (no adult, anyway) who does not know at least a few words in languages other than the maternal variety. If, as an English speaker, you can say *c'est la vie* or *gracias* or *guten Tag* or *tovarisch* – or even if you only understand them – you clearly have some “command” of a foreign tongue. Such competence, of course, does not lead many to think of bilingualism.

In Edwards’ view, incipient bilinguals with minimal competence (cf. Diebold 1961), such as second/foreign language learners in their initial stages of linguistic development, would also be included under the umbrella term “bilingualism”. This inclusion embraces the variety of acquisition contexts and linguistic experiences of bilinguals, some of which acquire their language(s) in the home context since birth, while others learn their language(s) in more formal settings, usually later in life. Whether these two populations should be conflated is a matter of debate. A problem with the minimalist perspective is that the definition becomes too encompassing and thus uninformative or unwieldy. The threshold that speakers need to attain to be considered bilingual continues to be contested (Baker and Wright 2017).²

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² It is for this reason that we interpret “speaker” broadly in this chapter, to also include, for instance, passive bilinguals.
The degree of linguistic competence in the bilinguals’ languages is thus significant. It is the basis upon which speakers have been classified and conceptualised, and has given rise to a number of dichotomies and categories encountered in the literature, such as “balanced” (a.k.a. ambilinguals; equilinguals; ideal or symmetrical bilinguals) vs. “unbalanced” (a.k.a. asymmetrical; semilinguals), or “ascendant” or “active” vs. “recessive” or “passive”.

Measuring levels of linguistic competence is not, however, a straightforward process, raising both theoretical and methodological challenges. The narrow definitions above, for instance, assume that “native-like proficiency” is a self-explanatory term, but operationalising it is extremely difficult given the amount of variability monolingual speakers display. Thus Clyne (2005: 30) remarked: “Even a monolingual’s ‘perfect’ command of their ‘one’ language is undefinable.” Moreover, scholars agree there are several areas of abilities, and each of the macro skills (i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing) can be subdivided further. Edwards (2004) posits that at least 20 dimensions of language can be assessed to determine bilingual proficiency. He exemplifies his claim with speaking, arguing that speaking involves skills related to the richness (or poverty) of expression in vocabulary, grammatical accuracy, and level of accentedness. Similar subdivisions also apply to the other macro skills. Therefore, decisions need to be made about minimal thresholds for each of the macro skills, and about how to classify users with high levels of proficiency (setting aside the problem of how these are measured) in some skills (typically oral) but not in others (typically written).

Furthermore, knowledge of a language implies much more than mastery of a linguistic system. Speakers need to develop competence in determining what is appropriate to say to whom in particular contexts, and how to interpret meaning beyond what is actually said. However, there is still no consensus on how to operationalise and assess speakers’ level of pragmatic or sociocultural competence (Bardovi-Harlig 2012; Grabowsky 2016). Measuring levels of communicative competence, i.e. the ability to use language accurately and appropriately, is complicated in one language, and testing each additional language in the bilingual’s repertoire increases the challenge.

The discussion about the degree of bilingualism a speaker needs to attain to be categorised as bilingual appears to assume bilingualism refers mostly to a linguistic phenomenon. It ignores or downplays other influential non-linguistic dimensions of the concept, such as social and affective factors which are the focus of this handbook. As mentioned above, some researchers have recognised other dimensions that impact on bilingual attainment. Some have therefore proposed that any

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3 What counts as a distinct language can also be hard to establish in some cases. Current discussions around “named languages” in the translanguaging literature suggest that for some scholars “named languages are social, not linguistic, objects” (Otheguy, García, and Reid 2015: 281).
account of bilingualism needs to recognise the complexity of the phenomenon and resist one-dimensional characterisations. Thus Chin and Wigglesworth (2007: 18) argue that “bilingualism is not a concrete entity that can be quantified or dissected”, and that using descriptors (such as age of acquisition, context of acquisition, degree of bilingualism, domain of use of each language) is more appropriate than constructing a general definition of bilingualism.

With this aim, a number of models have been proposed to characterise bilinguals. The precise number and nature of dimensions included in these models are still a matter of debate. Here we do not have space to discuss the different proposals, and can only outline them briefly. The model in Skutnabb-Kangas (1988), one of the most widely cited, proposes four aspects to describe bilinguals: origin – which language the speaker acquired first; competence – which language the speaker knows best; function – which language the speaker uses most; and identification – which language the speaker uses to associate with or disassociate from others. Baker and Wright (2017: 3–4) identify eight: (1) ability; (2) use; (3) balance; (4) age of onset; (5) development (i.e., whether bilingualism is ascendant or recessive); (6) culture; (7) contexts; and (8) choice. Grosjean (1998) identifies six: linguistic history; linguistic abilities; linguistic stability; language functions; language proficiency; language mode (i.e., whether one or two languages are activated); and demographic information. Along similar lines, Leung, Harris, and Rampton (1997) argue for three: language expertise; language inheritance; and language affiliation.

These dimensions are by no means as straightforward as the models cited above suggest. Although usually expressed as categorical constructs, mostly they should be seen as continuous (Butler and Hakuta 2004). Drawing clear boundaries between diverse types of bilinguals within a given dimension is therefore difficult. Furthermore, dimensions interact and impact on one another, and in some instances are interdependent. To give just one example, linguistic competence may be enhanced and further developed through language use, but at the same time, it influences the range of contexts in which each of the languages can be used, which in turn affects the purposes for which a language is used. Consequently, some dimensions appear to cluster together. Instructional domains, for instance, seem to characterise late, elective, additive, probably prestige bilingualism. Finally, it is widely recognised that bilingualism is a dynamic phenomenon and thus a bilingual’s profile may change over time. Despite these limitations, categorisations are still useful as a means of framing the discussion, and thus they will serve as the basis for our analysis in section 4.

While the term “bilingualism” is open to different interpretations, further complicating the situation are the different terms used to refer to bilingual speakers’ non-mainstream languages. Maintenance and development of these languages are in focus in this handbook, so let us turn to these terms in the next section.
3 Alternative terms to refer to non-mainstream languages spoken by bilingual speakers

Implicitly or explicitly, the terms referring to non-mainstream languages in bilingual repertoires – and their underlying concepts – encode differences in perspectives, along the lines of dimensions such as the ones identified above. In this section we unpack some of these terms, aiming to unveil conceptual and attitudinal implications underpinning their use, as well as the dimensions they foreground. We address the key question: Which term is used when, where, by whom, and with what purpose? Given the plethora of terms in use, we restrict our discussion to the terms most relevant to this handbook, and discuss “minority language”, “first language”, “mother tongue”, “heritage language”, some commonly used abbreviations and acronyms, and “home language”.

3.1 Minority language

We begin with “minority language”, since most of the terms used to describe languages of bilingual speakers and contexts hinge on the dichotomy between “majority” and “minority” languages. Skutnabb-Kangas and McCarty (2008: 10) define a minority language as a “[l]anguage that is not the dominant language of a territorial unit such as a state, because the speakers of the language have less power (they have been minoritised), and the language is generally spoken by a smaller number of people.” They argue, however, that the defining characteristic of “minority language” is its speakers’ lesser power in society rather than its speaker number. As Nelde, Strubell, and Williams (1996: 1) put it, “the concept of minority by reference to language groups does not refer to empirical measures, but rather, to issues of power.” They add that these minority groups “lack the political, institutional and ideological structures which can guarantee the relevance of those languages for the everyday life of members of such groups” (Nelde, Strubell, and Williams 1996: 1).

State ideologies, particularly the equation between the nation-state and linguistic homogeneity, serve to legitimise, regulate, and reproduce unequal access to power and resources (Skutnabb-Kangas 1988), entrenching inequality among diverse linguistic groups. Thus, the lack of state support for “minority languages” within a state’s territories, including restrictions on both access to allocation of resources and inclusion in educational curricula, further minoritises languages, regardless of the number of speakers. Historical examples in former colonial territories attest to this. Cameroon, for instance, has two official languages (French and English), one lingua franca (Cameroon Pidgin English), and 247 indigenous languages. The two official languages are the languages of instruction, while the
indigenous languages and Cameroon Pidgin English are excluded from the education system (Echu 2004).

Two dimensions, both of a social nature, thus appear to be foregrounded by “minority language”: the territorial unit (or state) as the restricted social context, and the language group’s lack of power and minoritisation in that context.

3.2 First language (L1)

Focusing on the individual, the term “first language” (L1) is probably the most commonly used, but also the most ambiguous and prone to diverse interpretations. L1 is often used as a synonym for “mother tongue” and “home language” and contrasted with second (L2) or foreign language (FL). Naturally, all speakers have a “first language”, including speakers of a mainstream language.

Part of the confusion around this term may stem from its inherent ambiguity, since there are several dimensions in which a language can be “first”. Skutnabb-Kangas and McCarty (2008: 6) define “first language” as “the language first learnt, best known, and/or most used.” This definition entails three aspects: acquisition sequence, proficiency, and extent of use. In bilingual contexts, the “first language” tends to be the “minority language”, which may be dominant, and thus the speaker’s most proficient language, during the early years of life, but loses its dominance once the speaker begins schooling in the mainstream language. When/if this happens, the first chronological language ceases to be the language that is “known best”, and this descriptor then applies to the mainstream language (which may be the second in order of acquisition). Similarly, the first chronological language may be used only in limited contexts, such as the family. This applies particularly in the absence of a community of speakers of that language and/or when there is no institutional support to maintain and develop languages other than the mainstream. Here the mainstream language becomes the “most used”, while the “first” chronological language is used in restricted circumstances.

For “first language” to be helpful, then, its meaning needs to be clarified. Some scholars appear to use this term to refer to the dominant language of a speaker, but this assumes that a dominant language in a speaker’s life remains dominant throughout their life, a questionable assumption given the dynamic nature of speakers’ lives, linguistic repertoires, and language needs.

From this discussion, we suggest that the most salient dimension of “first language” appears to be acquisition sequence: the “first language” is the one acquired first chronologically. This goes hand in hand with the language being acquired in a non-instructional way, as is typically the case with first languages. It follows that the age of onset is early childhood, and during this life period at least some proficiency is guaranteed (which, as we saw in the discussion of the usage domains,
could be quite restricted). While the dimensions for “minority language” are social, the dimensions for “first language” thus mainly concern the individual speaker.

3.3 Mother tongue

“Mother tongue” is another commonly used term, particularly in collocations such as “mother tongue instruction”. It appears to be prevalent in the education context and in human rights literature. Yet, defining it is not straightforward. UNESCO uses the term in recommending efforts be made to provide initial education in the mother tongue “because they [students] understand it best and because to begin their school life in the mother tongue will make the break between home and school as small as possible” (UNESCO 1951: 691; emphasis added). This description of a mother tongue assumes speakers’ proficiency, but the reference to understanding seems to privilege oral/aural skills, while disregarding other aspects of communicative competence.

Other definitions of “mother tongue” highlight diverse aspects. Skutnabb-Kangas and McCarty define “mother tongue” as “[l]anguage one learns first, identifies with, and/or is identified by others as a native speaker of; sometimes also the language that one is most competent in or uses most” (2008: 11; emphasis added). This definition is problematic, however, as it bundles together separate optional dimensions without problematising them further. Yet, unlike UNESCO’s characterisation, this definition recognises that someone may know one language best but feel stronger emotional attachment to another, which they have learned and used at home and associate with their early subjective experiences.

Some in the field object to the use of “mother tongue”. Romaine (1995: 18), for example, argues that the term suggests that mothers are “the passive repositories of languages, which they pass on to their children”. While this is a very literal reading of the term, one can easily find such interpretations outside the field of bilingualism research. The term’s underlying assumption is that mothers, as primary caretakers of children, are ultimately responsible for intergenerational language transmission. Yet this is no longer the case in many modern societies. Furthermore, as several scholars noted (Gupta 1997; Romaine 1995), determining an actual mother tongue is in many instances not a straightforward process, particularly in mixed families where children may not have a single identifiable mother tongue.

At a societal level, deciding which language is the mother tongue has significant real-life implications, including having or being denied the right to receive instruction in a specific language. Countries like Sweden, that offer students supplementary mother tongue instruction, do so for only one “mother tongue”. Hence parents must select one “mother tongue”, even if their children speak additional languages at home. In Singapore, the state designates the official language of one’s ethnic group
as the “mother tongue”, which students must study as a school subject. The question thus has to be asked whether the term “mother tongue” is indeed the right term to be used in these societal contexts, as it has acquired a different meaning from the one adopted by UNESCO for individual speakers.

Overall, we can conclude that speakers’ identification is the most foregrounded dimension for this term. Generally, a “mother tongue” is seen as transmitted by the parents, and it is contextualised in the family. We see, too, that a substantial level of proficiency is required for a language to be considered a speaker’s “mother tongue”.

3.4 Heritage language

“Heritage language” has its origins in the education literature and policy circles (Valdés 2001; Wiley 2014) and became prominent in the USA and Canada in the 1990s (Wiley 2014). It was introduced as a replacement for the language of “quasi-speakers”, to move away from the deficit perspective that this term purported. This was an attempt to convey a richer and more accurate account of the “non-mainstream” language component in bilingual repertoires. It sought to cast a more positive light on “heritage” or “background speakers”, who were typically contrasted negatively with both native speakers and second language learners. In principle, the concept of “heritage language” includes all languages, since, as Cummins (2005) notes, mainstream speakers also have a heritage. In practice, however, the term is reserved expressly for speakers of languages other than the mainstream. Heritage speakers have been identified as “those whose home or ancestral language is [a language] other than English, including those whose ancestors lived in this country prior to the establishment of the United States and those who have come in recent years” (Alliance for the Advancement of Heritage Languages, n.d., cited in Cummins 2005: 586).

Other definitions, however, downplay the centrality of linguistic proficiency, and instead foreground the affiliative dimension. Van Deusen-Scholl (2003: 221), for instance, defines heritage speakers as “a heterogenous group ranging from fluent native speakers to nonspeakers who may be generations removed but who may feel culturally connected to the language”. Valdés (2001: 2) observes similarly, “it is

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4 The official Singaporean “mother tongues” are Malay, Mandarin and Tamil. Additionally, non-Tamil Indian students have a choice between five Indian languages: Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Punjabi, and Urdu (Jain and Wee 2015).

5 Cummins (2005) notes that the term emerged in Canada in 1977 with the inception of the Ontario Heritage Languages, but only became prominent in the USA in the late 1990s in the context of public policy.
the historical and personal connection to the language that is salient and not the actual proficiency of individual speakers”. Thus, a speaker may claim – or be ascribed – a “heritage language” because that language has affective family connections for the speaker. This affiliation or attribution neither implies nor excludes actual proficiency in the language. As Gounari (2014: 257) notes, for the heritage language “survival and maintenance is justified upon its historical and personal value, and not on real current societal needs. It follows then that the maintenance of HLs [heritage languages] rests with the individuals and the communities and not with the State or the federal government.”

Like all concepts in the field of bilingualism, the term “heritage language” has been challenged by some scholars. Baker and Jones (1998: 509) argue that:

The danger of the term ‘heritage language’ is that, relative to powerful majority languages, it points more to the past and less to the future, to traditions rather than to the contemporary. The danger is that the heritage language becomes associated with ancient cultures, past traditions and more ‘primitive times.’ This is also true of the terms ‘ethnic’ (used in the US) and ‘ancestral.’ These terms may fail to give the impression of a modern, international language that is of value in a technological society.

Significantly, scholars may use and understand terms such as “heritage language” purely as academic jargon. Yet those terms could still take on a more “naive” meaning in the public discourse – and/or in policymaking. It is therefore relevant not to ignore the potential impact of such terms on social attitudes.

A further criticism relates to the essentialist view of speech communities that the concept entails, with scholars increasingly challenging the notion of a linguistic inheritance as the basis to classify speakers. As Gounari (2014: 260) asks poignantly, “whose heritage is maintained and who decided on it?” García, Zakharia, and Otcu (2013: 34) argue that “[l]anguage and ethnicity are not simple reflections of ‘heritage speech’ communities, or of ‘practice communities’.” Individuals can simultaneously belong to or identify with several groups, and their agency allows them to select which features of their identity to foreground or background in specific contexts. This includes selecting which language in their linguistic repertoire to use, according to time, space, and situation. Rather than being homogeneous entities, communities are composed of individuals that juggle multiple linguistic and cultural identities. And in multilingual contexts, this agency even affords individuals the freedom to engage in “language crossing” and using languages (in addition to the mainstream) that are generally not assumed to “belong” to the speaker (Rampton 1998).

From an educational perspective, scholars (e.g., Polinsky and Kagan 2007; Carreira and Kagan 2011) have distinguished between “broad” and “narrow” definitions of heritage language and heritage language speakers. A broad definition of heritage language emphasises the strong connections between cultural heritage
and linguistic heritage, transmitted through family interactions. This perspective highlights the identification dimension, since the individual adopts or is assigned a language as part of their heritage by virtue of being born into a particular community, without implying competence in that language. A narrower definition casts heritage language as a language that “was first in the order of acquisition but was not completely acquired because of the individual’s switch to another dominant language” since early childhood (Polinsky and Kagan 2007: 369), which takes us back to the question “what does it mean to be bilingual?”.

Different experiences with the heritage language make for wide variation among speakers, ranging from basic (minimally, in aural skills) to advanced levels of competence across skills. Even so, scholars agree that linguistic production and comprehension of heritage speakers fall short of those of the native speaker, who is taken as the yardstick for comparison (Montrul 2002; Polinsky 2006). The view that heritage language speakers acquire their heritage language incompletely entails a negative stance, as evident in discussion about the pedagogical challenges of providing language instruction for heritage learners (Valdés 2005: 410). Ruiz’s (1984) perspective of “language as a problem” comes to mind here.

As our discussion reveals, several dimensions come into play for the term “heritage language”. Most prominent and hence foregrounded is the felt connection between cultural and linguistic heritage. As to the identification dimension, speakers identify with or are assigned to “heritage languages” for social reasons (e.g., being born into a particular community). Furthermore, some scholars see the term as oriented towards the past, which could have unwanted repercussions in public discourse and policymaking, as indicated above.

### 3.5 Abbreviations and acronyms

Here we focus briefly on a few of the most commonly used abbreviations and acronyms. These terms are very prominent and influential in the educational discourse of at least some (Anglophone) countries, and education is one of the main fields under discussion in this handbook. As in the previous section (3.4), the terms we discuss here reveal a “language-as-a-problem” orientation in language policy (Ruiz 1984; Skutnabb-Kangas and McCarty 2008), which is also referred to as a deficit perspective (Yağmur 2015). We find that these terms foreground what their speakers lack rather than the competencies they display.

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6 See Valdés (2005) for a discussion of problems associated with teaching heritage language speakers. One problem is that many heritage language speakers use stigmatised varieties and thus may face discrimination from teachers of the standard varieties of those languages.
A clear example is the term “Limited English Proficiency” (LEP), found in US language policy documents. Skutnabb-Kangas and McCarty (2008) note a move in 2001 to substitute this term with the term “English Language Learner” (ELL), to convey a more positive association. However, ELL, like LEP, still identifies speakers of other languages by their lack, or limited knowledge, of the mainstream language, while ignoring or devaluing the other language(s) and cultures they know. Similarly, the terms “Languages Other Than English” (LOTE) or “Non-English-Speaking Background” (NESB) have been common in Australian language policies and education documents. Attempts to convey a more inclusive view of languages and speakers have seen these terms replaced by ever more abbreviations and acronyms that rapidly fall out of favour. In a guide produced by the New South Wales Department of Education (2015) for appropriate terminology to refer to people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, the following terms stand out:
- CALD, “culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds/communities” (which includes all communities except the Anglo-Saxon);
- LBOTE, “language background other than English”; and
- EAL/D, “English as an additional language or dialect”.

Despite the seemingly good intentions, these labels still imply a binary distinction between those who speak Standard Australian English and those who do not. The well-intended guide inadvertently implies that only the latter are (visible) members of communities, belong to ethnic groups, and require “additional support to assist them to develop proficiency in English” (ACARA n.d.). “Additional dialects” refers not to other recognised varieties of English such as New Zealand, British, or Canadian English, but to traditional languages, creoles and related varieties or Aboriginal English, namely, stigmatised varieties.

In terms of dimensions, the deficit or “language-as-a-problem” ideological perspective stands out clearly, and the terms are restricted to the education domain. Moreover, they are understood to apply exclusively to the languages of minority groups, even though some of the notions may try to display a more inclusive attitude, as discussed above.

### 3.6 Home language

We conclude this overview of selected terms used to refer to bilinguals’ non-mainstream languages with the discussion of “home language”, the term used in the handbook’s title. Unlike most other terms examined in this chapter, “home language” explicitly refers to a specific domain of use, the home. The home language is thus understood as the language spoken in the home environment. But this domain specification is not to imply that participants in family interactions limit the
use of their language(s) to the home domain, as some objectors to this term have suggested (cf., e.g., Cunningham 2019). Rather, the home is understood to provide a “point of reference” from which speakers navigate the world; it is the space where negotiations on language use at the micro level predominantly take place. This is highlighted by the field of family language policy research, where studies on “home language” focus on the communicative practices in which families engage, and attempt to document and understand individual and family driven language policy and planning activities.

In this context, “home language” highlights a dynamic outlook built on speakers’ agency. Language prominence and use in bilingual families are subject to constant renegotiation, as speakers change their language use in accordance with their perception of the context in which they find themselves at different points in time. Moreover, “home language” implies a sense of contingency; for instance, children will leave the home at some stage, families may disintegrate and blend with others, or particular languages may be abandoned and replaced through migration (cf. also Palviainen this vol.).

It seems obvious that every speaker – of mainstream or other languages – has a “home language”. However, as we have seen with previous terms, this term too is generally used in a restricted sense to refer to non-mainstream languages, as is true for many chapters of this handbook. Even so, despite using the term in singular rather than plural, discussion in these chapters recognises that everyday communication in some families is complex and might involve more than one language. The continuous (re)negotiation of language use in everyday communication also shows that, in contrast to “heritage language” potentially being understood as pointing towards the past (rightly or wrongly), “home language” is set in the present.

Beyond this is an under-specification of other dimensions. In terms of linguistic competence, for instance, “home language” accommodates a wide gamut of abilities ranging from limited to native-like proficiency in the language(s). Yet speakers need at least some proficiency for communication to take place. Similarly, in terms of identity and inheritance, speakers, in particular children, vary widely, as some of the chapters that follow illustrate. Some children identify strongly with the home language, as we see in this excerpt from Ahmed, interviewed by Mills (2001) about why he uses the term “home language”:

7 Replacing the term hemspråk (home language) with modersmål (mother tongue) in the Swedish education system (creating the subject modersmålundervisning, mother tongue instruction) in 1997 was intended to emphasise that modersmål is another language that can be taught in school, rather than used “only” at home. This move also reflected the subject’s stronger position in the curriculum (Erica Sandlund; Nihad Bunar, both personal communication).
Because Pakistan, even though I was born here, I class Pakistan as my home country. That’s where the language originates from, so I call it my home language. We speak it at home and like with my family and friends, well some friends. So, I call it my home language because that’s one of the languages that I like to express things. (Ahmed, cited in Mills 2001: 398)

Others, however, show no identification with their so-called “home language” and challenge what they perceive as a linguistic imposition from their parents (see Sevinç and Smith-Christmas, both in this volume). This has potential to turn the home into a source of linguistic anxiety, or a linguistic battlefield. Matters of identification are generally dynamic, too, and the above-mentioned sense of contingency suggests that feelings of identity and affiliation may change across speakers’ lifespans.

Summing up, the foregrounded dimension appears to be identification. Speakers negotiate their identification in the home, which in turn constitutes the general usage domain of this term. The term’s group context is neither the territorial unit nor the community (as it was for “minority language” and “heritage language”, respectively), but the family. Moreover, home language speakers are expected to display at least some proficiency in their current home language(s).

4 Comparing and contrasting the terms

So far we have tried to isolate the most prevalent dimensions highlighted by each term. We are aware that these presentations somewhat oversimplify the complexity of bilingualism, but we need to identify them in order to conceptualise the interplay of the dimensions discussed in the previous section. In this section we attempt to systematise the dimensions that contribute to our understanding and usage of each of the terms. Table 1 overviews these dimensions and their respective dimensional values, and indicates how these dimensions differentiate and characterise the terms.

Table 1 identifies a number of different types of dimensions, ranging from linguistic and speaker dimensions to social and affective dimensions. The relevant dimensions for each type are indicated in the columns and displayed in italics across the table (e.g., proficiency as linguistic dimension, acquisition sequence as speaker dimension, ideological underpinning as social dimension, and identification as affective dimension). Rows characterise the terms listed in the first column. Empty cells in the table signal that the dimension in question is not relevant to the characterisation or to the definition of that term. Otherwise, cell content indicates the specific value assigned to a particular dimension. Cell values in bold indicate that this dimension is considered the most important specification dimension for a term.
Table 1: Overview of the dimensions and values that differentiate and characterise the terms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Linguistic dimension</th>
<th>Speaker dimensions</th>
<th>Social dimensions</th>
<th>Affective dimensions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>proficiency</td>
<td>age of onset</td>
<td>initial acquisition sequence</td>
<td>usage domains</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minority language</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First language</td>
<td>at least some (in early childhood)</td>
<td>early first</td>
<td>first</td>
<td>non-instructional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother tongue</td>
<td>substantial</td>
<td></td>
<td>family</td>
<td>transmitted by parents (individual)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heritage language</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>community minority</td>
<td>cultural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abbreviations and acronyms</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>education minority</td>
<td>deficit / language as a problem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home language</td>
<td>at least some (presently)</td>
<td></td>
<td>home family minority</td>
<td>negotiated in the home</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.1 Dimensions

We start with some general observations of the dimensions themselves. Only one linguistic dimension, proficiency, plays a role in characterising the terms. However, proficiency does not constitute a primary dimension for any of the terms. Terms such as “home language” and “first language” express the expectation that speakers have at least some proficiency (in contrast to “heritage language”). Yet, this is not foregrounded for any of the terms, since linguistic proficiency is not a determining dimension for the terms discussed here. Instead, a broad range of proficiency levels is accounted for.

In relation to speaker dimensions, three of the four dimensions concern the individual speaker’s acquisition history (recording when acquisition started, in which order languages were acquired, and how acquisition took place), while only one dimension relates to the context in which speakers operate, namely, the usage domain. Moreover, for only one term, “first language”, is a speaker dimension foregrounded: “first language” is by default defined as the language that is first acquired in life8 (which in turn results in it being characterised as acquired in a non-instructional way during early childhood).

A similar picture eventuates for the social dimensions, with three of the four sharing a relational perspective on the speaker group (what kind of group it is and in what context it is couched, which status the group has in society, and which level of societal influence the group may have), while the fourth dimension addresses the ideological underpinning stakeholders entertain in relation to a specific term. Matters of influence (i.e., power) and ideology are essential to the definition of terms, indicating (i) relative powerlessness for “minority language”, and (ii) a cultural ideological underpinning for “heritage language”, and a deficit (“language-as-a-problem”) underpinning for abbreviations and acronyms.

Finally, one of the two affective dimensions reaches directly to the core of affective factors (identification), while the other addresses whether the respective terms orient speakers towards their past or situate them in the present. However, the only dimension foregrounded is identification, primarily distinguishing “mother tongue” from “home language”. The former is perceived to be associated with the individual speaker (indicating a stable characteristic of the single individual – speakers cannot “loose” their mother tongue from an identification point of view), while for the latter, identification is subject to negotiation (indicating a dynamically adapting, contextual specification, in line with the identification with home languages potentially changing as a result of life experiences and in interactions with others).

8 But see the discussion in section 3.2.
4.2 Terms

We now turn to a more in-depth discussion and comparison of the terms themselves. A quick glance at the table shows that some of the terms are restricted in their definitional dimensions to only some of the types of dimension. For instance, “minority language” is defined exclusively by social dimensions, disregarding the other three dimensional types. This probably results in the term being considered more as a general term, lending itself to a wide variety of discussions, and in particular to those at the meso and macro levels of research.9

“First language” functions similarly in that it predominantly displays speaker dimension specifications, with the notion that first language speakers must have had at least some proficiency in their early childhood, which in turn connects tightly to them having acquired the language as their first chronological language. “First language” is thus not specified with regards to social or to affective dimensions, so is likely to be used less often in discussions of social and affective factors in home language maintenance.

“Heritage language” and the abbreviations and acronyms also disregard two types of dimensions, the linguistic dimension for both terms, as well as the speaker dimensions in the case of “heritage language” and the affective dimensions in the case of the abbreviations and acronyms. This can be taken as an indicator that “heritage language” does not make any assumption as to who the speakers are (and whether they speak the language at all), while the abbreviations and acronyms are disconnected from affective aspects, thus emphasising the more managerial perspective often found in educational approaches to bilingualism.

“Mother tongue”, in line with “heritage language” and “minority language”, disregards speaker dimensions, indicating similarly the wide variety of speaker background characteristics that the term covers. However, of all the terms discussed here, this is the term that assumes the highest level of proficiency. Finally, “home language” displays a breadth in its specification that ranges across all four dimensional types. It shares a number of dimensions (but differing values) with “mother tongue”, which indicates a relationship between these two terms. This and sharing the primary dimension of identification (yet with different values, as discussed above) are likely to contribute to the intuition that “mother tongue” and “home language” are not only very closely related, but are also found often in discussions of social and affective factors in home language maintenance.

Some of the terms are uniquely specified, in that they are the only ones for which a particular dimension takes a value. This applies, for instance, to “first language”,

9 However, note that the value assignment as “not powerful” may pre-empt use of the term in some social settings, for instance in cases where colonial languages or languages of the ruling class were imposed top-down. Although such speakers may not comprise the majority, it is inappropriate to refer to their language as the “minority language” since they hold the power.
which is the only term for which an acquisition sequence is specified. Similarly, “minority language” appears to be the only term that points to a societal group of speakers perceived as not powerful. These unique specifications impact on when and how scholars use such terms, as they highlight and foreground rather unique characteristics.

Other values assigned to the terms also impact on decisions about using them, with scholars most likely to choose the terms that foreground aspects most relevant for their discussion, while downplaying or disregarding others. For instance, “heritage language” suits best in work on language anxiety (such as in Sevinç this vol.), as it highlights the environment’s identification ascription and speakers’ cultural community membership, while downplaying any assignment of proficiency and acquisition history.

5 Conclusion

This chapter has illustrated how terms frequently used as synonyms for non-mainstream languages encode their own distinctive concepts. We have compared and contrasted the terms’ conceptual dimensions, as well as the values (if any) each term assigns to these dimensions. Clearly, there is no one-size-fits-all term that can be used for nuanced discussion, since bilingualism is multifaceted and perspectives taken in research and practice range widely. Neither is there a single “best” term, as each of these terms foregrounds different dimensions and hence aspects.

This handbook clearly favours one term over the others, though. Both title and many of the chapters use “home language”. As we have explained, “home language” is a dynamic term referring to interactional contexts where social units of speakers, the families, negotiate language use in the here and now. This term is therefore highly conducive to work on the micro level, in particular to discussions of family language policy, highlighting the actual practices found in these family units. Moreover, “home language” has no ideological underpinning, in contrast to many other terms used in the field of educational research. It also appears to be a good choice for educational contexts. The term’s obvious limitation, however, is that it specifies the domain of language usage, restricting this domain to a speaker’s home. Here we have argued that “home” is not the same as “house one lives in” (i.e., the physical space), and should be understood more broadly as referring to a “point of reference” from which speakers navigate the world. As such, the term is also well-suited to meso and macro level discussions, such as those concerned with formal education.

Last but not least, “home language” highlights both social and affective dimensions, without taking a strong stance. This term is not about power relationships, it does not address cultural community membership, and it does not impart a
“language-as-problem” perspective. Aspects of identification are not ascribed by others, but are negotiated dynamically by speakers themselves. This is why we see “home language” as a rather neutral term – and the best terminological choice for this handbook.10

References


Cheatham, Gregory A. & Sumin Lim. this vol. Disabilities and home language maintenance: Myths, models of disability, and equity.


10 Nevertheless, we appreciate that some contributors to this handbook prefer to use other terms, and that the terms they have chosen do lend themselves to different purposes in the individual chapters.


Palviainen, Åsa. this vol. Future prospects and visions for family language policy research.


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