

Presentation at *Presentación del Centro de Investigación  
en Multilingüismo, Discurso y Comunicación (MIRCo)*,  
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## **Keys to disrupt our understanding of multilingualism (in less than 10 minutes)**

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Good evening. Today is Thanksgiving in the United States, the day of giving thanks, so I should start by thanking Luisa Martín Rojo and the MIRCo team for inviting me to talk to you for a few minutes about the great milestone that the launch of MIRCo is, and for having invited me to be a part of the Scientific Advisory Committee. Everytime I say MIRCo I do not understand what the acronym means. I know that Luisa talks about multilingualism, interdisciplinarity, and communication, but the way I remember it is by thinking that MIRCo means "to look" "to co- look", "to look in company", "accompanied", and for me that is one of the greatest achievements of this team, that they work together and accompanied, sometimes accompanied by some of us who are very far away (I am in New York right now). And, above all, with Spain's linguistic diversity. I am always amazed by the fact that there are people from Castile, from Galicia, where my grandfather comes from and therefore a place that I love, from the Basque Country, where I have so many friends and family as well, and from Catalonia. I met Luisa many years ago, but the most pleasant memory that I have of her intellectual collaboration was the one she made at the *Graduate Center* when she was a distinguished scholar at *Advanced Research Collaborative*. I remember that Luisa always talked about Foucault and, for her, language, multilingualism, power and politics cannot be untwined and I think that is one of the greatest achievements of MIRCo's interdisciplinarity.

Luisa and Joan Pujolar published a book entitled *Claves para entender el multilingüismo contemporáneo* and invited me to do one chapter. In that chapter I focus on the United States and what has happened with multilingualism in education. But I have always thought that the fact of... the keys to understanding multilingualism are important. And for me there are three important keys to understanding contemporary multilingualism. The first key is understanding language as a product of colonialism and of power. The second key is seeing schools and the teaching of language as an instrument of domination of the nation state and the dominant majority to subjugate and to oppress, sometimes. The third key is thinking of bilingual education as "gatopardismo". Let me then unfold these three keys. I think that we all know and understand that language has been a product of colonialism, of the matrix of power according to Walter Mignolo, and that language is one of the categories created by the domination of the encounter of 1492, that is, biologizing races, naming languages, categorizing women were ways of dominating and subjugating that population back then. Such hierarchization based on race and also language, and gender, is what goes on today, and it is what Aníbal Quijano, the Peruvian sociologist, has called coloniality.

That is, the fact that this coloniality goes on and that language continues to be an object to mark differences and alterity. Also, I always think, when I am with Spanish colleagues, I think a lot about colonialism, Spain, Latin America, given the fact that I am Latin American, but also when I work with the concept of MIRCo and with the networks that everyone has introduced I also think about the nation state in Spain as well and the colonialism that it exercises on its linguistic minorities. So things get complicated.

The second key is the fact that schools are also an instrument of that domination. This is done by inventing an academic language, a standard language. Here in the United States the fact of the academic language has been invented now, everybody says that it is the problem that minoritized bilinguals have, however, nobody understands what the academic language is. Standards that minoritized, racialized bilinguals cannot meet are proposed, then producing inferior subjectivities. That is to say that schools have functioned for a long time as instruments of domination. And there is also the fact that it is minoritized speakers who are blamed instead of what Jonathan Rosa and Nelson Flores have called “the white listening subjects”, ie., people with institutional power who listen with a raciolinguistic ideology that racializes and stigmatizes those speakers.

The third key is bilingual education, because sometimes we think that simply by having a bilingual education the problem is resolved, but I think that we have to turn to the concept of *gatopardismo*, a concept presented by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa in his novel about “changing everything to change nothing.” I think that above all bilingual education, as I have lived it in the United States during the last 40 years, changes some things, but nothing changes. That is to say that there continue to exist perhaps even more categories of languages, categories of speakers: there is a first language, a second language, a mother language; students who are speakers of one language, students who are speakers of another, students that are not speakers of one language or the other. Categories that did not exist before but that today, within bilingual education, are important. Bilingualism, then, is defined simply as additive and, therefore, it is demanded that a bilingual is two monolinguals in one. And then they are demanded to have a way of using language that is equal to that of a monolingual, which is almost impossible, and then what is branded are interferences, loanwords, calques, code-switching, and the incomplete acquisition of these bilinguals. And also categories of programs. For me one of the essential changes has been the introduction in the last 10 years, 20 years already, of what we call Dual Language Programs in the United States. A way of not naming bilingualism, also a way of distancing from the sociopolitical purposes of the Chicanx, Puerto Rican, and Native American communities that demanded those programs during the civil rights era, not for linguistic purposes, but rather with the purpose of being able to educate their own children and also to get socioeconomic and sociopolitical improvements.

So I believe that, given these three keys, we have to think about how to place bilinguals, who are racialized and minoritized, mainly in education. I believe that we have to think beyond the abysmal line, a concept given to us by Portuguese decolonial Boaventura de Sousa Santos, and place them in what Gloria Anzaldúa, Mexico-American Chicana, calls *Nepantla*, that is, beyond what she started calling the borderlands, that is, a place in between, in which there are no rigid borders that prevent communication, thus allowing us to stretch in order to reach what she calls, then, our

doline. For her, the doline is that sinkhole full of water that was the only resource of fresh water for the Mayans. A subterranean reservoir, she says, of personal and collective knowledge, i.e., the single repertoire that has been called *translanguaging*, which transcends language and the effects of colonialism, racism, and global capitalism. MIRCo is lucky to have its nepantleras (Gloria Anzaldúa uses the word *nepantla*, from Nahuatl), and as the website says, the majority of members are women, nepantlera women who interrupt, disrupt, unsettle, derange the view. Gloria Anzaldúa says, and I quote her in English: “Like tender green shoots growing out of the cracks, they eventually overturn foundations, making conventional definitions of otherness hard to sustain”.

And this is what matters of MIRCo’s and MIRCo’s nepantleras’ work: how to interrupt then theories of language and bilingualism and multilingualism that have created inferior subjectivities, how to then look for the fissures, the crack in order to then interrupt the colonial reality in which we continue to live. And I think that they have answered this question through action-research. Anzaldúa tells us that we have to put our hand in the dough and not just think and talk about making tortillas, i.e., we have to create spaces and times to interrupt the colonality that we live in. And the work of, for example, EquiLing is precisely based on the kind of action-research that interrupts such colonality and it is much more than making tortillas. I believe that in order to study multilingualism we have to take an inside-out perspective, as Boaventura de Sousa Santos tells us, a MIRCo, a look with and not a look about, which is precisely what now MIRCo does starting today. Thank you very much.