



Joseph Lo Bianco and Larissa Aronin (Eds.),
Dominant Language Constellations:
A New Perspective on Multilingualism
Springer 2020, 301 pp.

The term ‘dominant language’ evokes negative connotations and conjures up thoughts of linguistic imperialism and hegemony. Yet, by adding just the single word ‘constellations,’ which refers to a group of similar items or qualities, we are presented with a construct that inverts the concept of dominance into a notion that has nothing to do with oppression or imposition of linguistic power to the individual or the community. Quite the contrary, in fact, since the Dominant Language Constellations (DLC) perspective, vigorously making its way into multilingualism studies, refers to “a group of one’s most important (vehicle) languages, functioning as an entire unit, and enabling an individual to meet all his or her needs in a multilingual environment” (Aronin, 2016, p. 146).

The aim of the first of two interconnected volumes on DLC, under the general supervision of the eminent scholar Joseph Lo Bianco, is to provide a comprehensive definition of this new valuable construct, along with the qualities assigned to it by its architects. It also aspires to position DLC in the current discussions of multilingualism studies and to explain how DLC, in its own targeted way, can contribute to understanding the nature of multilingualism. Notably, it also provides academically fertile ground for studies guided by the DLC, which Aronin (2020) views as an approach to studying multilingual practices, with a variety of applications from scholars of different disciplines carrying out research in diverse cultural contexts across the globe. Those which contribute substantially to understanding of why and how to use DLC as perspective for researching multilingualism will be briefly discussed in the last part of this review. Its first and major part will be concerned with how, in the chapters authored by the volume editors, Lo Bianco and Aronin,

the DLC is built as a paradigm of its own accord—a perspective for the study of individual and social multilingualism and a “research model,” but also in relation to two other notions—*translanguaging* and *language repertoire*—both of which have been gaining growing attention and increasingly surfacing in discussions concerning multilingualism and plurilingualism, particularly in the field of language and literacy education.

Let us start with the comparison between DLC and translanguaging, a concept that recently has been dominating academic discussions about pedagogy in bilingual and second language (L2) immersion programs, as well as pedagogy for multilingual and immigrant-background students taught through the official school language (for example, see: Leung & Valdés, 2019; Paulsrud et al., 2017). The authors explain that, whereas DLC involves multilingual agents in *an act* of selection of two or more languages from their total repertoire to use them purposefully at any one time, in different contexts, the latter, constitutes *a process*. The process of translanguaging involves bilingual speakers (or multilinguals) in enacting their language assets. Furthermore, they note that translanguaging involves “complex language practices,” while DLC constitutes a “set of selected languages and skills” and is “a model of language practices.” In making this distinction, one wonders if the authors wish to downplay the complexity of language practices that DLC involves, when compared to those of translanguaging, and if so, why. Does this have anything to do with multilinguals often selecting from among their dominant languages, one at a time to communicate in different situations with different people in different environments? One also may perhaps question the characterization of DLC as a “set of language skills” and express certain reservations about the use of a term, which in popular foreign language teaching literature is associated with “the four skills,” namely, listening, reading, writing, and speaking. Is DLC “a set of language *skills*” or would it be fair to say that DLC refers to a multilingual individual who has the “plurilingual competence”¹ to use the “languages which stand out as being of prime importance as the vehicle of the communicative practices of that person’s daily life, business, career and identity expression” (Aronin 2016, 2019; Aronin & Singleton, 2012, pp. 59–75).

Finally, one may also feel the need to understand better what the authors mean when they state that DLC may serve as “a *model* of language practices” so as not to think that what they are implying is that DLC is some type of prototype or archetype of language practices, that it is some mechanism to be used as an example or a procedure to imitate. Finally, it is worth noting that what has not been highlighted adequately but is quite important in the comparison between the two constructs is that DLC concerns different languages

¹ Plurilingual competence—a concept which to be revisited shortly in this review—roughly refers to the ability to use, in different ways and forms of communication, the different languages a person knows.

spoken in societies and used by individual speakers, whereas translanguaging, as theorized by some of its most important proponents (García, 2013; García & Li Wei, 2014; Otheguy et al., 2015) puts on the table the question of the discreteness of languages.

As a matter of fact, building on the claim by Makoni and Pennycook (2007) that languages do not exist as real entities in the world but rather are inventions of social, cultural, and political movements, translanguaging scholars refer to the distinctness of language being non-existent. García (2009), for example, claims that the multilingual's linguistic system is internally undifferentiated and unitary reflecting the fact that languages have no linguistic or cognitive reality. Moreover, in the same documents she claims that additive bilingualism is an illegitimate monoglossic construct because it similarly assumes the existence of two separate languages that are added together in bilingual individuals. Otheguy et al. (2015), on the other hand, state that codeswitching is an illegitimate monoglossic construct because it assumes the existence of two separate linguistic systems. This is a bit different than what is suggested in the intro of this volume that “[b]oth translanguaging and the DLC approach, demonstrate that the pattern of using several languages more or less concomitantly, and this overrides the previously sufficient pattern of employing one language at a time.” Despite statements by the authors that DLC (like translanguaging and language repertoire) at individual and communal level may involve more than one language, it does not question the existence of languages alone or in combination with one another. Translanguaging scholars actually do question the existence of language (cf. Cummins, 2021), while focusing on “the fluid and dynamic practices that transcend the boundaries between named languages, language varieties, and language and other semiotic systems” (Li Wei, 2018, 9).

This brings us to another concept which is discussed by the Lo Bianco and Aronin as a cognate yet as a distinct perspective from that of DLC: that is, *language* or *linguistic repertoire*.² The notion comprises elements of the different levels of description of language—including phonetic-graphical, lexical-grammatical, notional-functional and discursive-textual) but also of language use. As such, an individual's repertoire forms the basis of every language learner's *plurilingual competence* (either current or possible). According to Lo Bianco and Aronin (p. 5), while “linguistic repertoire aims to include the totality of an individual's, or a community's linguistic skills,” DLC is “the active part of

² The term was coined in the context of language sociology, for the set of language varieties—including registers and dialects—“exhibited in the speaking and writing patterns of a speech community” (Fishman, 1972, p. 48). The concept is applied both to multilingual and monolingual repertoires: “Just as a multilingual linguistic repertoire allocates different language varieties to different speech situations, so does a monolingual repertoire. For all speakers—monolingual and multilingual—there is marked variation in the forms of language used for different activities, addressees, topics, and settings” (Finegan, 2004, p. 319).

one's language repertoire" as it "includes only the most expedient languages or language skills that relate to a person or a group in their communication functioning at a given time and in a given environment." They further explain that linguistic repertoire includes "all languages used by speakers/writers and potentially available to them for use, those identified with but not active and those which are passive yet still present," whereas DLC, as mentioned earlier, is concerned only with the active languages." One more point that the authors make is that DLC "operates as a coherent whole, and therefore is the account of what an individual or wider grouping's specific repertoire of used languages is in a given time and setting." Does this mean that "linguistic repertoire" is not and does not operate as a coherent whole? Yes and no. Because the concept of repertoire includes all the assets or resources a social agent has for communication, but these assets are not homologous in the sense that they are not just languages. Social agents have other semiotic resources, given that communication nowadays is not simply multilingual but also multimodal—the five modes of communication being linguistic, visual, aural, gestural, and spatial (Dendrinou, 2020).

On the basis of the above, though not only, it might be preferable to compare DLC not to the concept of linguistic repertoire, which admittedly is used frequently when discussing or examining multilingual communication because, unlike DLC, it is a component of an approach not the approach itself. That is, (a) one has a repertory of languages and uses the dominant one(s) at any one time (DLC approach); (b) bi/multilingual individuals regularly draw on the totality of their linguistic resources in communicative interactions and classroom instruction should support students to use the languages or elements of the languages they know in flexible and strategic ways as a tool for cognitive and academic learning (translanguaging pedagogy); (c) just as effective communicators draw on the totality of their semiotic resources to participate constructively in discursive practices, language learners should develop their plurilingual and pluricultural competence—the ability to put to productive use these resources in combination in order to construct (and negotiate) meaning (Dendrinou, forthcoming).

Actually, the idea of learners developing *plurilingual and pluricultural competence*, so as to use the repertoire of (a) the languages in which they have developed greater or lesser proficiency, (b) the languages around them, and (c) the languages they are learning began being discussed in the language teaching community and language education scholarship after the publication of the Council of Europe's *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR) (Council of Europe 2001)—a policy document translated in over forty languages that over time became very influential for language teaching, learning, and assessment across European school systems but now only. It is there where it was first suggested that learners' linguistic repertoire

is the base upon which their learning can progress (CEFR: 3) and stated that “the aim [of education in a language] is to develop a linguistic repertory, in which all linguistic abilities have a place.” It also noted that “a single, richer repertoire of this kind thus allows choice concerning strategies for task accomplishment, drawing where appropriate on an interlinguistic variation and language switching” (CEFR: 132). The idea of language learners developing plurilingual and pluricultural competence has recently further built up and expanded in the Council of Europe’s *CEFR Companion Volume* (Council of Europe 2018/2020), which describes what plurilingual and pluricultural competence entails and clearly states from the first pages that “[i]n the reality of today’s increasingly diverse societies, the construction of meaning may take place across languages and draw upon user/learners’ repertoires” (CEFR-CV) and provides a long list of levelled descriptors for mediation *across languages* (cross-linguistic mediation) but also within the same language (intra-linguistic mediation), since a learner’s repertory includes not only languages or elements of different languages but also linguistic varieties, including registers, dialects, styles, and accents that exist in a community or within an individual.

As we come to the last part of this review, let us turn attention to notable studies guided by and using the DLC approach by authors of different disciplines who “introduce a variety of applications and interpretations of the DLC model leading to important insights,” “from a wide variety of perspectives.”

Studies in highly complicated multilingual contexts such as those in Africa are always fascinating because the languages which must be managed are the many indigenous languages, some of which have official status nationally or regionally, and non-African languages with a colonial past and post-colonial present. Two interesting African-setting studies included in this volume are one by Felix Banda, and the second by Susan Coetzee-Van Rooy. The former, by Banda, explores the notion of DLCs in Zambia where 72 indigenous languages are spoken, plus English which is the main language of education, national government business and socioeconomic mobility—one of the main remnants of colonialism. Using data from various sources, the author illustrates “the multi-layered DLCs operating across individual/household, community, regional and national boundaries” and shows how to the complex situation created by how the multilingualism is managed and how it exists in the Zambian context adding to the dynamism of DLCs. The latter, by Coetzee-Van Rooy, applies the DLC concept to language-repertoire survey work done on urban present-day South African multilingualism, who finds that the size of a typical DLC is three languages—a finding that holds implications for language in education practices for urban multilingual students in South Africa.

Two well-written and documented studies by three authors concerned with languages in the educational context discuss of the usefulness of DLC as a tool for capturing multilingual language patterns. One of the two studies, written

by Björklund, Björklund, and Sjöholm, shows how DLC can be used as a tool to describe the domains and functions of different languages at individual and societal levels in Finland and to promote multilingual awareness among student teachers. The second study, by Slavkov, concerns the use of DLC as a tool for the crucial issue of language background profiling of students in educational institutions. He examines a rich array of interesting data and situates his findings within the context of other multilingual perspectives but then focuses specifically on the notion of DLC discussing how this perspective can prove beneficial for the conceptualization of language background profiling.

The studies on “Personal Dominant Language Constellations Based on the Amount of Usage of the Languages” are also quite interesting because they describe and analyse the learning and real life experiences of multilinguals with their DLCs in very different contexts starting with a paper by Kannangara which sheds but also shed light on multilingualism in Sri Lanka and convincingly argues that the uniqueness of one’s DLC varies depending on its linguistic, societal, political, or geographical context and that these variations can be observed in interrelated factors, such as the prominence of the language, its level of proficiency, and the functions allocated to each language. Next in line is a study by Karpava which examines the DLCs of Russian speakers in Cyprus. The analysis of the author’s qualitative data interestingly revealed that the female adults in her sample have either Russian or mixed (Russian and Cypriot Greek) cultural and linguistic identity, whereas students have mainly mixed (Russian and English) identity concluding that immigration, social milieu, integrative and instrumental motivation affect the constitution, configuration, and dynamics of their DLCs. The third study in this part of the volume is by Krevelj, who examines the potential of the DLC approach for studying the under-researched area of crosslinguistic influence (CLI) in multilinguals by looking at previously collected data and outcomes of a research project, which investigated simultaneous interaction of languages used by multilingual participants from the same community in Croatia, with a common DLC (involving Croatian and Italian as official languages and English as a foreign language). In looking at her data from the DLC perspective, the author finds some novel insights, and discusses the benefits of DLC, both as a concept and as a research tool. Finally, the last study in this part of the volume, authored by Nightingale, presents “a case study focusing on the DLC of a Moroccan-born man living in Spain, specifically on how his most expedient languages are reconfigured according to the multilingual environment and how they relate to his emotions, language attitudes, and identity construct.” The author makes no generalizations based on this one case study; however, he does point out the studies such as this one, with ample qualitative data helps us understand better multilingual practices realized in concrete social and cultural contexts.

The concluding chapter, by Lo Bianco, argues that the DLC concept makes a vital contribution to understanding language questions today, and purposefully sets the agenda for future directions of the concept of the DLC and its role in/for multilingualism studies, as these figure in areas such as public policy, education, grammatical exploration, sociology of multilingualism, intercultural relations, and personal and group identity.

References

- Aronin, L. (2016). Multicompetence and dominant language constellation. In V. Cook & L. Wei (Eds.), *The Cambridge handbook of linguistic multicompetence* (pp. 142–163). Cambridge University Press.
- Aronin, L. (2019). Dominant language constellation as a method of research. In E. Vetter & U. Jessner (Eds.), *International research on multilingualism: Breaking with the monolingual perspective* (pp. 13–26). Springer.
- Aronin, L. (2020). Language constellations as an approach for studying multilingual practices. In J. Lo Bianco & L. Aronin (Eds.), *Dominant language constellations: A new perspective on multilingualism* (pp. 19–33). Springer.
- Aronin, L., & Singleton, D. (2012). *Multilingualism*. John Benjamins.
- Council of Europe (2001). *Common European Framework for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment*. Cambridge University Press.
- Council of Europe (2018/2020). *Common European Framework for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment. Companion volume with new descriptors*.
- Cummins, J. (in press). Translanguaging: A Critical Analysis of Theoretical Claims. *Translanguaging: A critical analysis of theoretical claims*. In P. Juvonen & M. Källkvist (Eds.), *Pedagogical translanguaging: Theoretical, methodological and empirical perspectives*. Multilingual Matters.
- Dendrinis, B. (2020). The magic of language & language teaching. In T. Tinnefeld (Ed.), with the collaboration of Martin East & Ronald Kresta, *The magic of language—Productivity in linguistics and language teaching*. Saarbrücker Schriften zu Linguistik und Fremdsprachendidaktik (SSLF). <https://sites.google.com/site/linguistikunddidaktik/home/b-sammelb%C3%A4nde-band-11-b-collected-volumes-volume-11>
- Dendrinis, B. (Ed.) (forthcoming). Introduction. *Mediation as linguistic and cultural negotiation of meanings and plurilingualism*. Routledge.
- Finegan, E. (2004). *Language: Its structure and use*. Thomson Wadsworth.
- Fishman, J. A. (1972). *The sociology of language*. De Gruyter Mouton.
- García, O. (2009). *Bilingual education in the 21st century: A global perspective*. Basil/Blackwell.
- García, O. (2013). From diglossia to transglossia: Bilingual and multilingual classrooms in the 21st century. In C. Abello-Contesse, P. M. Chandler, M. D. López-Jiménez, & R. Chacón-Beltrán (Eds.), *Bilingual and multilingual education in the 21st century: Building on experience* (pp. 155–175). Multilingual Matters.
- García, O., & Li Wei. 2014. *Translanguaging: Language, bilingualism and education*. Palgrave Macmillan.

- Leung, C. & Valdés, G. (2019). Translanguaging and the transdisciplinary framework for language teaching and learning in a multilingual world. *The Modern Language Journal*, 103(2), 348–370. <https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12568>
- Li Wei. (2018). Translanguaging as a practical theory of language. *Applied Linguistics*, 39(1), 9–30. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amx039>
- Maconi, S. and Penycook, A. (Eds.) (2007). *Disinventing and reconstituting languages*. Multilingual Matters.
- Otheguy, R., García, O., & Reid, W. (2015). Clarifying translanguaging and deconstructing named languages: A perspective from linguistics. *Applied Linguistics Review*, 6(3), 281–307.
- Paulsrud, B. A., Rosén, J. Straszer, B., & Wedin, Å. (2017). *New perspectives on translanguaging in education*. Multilingual Matters. <https://doi.org/10.21832/9781783097821-003>

Bessie Dendrinou
Emerita Professor at the National and Kapodistiran University of Athens