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Fluid bilingualisms: Place and the construction of language competence

In this presentation I will examine the notion that discursive constructions of place intersect with individual bilingual competences and identities. While prior work has demonstrated that mobility across space can lead to the ascription of varying language competences and fluidity in individual bilingualism (Blommaert, Collins, & Slembrouck, 2005; Hult, 2013); few studies have examined the ways in which talk about place, i.e. narratives of place (Romine, 2008) and discourses in place (Scollon & Scollon, 2004), afford or constrain bilingual possibilities. In this paper I will focus on interview data from 13 young adults who grew up bilingual in the Southern United States to demonstrate how talk about place implicitly references presuppositions and presumed language ideologies that intersect with discussions of language development, family language policies, and bilingualism. In specific, I focus on the discursive strategies participants use to evaluate places (e.g., the South) both positively and negatively and how such evaluations serve as resources for the construction of individual bilingualism in the interviews. In this light, bilingual competence is a highly contextualized and fluid phenomenon. This study has implications for understanding both the contextual nature of bilingual competence from a sociocultural point of view as well as processes of language development and family language policy in contexts of internal migration within the United States.