

Language in Action. Bilingualism and Society

Langue en action. Bilinguisme et société

Limba în acțiune. Bilingvism și societate

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Abstract

Languages are the medium through which communication takes place in politics, commerce, academia, the media, technology and most aspects of life. Languages are, therefore, central to our international world, to globalization and the accelerating process of European unification. The aim of this study is to address multilingualism and bilingualism as universal norms, as societal rather than individual phenomena. The study will focus on the importance of acquiring competence in more than one language, the factors of cultural diversity and their role in the development of the society and the issue of multilingualism by addressing the questions of language policy, language use and language learning.

Résumé

Les langues sont le principal moyen qui permettent la communication dans l'environnement politique, commercial, universitaire, technologique, médiatique, etc. En conséquence, connaître une ou plusieurs langues est une priorité au niveau international, dans le contexte de la mondialisation, et le processus de l'unification européenne. Par cette étude, nous nous proposons une analyse des concepts liés au multilinguisme et bilinguisme, du point de vue de l'individu et de la société. L'étude souligne l'importance d'acquérir des compétences linguistiques et discute la diversité culturelle et son rôle dans la société, en abordant les questions de politique linguistique, l'utilisation du langage et l'appréhension d'une langue.

Rezumat

Cunoașterea unei limbi străine este principalul mijloc care facilitează comunicarea în mediul politic, comercial, academic, mediatic, tehnologic etc. Din acest motiv, cunoașterea unei sau mai multor limbi este un imperativ la nivel internațional, în contextul globalizării și al procesului accelerat de unificare europeană. Acest studiu propune o analiză a noțiunilor legate de multilingvism și bilingvism, înțelese prioritar ca dimensiune socială și mai puțin ca aspect individual. Studiul se va axa prioritar asupra importanței învățării unei sau mai multor limbi străine, precum și asupra diversității culturale și a rolului acestora în dezvoltarea societății. De asemenea, studiul nostru surprinde problema multilingvismului în perspectiva politicii lingvistice, a utilizării limbajului și a învățării unei limbi.

Key-words: *bilingualism, multilingualism, language policy, cultural diversity*

Mots clés: *bilinguisme, multilinguisme, la politique linguistique, la diversité culturelle*

Cuvinte cheie: *bilingvism, multilingvism, politica lingvistică, diversitate culturală*

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to present recent studies on language contact, bilingualism and multilingualism together with the role of cultural diversity and explore the way in which Europe is meeting this challenge. It focuses on the relationship between language and cultural identity in Europe at a time of increasing multicultural complexity and the linguistic and imaginative spaces within and beyond Europe.

From the mid-twentieth century onwards there has been an increasing array of global transformations. One of these has been a remarkable spread of multilingualism. Unsurprisingly, recent decades have seen a noticeable intensification of research into the field of multilingualism. This flowering of multilingualism research is evidence that bilingualism and multilingualism are the norm rather than the exception in the world nowadays.

The first section focuses on the presentation of recent research in the field of bi- and multilingualism; the second section discusses cultural diversity as a feature of multilingual societies and the last section outlines suggestions for future research.

To be bilingual or multilingual is not the aberration supposed by many (particularly, perhaps, by people in Europe and North America who speak a “big” language); it is rather a normal and unremarkable necessity for the majority in the world today. A monolingual perspective is often, unfortunately, a consequence of possession of a powerful “language of wider communication”, as English, French, German, Spanish and other such languages are sometimes styled [1].

Therefore, any discussion of bilingualism or multilingualism today cannot be isolated from the consideration of globalization, or the existence of international tendencies which have meant that the world at the beginning of the twenty-first century is perceived as being more interconnected than ever before. In another article, Edwards [2] states that there have often existed *linguae francae* which serve as “aids to cross-group understanding”, and which are usually represented by the language of a prestigious society such as Greek, Latin, French, Arabic and, recently, English, but also pidgins and ‘artificial’ or constructed languages (like Esperanto) in more restricted contexts [3].

According to Crystal [4], there are two linguistic principles which should be considered with respect to languages in the era of globalization: on the one hand, the fundamental value of multilingualism as an amazing world resource which leads to different perspectives and insights enabling us to reach a more profound understanding of the nature of the human mind and spirit; on the other hand, the fundamental value of a common language, as an amazing world resource which is characterized by “unprecedented possibilities for mutual understanding, enabling us to find fresh opportunities for international cooperation” [5]. Thus, the first principle fosters historical identity and a climate of mutual respect, while the second principle fosters cultural opportunity and promotes a climate of international intelligibility through unity, a higher level of ambition, open-mindedness and several job opportunities [6].

The spread of bilingualism and the status of the English language in Europe

The study of bilingualism is a broad and complex field including the study of the nature of the individual’s bilingual knowledge and use of two or more languages as well as the broader social and cultural consequences of the widespread use of more than one language in a given society.

Although many sociolinguists now use the term “bilingualism” for both individual and societal use of two languages, the desire to distinguish individual from societal use of two languages has given rise to different terms at different times. Most researchers use the term

“bilingual” for users of two languages and “multilingual” for three or more, but this is not a universal classification [7].

A multilingual is a person who has the ability to use three or more languages, whether separately or in various degrees of code-mixing. Different languages are used for different purposes, competence in each varying according to factors such as register, occupation and education [8]. Multilinguals may not have equal proficiency in or control over all the languages they know [9].

If we turn to “bilingualism”, we can compare Bloomfield’s [10] understanding of bilingualism as the “native-like control of two languages” with Haugen’s as beginning “at the point where the speaker of one language can produce complete, meaningful utterances in the other language” [11]. Mackey [12] points out that this is because researchers have realized that it is “either arbitrary or impossible to determine” at what stage an individual becomes bilingual.

In this paper we use the terms “bilingualism” and “multilingualism” interchangeably to refer to the routine use of two or more languages in a community. Although there are no precise statistics on the number or distribution of speakers of two or more languages, Grosjean [13] estimates that probably about half of the world’s population is bilingual.

Although linguists usually draw a distinction between individual and societal multilingualism, it is not always possible to maintain a strict boundary between the two. This lies in the difficulty of defining bilingualism [14] and the notion of community [15].

The spread of multilingualism justifies its importance in research because most of the world’s population speaks more than one language. Even if some people support the fact that they are monolingual, they are however exposed to other languages through educational services, emergency services, health services, social services, judicial assistance, transport, immigration and integration services, touristic services, etc.

Linguists estimate that there are roughly 6700 languages in the world, but only about 200 nation-states. There are over 30 times as many languages as there are countries, which means that bilingualism or multilingualism is present in practically every country in the world, whether it is officially recognized or not. Australia, Britain and the United States are largely monolingual English countries, despite the presence of a considerable number of indigenous and immigrant communities using languages other than English [16].

With respect to the connection between individual and societal bilingualism, the reasons why certain individuals are or become bilingual must be considered. In a society, it is usually the more powerful groups who force their language upon the less powerful. Although most nation states incorporate a number of groups with distinct languages, usually only one or a few languages will be recognized for use within the educational system and other societal institutions. Hence, the language(s) a person learns at school and is educated in is (are) determined by the policies of individual governments which favour the dominant state language(s).

Multilingualism appeared due to different factors such as:

- historical or political movements such as imperialism or colonialism (e.g., the spread of Spanish throughout Latin America) results in the coexistence of different languages.
- economic movements in the case of migration: movement of the population to other countries due to economic problems leads to the development of multilingual and multicultural communities in the host countries;
- increasing communications among different parts of the world and the need to be competent in languages of wider communication (e.g., the development of new technologies and science);
- social and cultural identity and the interest for maintenance and revival of minority languages: two or more languages co-exist and are necessary in everyday communication.

- education: second and foreign languages are part of the curriculum in many countries.
- religion movements that result in people moving to a new country

As mentioned before, a basic distinction when discussing bilingualism and multilingualism is between the individual and societal level. At the individual level, bilingualism and multilingualism refer to the speaker's competence to use two or more languages. At the societal level the terms bilingualism and multilingualism refer to the use of two or more languages in a speech community and it does not necessarily imply that all the speakers in that community are competent in more than one language [17].

From all languages English is the most important language of wider communication in the world as the result of British colonial power in the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century and the leadership of the US in the twentieth century. English is also the main language of science and technology in the world and its spread is advancing in many countries and regions where English has not been traditionally spoken. English is also the main language of popular culture and globalization as can be seen in advertising. Nowadays multilingualism usually implies English and other languages. Nonetheless, English has also been considered a threat for linguistic diversity [18].

The US linguist Braj Kachru has suggested that we think of the spread of English around the world in terms of three concentric circles representing the historical and sociolinguistic profile of English in different parts of the world [19]. The inner circle includes the countries that are traditionally considered the bases of English, where English is the first language for the majority of the populations: UK, USA, Ireland, Canada, New Zealand, Australia. Nevertheless, English is not the only language spoken in these countries because it is in contact with heritage languages or languages that are spoken as the result of immigration.

The outer or extended circle includes those countries where English is not the first language of the majority of the population but a second language used at the institutional level as the result of colonization; it includes Singapore, India, Malawi and over fifty other territories. The expanding circle includes those countries where English has no official status and is taught as a foreign language. It includes China, Japan, Greece, Poland and a steadily increasing number of states [20].

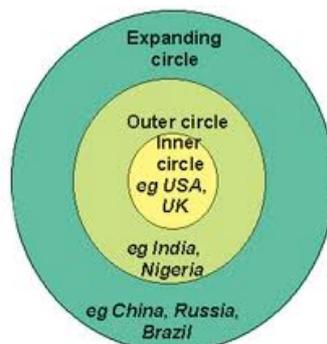


Fig 1. The three circles of Kachru [21]

Cultural diversity as a feature of multilingual societies

Moving to cultural criteria for membership of a speech community, people generally view others as part of their speech community on account of common social or political characteristics (e.g., if they are perceived to share some experience with them, such as shared culture, world view, or writing system. Multilinguals may see being multilingual itself as part of their identity, and may identify with other multilinguals who do not share the same languages.

Diversity in the European society represents one of the key requirements for its successful future development. The complex, heterogeneous societies of Europe today require multilingual competences of citizens, the embracing of varied communicative skills and abilities which make the current European culture to be the product of long-term cultural phenomena, such as written texts, various media, institutions, talks and discourses [22].

Therefore, we may emphasize the fact that diversity is a characteristic feature of multilingual societies in a European context which aims at further development, one which will define the area both culturally and economically. As far as the historical foundations are concerned, the European cultural arena has been multilingual for centuries. Furthermore, cultural sensitivity plays a key role in the development and maintenance of a multilingual Europe [23].

The current 48 states in Europe have 38 different official state languages. In total, there are about 240 spoken indigenous languages. The five languages spoken by most people in Europe are Russian, German, English, French, Italian. But most European countries operate routinely with several languages. The exceptions are small states such as Iceland, Liechtenstein and the Holy See (Vatican), and even in these places we find significant use of second languages [24].

Regarding the theory of language policy, Spolsky [25] distinguishes four main features. The first is that Spolsky divides “language policy” into:

1. Language practices (i.e. actual language behaviour)
2. Language beliefs and ideologies (also called language attitudes)
3. Language management (the plans and activities to modify language).

His second main notion is that language policy can be involved “with all individual elements at all levels that make up a language”. The third is that language policy operates in a speech community. And his fourth basic notion is that language policy functions in an ecological relationship with linguistic and non-linguistic factors. Basically language policy is about choice [26].

Due to the ambiguity of these concepts and terms, their place and usefulness in society and research need to be adequately addressed. For instance, not every society which claims to be multilingual necessarily produces multilingual individuals. In the cases of Belgium and Switzerland, because of the territorial principles which are mainly based on the separation of the population, the official bi- or multilingual status of the country does not lead to a multilingual repertoire of their inhabitants. In order to systematize foreign language teaching the “second” and “third” language start to be learned at an early stage in school, side-by-side with the first language(s). These are clear attempts to capture the potential of both becoming multilingual and for multilingualism to become a standard communicative tool for pupils in European schools.

Perspectives for future research on bilingual students

On the basis of language statistics which evaluate the competences of multilingual speakers, it should be possible in the future to trace the characteristics of various, specific types of multilingualism according to different criteria. One of the prime objectives for language statistics should therefore be to obtain reliable, detailed and comparable language data. The aim would be to compile statistics which record the multilingual potential in terms of language users’ abilities and skills, through questions about practices in families, with friends, in everyday professional uses. A map of multilingualism might be drawn for any country or region and it would be possible to monitor its development over time [27].

Fruitful research questions would include: the use of several languages in families with and without a migration background, the relationship between multilingual use and social stratification, groups historical language minorities and their use of several languages, profession-related multilingual use, comprehension skills,

According to Grosjean [28], some research questions which may give account of the individual differences among bilinguals:

- Language history and language relationship: Which languages (and language skills) were acquired, when and how? Was the cultural context the same or different? What was the pattern of language use? What is the linguistic relationship between the bilingual's languages?
- Language stability: Are one or several languages still being acquired? Is the bilingual in the process of restructuring (maybe even losing) a language or language skill because of a change of linguistic environment? Has a certain language stability been reached?
- Function of languages: Which languages (and language skills) are used currently, in what context, for what purpose and to what extent?
- Language proficiency: What is the bilingual's proficiency in each of the four skills in each language?
- Language modes: How often and for how long is the bilingual in a monolingual mode (i.e. when only one language is active) and in a bilingual mode (i.e. when both languages are active)? When in a bilingual mode, how much code-switching and borrowing is taking place?
- Biographical data: What is the bilingual's age, sex, socioeconomic and educational status, etc.?

Much of the information can be collected via questionnaires which are based on these factors mentioned above. It is important that differences in the way people rate themselves be controlled for. Due to various factors, some individuals have no problem overrating themselves, while others are more conservative in their self-evaluation. Furthermore, it is crucial to distinguish between language learners who do not usually interact socially with their two languages and people who are acquiring a language in a natural environment and are using both languages on a regular basis [29].

Questionnaire with respect to the advantages of being bilingual

- What are the foreign languages that you know?
- Which is your level of competence in each of the languages you know?
- How did you reach this level of knowledge? (compulsory educational system/ private lessons/ individual study)
- How many years have you spent learning each of the languages you know?
- Would you be willing to study other languages besides the acquired ones?
- Did your family support you in learning foreign languages?
- What is your mother tongue?
- Does your mother tongue correspond to the official language of the country you reside in/ you study in?
- Did you use the learned languages in communication with other people besides your teachers?
- What do you find easier in communicating in a foreign language: reading, understanding a native speaker, conversation, expressing a point of view or writing?
- Which of the learned foreign languages do you consider useful in the future?
- Where do you intend to work when graduating: in the home city/ in the city where you studied/ in another European country/ on another continent?
- Do you think it was useful to have continued studying a foreign language during your Bachelor studies?
- Will you study the same foreign language during your MA studies?
- Will you choose a second foreign language during your MA studies?
- In what contexts do you think you will use the learned foreign languages?
- What are the advantages you consider learning the languages will offer to you?
- In case you are working or have been working did you use one of the learned foreign languages at work?

- What foreign languages did you use in communication while you were visiting foreign countries?
- Do you have friends whose mother tongue is different from yours?
- Do you encounter difficulties in understanding them?
- What language do you use when communicating with them?
- Do you listen to radio broadcasts or do you watch TV programmes of certain channels in foreign languages?
- Do you prefer watching a movie in its original version, original version with subtitles or synchronized?
- Do you ever read the labels on the products you buy in the foreign languages? Do you trust their translation?
- If you are asked for information in a foreign language, do you offer your help or do you ask others to speak?
- Which foreign languages do you think will become dominant in the future?
- Are there any rules with respect to language teaching in your faculty?
- Do the students have the opportunity to study in other languages?
- Does your university offer programmes of linguistic support in the national language to students who are not native speakers of that language?
- Are there admission requirements regarding language competence for the Bachelor /Master level?
- Does your university make special efforts to attract students from other linguistic communities than the national language through brochures, booklets, leaflets, advertisements, etc.?

Conclusions

Different researchers working in different research traditions use different definitions of multilingualism according to their purposes. Defining a phenomenon as complex as multilingualism is problematic in many ways, and necessitates defining what a language is and how languages can be counted with respect to individuals' proficiency, identity, etc.

As research into multilingualism has been undertaken by researchers working in different traditions, a number of terms are used to refer to the same and different phenomena. Most researchers now use the term "bilingual" to refer to individuals who use two languages, and "multilingual" to refer to individuals who use three or more languages.

Furthermore, taking into account the economic and strategic benefits, multilingualism promotes mobility, tolerance, a sense of European citizenship and, as an integral aspect of the legitimacy, transparency and democracy of the European integration; it contributes to successful communication within European Union. EU policy is to encourage all its citizens to be multilingual; specifically, it encourages them to be able to speak two languages in addition to their mother tongue (Leonard Orban, EU Commissioner for Multilingualism between 2007-2009).

The language industry has both an economical and a strategic importance: economical, because of its size, its resistance to the present crisis and especially its future potential; strategic, because it is essential to preserving people's identities and culture and to coping in a globalized world [30].

The socio-cultural explanation looks at the way people all over the world have come to depend on English for their economic and social well-being. The language has penetrated deeply into the international domains of political life, business, international commerce, safety, communication, entertainment, the media and education. The English language as a lingua franca has become available to serve global human relations. As for the other languages there is a growing

belief amongst language professionals that the future will be a bilingual one, in which an increasing proportion of the world's population will be fluent speakers of more than one language [31]

Whereas not all the languages have the same importance in the field of science, commerce, international relations, education, all deserve to be studied, used as intellectual and cultural systems because:

Language is the repository of the history of a people. It is their identity. Oral testimony, in the forms of sagas, folktales, songs, rituals, proverbs, and many other practices, provides us with a unique view of our world and a unique canon of literature. It is their legacy to the rest of humanity. Once lost, it can never be recaptured [32].

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