

Motivation research and the multilingual turn: Taking a more critical orientation

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Current interest is growing in researching motivation in contexts where people are learning languages other than, or in addition to, English. This stems from our recognition that the prevailing theoretical frameworks used to analyse L2 motivation have largely been developed with reference to contexts where people are learning English, which clearly enjoys a powerful and unique status as the dominant global language today. Consequently, we need to examine the applicability of these frameworks to contexts where people are learning languages other than, or in addition to, English, and perhaps refine our theorizing (Dörnyei & Al-Hoorie, 2017).

This interest in diversifying the contexts and languages we investigate may also be viewed as aligning with the “multilingual turn” (May, 2014; Ortega, 2013) shaping the broad landscape of thinking across research in language education. However, within motivation research, the influence of the multilingual turn remains broadly confined to theorizing motivation in relation to the simultaneous or consecutive learning of two or more languages, and to examining variations and interactions in motivation across languages of study (e.g. Henry, 2017; Thompson & Erdil-Moody, 2016). In other words, researchers have focused on motivation as a psychological construct to accommodate the learning of multiple languages, through a systems-based approach to theorizing motivation. Less often has this research taken a person-focused approach and critically examined contemporary social contexts of multilingualism and their impact on the motivational choices and constraints experienced by people learning languages in different sectors of society.

In this talk, I will argue that motivation research has much to contribute by engaging with the more critical social perspectives that characterize the multilingual turn in the wider field of applied linguistics, and I will discuss approaches to taking a person-focused rather than systems-based orientation to researching language learning motivation.

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