

THE BEAUTIFUL BILINGUAL MIND A FOCUS ON BILINGUAL INTERPRETERS

LE BEL ESPRIT BILINGUE UN POINT DE VUE SUR LES INTERPRÈTES BILINGUES

SPIRITUL BILINGV O PERSPECTIVĂ ASUPRA INTERPREȚILOR BILINGVI

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Abstract

This paper shall focus on the general issue of bilingualism. It shall deal with the several definitions of bilingualism, present the types of bilingualisms as well as the ways and contexts in which one can become a bilingual. Stress will be laid on the sociolinguistic and psycholinguistics factors that determine bilingualism. Furthermore it shall dwell on several theoretical aspects of interpreting, the approach of the European institutions have on the matter and make the connection between bilingualism and interpreting. In the following subchapter both issues shall then be addressed from the perspective of the local educational and labour market from the perspective of bilingual interpreters.

Résumé

L'article va se concerter sur les aspects généraux du bilinguisme. Il s'occupera des définitions du bilinguisme, présentera les types de bilinguisme tandis que les manières et les contextes dans lesquels les gens deviennent bilingues. Nous mettrons l'accent sur les aspects sociolinguistiques et psycholinguistiques qui mènent au bilinguisme. Puis dans le second sous-chapitre l'article va s'arrêter aussi sur quelques aspects théoriques de l'interprétation, l'approche des institutions européennes sur le sujet et va faire la connexion entre le bilinguisme et l'interprétation. Dans le sous-chapitre suivant nous allons adresser les deux sujets du point de vue du marché local éducationnel et du travail de la perspective des interprètes bilingues.

Rezumat

Articolul se va concentra asupra aspectelor generale ale bilingvismului. Va aborda mai multe definiții ale bilingvismului, va prezenta tipurile de bilingvism, respectiv modurile și contextele în care vorbitorii pot deveni bilingvi. Vom pune accentul pe aspectele sociolingvistice și psiholingvistice care conduc la bilingvism. Mai apoi, în al doilea subcapitol, articolul va prezenta câteva aspecte teoretice legate de interpretariat, abordarea instituțiilor europene privind acest subiect, făcând conexiunea între bilingvism și interpretariat. În următorul subcapitol vom analiza cele două problematici din punctul de vedere al ofertei educaționale și al pieței muncii din perspectiva interpreților bilingvi.

Key words: *bilingualism, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, bilingual interpreter, higher education*

Mots-clés: *bilinguisme, psycholinguistique, sociolinguistique, interprète bilingue, études supérieures*

Cuvinte cheie: *bilingvism, psiholingvistică, sociolingvistică, interpreți bilingvi, învățământ superior*

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to discuss issues related to the bilingual mind, define bilingualism starting from the various linguistic approaches and building in sociolinguistic, psycholinguistic elements as well as the theory of languages in contact. After having defined bilingualism, we will narrow it down to interpreters who could be called the “perfect” bilinguals given their social background and consciously cultivated language knowledge. The rules on interpreting and the directions in which one can interpret into have been made up considering both the native and the cultivated language skills. The literature in the field backed up by the websites of various public institutions as well as personal examples and evidence will all contribute to drafting a clearer image of this complex linguistic sector.

1. Bilingualism

Bilingualism is both a psycholinguistic and a sociolinguistic phenomenon; it is also a branch of linguistics that studies the phenomenon bearing the same name, a discipline; it is a social science featuring its own object of study, its own objects, methods and research approaches (SZÁSZ, 2014, 72).

As a phenomenon, bilingualism means the simultaneous mastery of two different language codes. According to some authors, bilingualism means knowing the second language at the same degree of proficiency as the first / native language (BLOOMFIELD, 1933/1958, 50). According to Uriel Weinreich (qt. BARTA, 1999, 36) the bilingual individual uses two languages alternatively in his/her everyday communication; s/he regularly uses the two languages because s/he needs the two codes in everyday communicational environments.

Bilingualism is a psycholinguistic phenomenon as the brain of the bilingual individual is bilingual, irrespective of how and when s/he acquired the second language. Anyway, learning another language implies intellectual effort as well as talent to some extent. (SZÁSZ, 2014, 72). The acquirer or learner will experience the effort at various degrees at different ages. The age of acquisition and the degree of proficiency are the criteria based on which bilingualism is categorised.

Literature makes several distinctions and classifies individual bilingualism into several categories according to the criteria indicated above, as follows: true or early bilingualism (simultaneous or successive) also called compound bilingualism (LAMBERT, 1978, 137), late bilingualism, additive and subtractive bilingualism and passive bilingualism. However there are several other classifications depending on the authors' approaches (SZÁSZ, 2006, 45)¹

The first category is the type of bilingualism we are interested in and we shall use the above terms interchangeably in tackling the subject of bilingual interpreters. **Early bilingualism** refers to the time of language acquisition. Early bilinguals acquire the language in childhood. The languages can be acquired simultaneously, which generally produces a strong bilingualism, called additive bilingualism. This also implies that the child's language development is bilingual, i.e. s/he has two native languages. Successive early bilingualism refers to a child who has already partially acquired a first language and then learns a second language early in childhood (for example, when a child

¹ For further classifications, see also; <https://www.onehourtranslation.com/translation/blog/being-bilingual-types-bilingualism>

moves to an environment where the dominant language is not his native language). This generally produces a strong bilingualism (or additive bilingualism), but the child must be given time to learn the second language, because the second language is learned at the same time as the child learns to speak. In our opinion this bilingualism can be considered genuine, effortless bilingualism. Although the concept “critical age” (LENNEBERG qtd. by PALEA, 2015, 429) at which a language should be acquired in order for the individual to reach a certain degree of proficiency and eventually bilingualism has become obsolete, researchers have found other factors that trigger apparently effortless language acquisition in children. Children can spend more time and effort on learning than adults; their motivation to fit in is much higher, and the habits of pronunciation and grammar of their first language are less deeply ingrained and thus easier to overcome.² According to the same researchers, the above-mentioned factors are not in direct relation to the phenomenon of the “critical age”. However these factors facilitate language learning at an early age. Thus the earlier one is exposed to a language, the higher the likelihood of his/her to become eventually bilingual (DeKEYSER, 2012, 443).³ Most studies deal with L2 acquisition in a naturalistic context. This article also views bilingualism possible only in such a context that is bilingualism can be achieved if the child is immersed or at least has some realistic contact with both cultures. Another prerequisite is that his/her linguistic “education” should consciously be guided. Thus, the child shall not only be bilingual but also bicultural.

Late bilingualism refers to when an individual learns a second language after the age of 7. It implies consecutive learning and the individual uses his language learning skills or experience to learn the second language. There are several examples of late bilinguals who worked and wrote in the second language they learnt at a later age. (GROSJEAN, 2008, 152) The degree of achieved proficiency and whether or not one can become bilingual at any point in life varies greatly and depends on the individual. (PALEA, 2015, 428) Moreover all learning gets harder with age and language learning is no exception from the rule.

As mentioned, becoming bilingual at any age involves meeting a certain set of criteria as far as language mastery is concerned. One can be born bilingual and acquire two languages at the same time or learn L2 at a later age. In the first case we can call it acquisition in the strict sense (LEEDOM SHAUL, 2014, 24) whereas in the latter case we can call it L2 learning normally taking place in the target language community, generally leading to bilingualism. However the perfect balance between the two languages i.e. the same degree of mastery is hardly quantifiable.

The other criterion based on which bilingualism can be classified is the mastery of the language, the speaker’s proficiency in the languages.

Canadian researcher Wallace Lambert created the terms **additive** bilingualism that refers to individuals who have acquired the two languages in a balanced manner. The effects of additive bilingualism are most often positive as it is the result of considerable intellectual effort (SZÁSZ, 2006, 302). On the other hand, **subtractive** bilingualism refers to the situation where an individual has learnt the second language to the detriment of the first language. In this case, mastery of the first language decreases, while mastery of the other language (usually the dominant language) increases. Besides the linguistic consequences, this process will lead to identity-related issues and eventually to acculturation. In both types of bilingualism the two codes influence each other to a certain extent. The interrelationship and its extent depend on several cognitive and environmental factors.

Some authors are more permissive when it comes to language mastery and consider **passive bilingualism** as bilingualism. (SALA, 1997, 322; BARTA, 1999, p. 34). This refers to being able to understand a second language without being able to speak it. For instance, Canadian children who respond in a relevant way in English when they are addressed in French could become passive bilinguals, as their mastery of oral expression in French decrease.

² See: <https://theconversation.com/at-what-age-is-it-easiest-to-learn-a-second-language-53840>

³ See the study: Age Effects in L2 Grammar Processing as Revealed by ERPs and How (Not) to Study Them at: <http://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371%2Fjournal.pone.0143328#pone.0143328.ref001>

In all categories of bilingualism there is a certain extent of intellectual effort involved as mentioned above. (SZÁSZ, 2014, 72) As acquisition is apparently effortless at an early age, early bilinguals have an advantage over late bilinguals whose language learning/acquisition takes place in a more conscious manner and consequently with more effort involved. In this latter case the language structures of the individuals' native tongue partially help but also partially disturb the expression in the second language, this interaction leading to interference and language transfer phenomena that shall not be dealt with in this paper.

2. Interpreting

The interpreter's job is to verbally convey meaning, mediate and transfer ideas in a continuous flow between two monolingual individuals. (SZÁSZ, 2016, 20). It can be done in simultaneous or consecutive mode, or it may refer even to sight translation in some cases. Interpreters usually interpret between a combination of two active languages they master from which one is their native tongue (language B → language A, and language A → language B) (KOSZTA, 2013, 3).

The European Commission's Directorate General for Interpretation has listed a set of rules regarding the interpreters' linguistic combinations.⁴ These rules are based on criteria such as proficiency, native language, acquired language or passive language knowledge. They set forth that conference interpreters work from their passive languages into their active language. All interpreters must have at least one A language, which can be their native tongue or another language strictly equivalent to it. According to the same source, some interpreters can have a second active language. Furthermore, an interpreter's B language is other than the native tongue, of which the interpreter has a perfect command and *into* which he/she works from one or more of his/her other languages. The interpreter's proficiency level in this case must be C1. (Cornea, 2011, 242) Although according to this definition, language B seems to be hairsbreadth close to the interpreters' native language, Clare Donovan states that "language B is less versatile and less flexible than language A by definition."⁵ (GODIJNS, 2005, 195) In a plain translation, this means that the interpreter is less spontaneous in the B language he/she masters.

In the same line the Directorate General for Interpretation defines the interpreters' C language as a language he /she can understand and work from into his/her A language.⁶

As one can notice the Directorate General for Interpretation uses the term native language cautiously rather preferring the phrase active language or A language. It emphasises the A language as a mother tongue or equivalent language and introduces the phrase second active language, which in our context can be viewed as the mastery of two languages in almost the same balanced manner.

In the same line of ideas and based on the above definitions of bilingualism, only the interpreters mastering two A languages can be called a bilingual interpreter in the strict sense of bilingualism.

An example in this sense is Jenny Sigot Müller's diary in which she speaks among others about her early-life goal of becoming bilingual. She makes two key references about it in her book titled *Entre deux voix*: first, she mentions one of her fellows who was born and raised bilingual, which is obviously important for the author, and second, she refers to bilingualism when telling the background story about the moment in time when she decided to become an interpreter. Having undoubtedly remarkable language proficiency did not equal being bilingual for her, nor her colleagues or the professional market. She considered not being bilingual as a drawback, which she had to surmount by hard work in order to become a professional on the Swiss market.⁷ (SIGOT MÜLLER, 2012, 85) Her aim was to become an interpreter despite the hard work it involved, as she put it "so that no one can tell where I come from". (SIGOT MÜLLER, 2012, 88) She does not use

⁴ http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/scic/what-is-conference-interpreting/language-combination/index_en.htm

⁵ Clare Donovan quoted by Godijns

⁶ For a similar approach see the website of the international association of conference interpreters: <https://aiic.net>

⁷ French original: "Vous n'êtes pas bilingue, ce sera difficile"

the terms language A or language B or any other degree of proficiency, targeting rather bilingualism irrespective of the effort it may require. Interpreting is a skill that she learns in time but her other goal is to become a truly bilingual interpreter.

In order to better clarify the terminology we use, we have also carried out an empirical web search, which could have confirmed or invalidated our idea about bilingualism and bilingual interpreters. In opposition to the definitions given by linguists as well as our own definition of bilingualism, we have found that the term “bilingual interpreter” is not used in its strict sense nor does it imply second active language mastery, being strictly limited to a certain linguistic proficiency in language B. On English language websites the term “bilingual interpreter” is used to make the distinction between “sign language interpreters” and interpreters between two natural languages irrespective of their degree of proficiency.

3. A focus on Transylvanian bilinguals

The training of translators and interpreters in Romania is organized in two different types of departments established at various faculties within several universities: departments of applied modern languages and departments of translation and interpreting studies. We shall include a short list of the departments training interpreters and translator: 1. “Babes-Bolyai” University of Cluj-Napoca - Faculty of Letters – Department of Applied Modern Languages; 2. The West University of Timisoara – Faculty of Letters History and Theology; 3. “Transilvania” University of Brasov – Faculty of Letters – Department of Theoretical and Applied Linguistics; 4. “Vasile Goldis” Western University of Arad – Faculty of Humanities, Political and Administrative Sciences; 5. “Lucian Blaga” University of Sibiu – Faculty of Letters and Arts; 6. “Petru Maior” University of Targu Mures – Faculty of Sciences and Letters; 7. North University of Baia Mare – Faculty of Letters; 8. “1 Decembrie 1918” University of Alba Iulia – Faculty of History and Philology; 9. “Sapientia” Hungarian University of Transylvania – Faculty of Technical Sciences and Humanities of Targu Mures. (FAZAKAS, 2015, 148) We have listed only the institutions in Transylvania in order to highlight one of the key deficiencies and connect it to the aspects dealt with in the previous two subchapters. These universities offer both BA and MA degrees in the field. Their educational offer and linguistic combination is manifold. (FAZAKAS, 2015, 149-153)⁸

The reason why we have focused on the institutions in Transylvania is because we consider that Transylvania could deliver the perfect bilingual interpreters both for the local and the international market. Given that Transylvania is an ethnically mixed geographical area, there are a high number of born bilinguals (especially Romanian and Hungarian) raised with two native languages, the prerequisite of cultural immersion exists as the native Hungarians are in constant contact with Romanian language and culture, consequently all the prerequisites of bilingualism are met, having the two languages (Romanian and Hungarian) in contact. (SZÁSZ, 2008, 186) The same can also be valid for individuals born in bilingual Romanian-German, Hungarian-German families or schooled in German bilingual schools.

Although there is a vast pool of bilingual or potentially bilingual students none of the above departments – except for Sapientia - include Hungarian as a working language. (FAZAKAS, 2015, 154) What is more, the majority of students attending the aforementioned programmes are Hungarian natives for whom Hungarian is language A, so they should learn how to interpret and translate first into their native tongue. The universities disregard this key aspect in interpreter and translator training. Thus, the students are supposed to interpret and translate into their B language⁹, which can be Romanian in the best case scenario. If so, they can become bilingual in time with constant effort and sufficient language exposure. However there are cases in which their language B is English (or another foreign language) rather than Romanian. Irrespective of the case, these

⁸ They all normally offer English (language A) in combination with a second language (B) that can be either German, French, Italian, or Spanish as well as in some cases a C language that can any of the B languages or other languages such as Russian, Portuguese, Croatian, Serbian etc.

⁹ Reference level C1

students are compelled to work between two foreign languages. After graduating from university they will face a market context which will force them to continue with this practice without settling for a less than perfect performance. (KOSZTA, 2013, 7).

The second group of potentially bilingual interpreters is the group of German bilinguals for whom the situation is somewhat similar to the situation of Hungarian students/professionals. Given the students' various levels of language proficiency in university, the training programmes rather focus on German as a foreign language without envisaging the possibility of creating smaller groups of perfectly bilingual students with whom the approach in teaching interpretation and translation would obviously be different.

Provided they have the skills required for an interpreter, both categories of students have all the features and prerequisites needed to make the perfectly bilingual interpreter.

In both cases mother tongue higher education is necessary in order for them to reach a competitive proficiency level on the European market. They would clearly have an advantage over the other interpreters as their bilingualism is an ace up sleeve in the professional context. Another problem with the lack of training programmes in the students' respective native language is that these future professional could become rather monolingual losing their skill of working into / from their native tongue as they strive to reach perfection in language B or C. The local market shows that there is a need for interpreters working in these languages, at it would really be an unfortunate loss.

In conclusion, we can state that bilingualism is the advantage and the privilege of few individuals given their cultural, educational or family background. The well-balanced language mastery of two A languages as well as appropriate training in language and interpretation and collateral skills could lead to shaping a new category of unique local and European professionals.

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