Multilingualism

JASONE CENOZ

Introduction

One of the earliest references to multilingualism can be found in the book of Genesis, where people who spoke only one language had tried to build a tower "whose top may reach unto heaven" and, in order to prevent this, God made them use different languages: "Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech" (Gen. 11:1–10, King James Version). In this passage, linguistic diversity is seen as a problem that prevents people from achieving their task—the building of the tower. As Lüdi and Py (2009, p. 155) point out, the idea is that "monolingualism represents an original state, intended by God and/or politically legitimised by human beings." This positive vision of monolingualism still has currency today. In fact, speaking the same language is considered by many people as more natural and a better scenario than speaking several languages. An example is the link of the state to only one official language and not to the different languages used by different speakers. According to this "one nation–one language" ideology, the use of one single language gives unity and strength and can be a better ground for achieving different goals. This ideology has been very strong since the 18th century in Europe and has spread to other parts of the world.

On the other hand, multilingual individuals (also called polyglots) have always been admired. One of them was Cardinal Giuseppe Caspar Mezzofanti (1774–1849), who spoke at least 38 languages. Another famous multilingual was John Bowring (1792–1872), an English politician and economist, who was fluent in 100 languages and had a basic understanding in many more. Being able to communicate in other languages has also traditionally been part of the skills of a well-educated person. Being multilingual can provide more opportunities for communication and, in fact, multilingual skills could have avoided the problem of confusion created at the Tower of Babel.

In spite of this, there are still many parents and educators who think that raising children in two or more languages can cause some type of cognitive delay or at least confusion. This deficit view of multilingualism was reinforced by early research into bilingualism, which associated bilingualism with negative cognitive implications. This early research had many methodological problems and nowadays is no longer accepted. More recently, most research studies have associated bilingualism and multilingualism with positive effects in cognition and particularly in some aspects of metalinguistic awareness (see Baker, 2011).

Another issue related to the more or less positive implications of being multilingual is related to the status of the specific languages involved. Some European languages such as English, French, or German have a high status as "foreign languages" and result in so-called "elite multilingualism." Speaking these languages has always been a marker of high status in opposition to folk or nonelite multilingualism, which involves languages that can be used by minorities, immigrants, or powerless people. This second type of multilingualism is more widespread. In many of these situations schoolchildren who speak languages with a low status in a given society are expected to become monolingual in the high-status language and to assimilate to the dominant culture without getting any

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support for their first language. In these contexts negative attitudes toward multilingualism may be found coming not only from monolingual speakers of the high-status language but also from multilingual speakers.

Definition of Multilingualism

The term "multilingualism" is used in different ways. Multilingualism is a complex phenomenon because it is affected by many factors and can take place in a very wide range of situations. One of the first issues to consider is the number of languages involved. Multilingualism clearly refers to more than one language, but the distinction between bilingualism and multilingualism is not clear-cut. The term "bilingualism" means "two languages" (Greek prefix *bi-* = two), but traditionally it has also been applied to more than two languages, which is not etymologically accurate (see, for example, Bloomfield, 1933). The word "multilingualism" means "many languages" (Latin *multus* = many) and is a term applied by some scholars to two languages and by others to three or more languages. For example Kemp (2009, p. 15) considers that "most researchers in language research use the term 'bilingual' for users of two languages and 'multilingual' for three or more, but this is not universal." It is difficult to know the relative number of researchers that make this distinction because "multilingualism" is a term that seems to be gaining currency at the expense of "bilingualism" even when only two languages are involved. If we take the etymological origin into consideration, "two languages" does not seem to be "many" (*multi*), but it is arbitrary to decide that the line has to be drawn between two and three languages and not between three and four, for example. In any case, etymology is only one of the criteria to be taken into account and research on the acquisition and use of third and additional languages will probably establish the similarities and differences between the different processes. In this entry we will use the term "multilingualism" in a broad sense, including bilingualism.

Multilingualism may refer to many aspects of life, but one of the basic distinctions is between its individual and social dimensions. Individual multilingualism (also called plurilingualism) refers to the ability that individuals can have to communicate in two or more languages, while societal multilingualism refers to the languages used in a specific society. Obviously, individual multilingualism is closely related to societal multilingualism because if more languages are spoken in a given community it is more likely that the individuals who live there speak more than one language. However, there are multilingual individuals who live in a relatively monolingual society, particularly in the case of elite multilingualism. At the same time, there are contexts of high linguistic diversity such as many of the big cities in Europe or North America with a large percentage of monolinguals. The European Commission combines individual and societal multilingualism in the following definition: "the ability of societies, institutions, groups and individuals to engage, on a regular basis, with more than one language in their day-to-day lives" (European Commission, 2007, p. 6). This definition also considers multilingualism to include bilingualism.

The Scope of Multilingualism

The study of multilingualism has attracted the interest of scholars in different disciplines. These disciplines look at different aspects of multilingualism on individual or societal levels and their research is based on different theoretical approaches and also uses different methodologies. In this section some of the main approaches are summarized.

A perspective based on linguistics focuses on the characteristics of the languages which are analyzed. One of the issues in the study of multilingualism is the linguistic distance

between the languages involved because of its implications for areas such as crosslinguistic influence, receptive multilingualism, or multilingual education. Another area that has received a lot of attention in recent years is early multilingualism. Studies in this area have focused on the simultaneous acquisition of two or three languages by looking at the development of grammar, phonetics, pragmatics, or lexis from a very early age (see De Houwer, 2009). The findings of these studies, which are typically longitudinal and follow the development of bilingual or trilingual competence for months or years, are based on audio and video recordings of oral interaction recorded while the child uses different languages with other speakers. This type of research has provided interesting insights into the different stages of development and the relationship between the languages being acquired.

The way multiple languages are processed by individuals is also of great interest in the study of multilingualism. There are many methods to find out how the brain functions when processing language. The study of aphasic patients can provide valuable information by analyzing the effect of brain damage on specific aspects of language processing. One of the techniques most widely used, both with aphasic and with nonaphasic individuals, is event-related potentials (ERP), which allows researchers to observe brain activity during specific cognitive processes. There are also new advances in neuroimaging that allow the examination of brain activity with more accuracy by using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) or positron emission tomography (PET). In the case of multilingualism, one of the main issues is the brain mapping of languages, that is, to find out whether different languages are processed in different parts of the brain, but so far the results have not been consistent. There are some methodological problems because of the great diversity of situations in the way multilinguals acquire and use their languages and the different aims and designs of the research studies. Van den Noort, Bosch, and Hugdahl (2006) review some studies and conclude that there are stronger activation patterns in the brain when bilingual speakers are processing their second language.

Other experiments on language processing have focused on the areas such as the organization of the mental lexicon or the differences between monolinguals and multilinguals in metalinguistic awareness. In the case of the multilingual lexicon, it is common to use techniques such as reaction times, semantic priming, and lexical-decision tasks. There has been a lot of interest in analyzing whether there is separation or integration of the operations of the mental lexicon and the main conclusion seems to be that there is a high degree of interplay between the mental lexicons of the different languages (Singleton, 2003). An interesting perspective is the conceptual representations that multilinguals have of the lexicon as compared to monolinguals (see Pavlenko, 2009). This perspective explores the differences between monolinguals and multilinguals in the categorization of objects, events, and actions. Research studies have also related multilingualism to metalinguistic awareness, that is, the ability to reflect on language and look at it objectively, focusing on its structure and functions. According to Bialystok (2001), bilinguals tend to obtain better results in some dimensions of metalinguistic awareness: tasks aimed at identifying words and tasks that demand high levels of control of attention. Bialystok, Craik, Klein, and Viswanathan (2004) also found that lifelong bilingualism could possibly slow down the process of cognitive decline.

A related aspect of multilingualism that has received a lot of attention in the last years is its dynamic character. In contrast to earlier views, nowadays multilingualism is not seen as static and fixed, but more as changing according to the different processes of acquisition and attrition. Herdina and Jessner's *A Dynamic Model of Multilingualism* (2002) explores the psycholinguistic dynamics of multilingualism and shows how the constant interaction between a speaker's multiple languages creates new structures and emergent properties that are not found in monolingual systems.

Another line of research that links linguistic and psycholinguistic perspectives comes from specific studies on crosslinguistic influence in the acquisition of third or additional languages. These studies suggest that there could be closer links between languages other than the first and also between languages that are typologically close (see, e.g., De Angelis, 2007). Apart from linguistic transfer, crosslinguistic influence at the conceptual level has been analyzed as well as the multidirectionality of crosslinguistic influence, its relationship to proficiency, and the influence of factors such as motivation or personality (Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008).

The study of some affective variables such as attitude and motivation has a long tradition but other aspects of emotions as related to multilingualism have received more attention in recent years. The study of issues such as the way emotions are expressed in different languages, or the emotional experience of acquiring and using different languages, opens new perspectives in research on multilingualism (see Pavlenko, 2005). One of the methodological techniques to analyze emotions and multilingualism is to look at narratives written by multilingual speakers. For example, the following multilingual speaker highlights the role of emotions: "My experiences and subsequent choices highlight the powerful effect of emotions on the enterprise of learning. At least for some personalities—such as mine—the emotional context of learning a language can be a make-or-break issue" (Freedman, 2009, p. 149).

Multilingualism is also examined in sociolinguistic studies. In this case, research on multilingualism has focused on different areas such as language policy and language planning, attitudes toward languages, or the use of different languages in specific contexts (home, with friends, work, media, internet, etc.). Language policy and language planning studies focus on different aspects related to the status, use, and acquisition of different languages. Research on language planning looks at specific interventions aimed at modifying the corpus of a language, its status, and acquisition. For example, the government of a country, region, or agency can decide to create a standard form of a language to be used at school or in the media. It is also possible to establish norms about the use of languages in different domains such as the school curriculum, or the signs in the linguistic landscape. Schools are crucial agencies in language planning because there are important decisions to be made about which languages are studied as subjects or which languages are used as languages of instruction. In many cases, the language schoolchildren use at home is not taught at school. Schools can also contribute to setting different values and ideologies about languages (see, e.g., Heller, 2007). Some of the studies in this area analyze discourse practices involving different languages in school contexts using an ethnographic methodology based on observation and interviews so as to identify these practices as related to ideologies. For example, Blackledge and Creese (2009) distinguish between the ideology of "separate bilingualism" that tries to keep languages apart in separate containers and the ideology of "flexible bilingualism," when the speaker and not the language is the center and language practices allow for combining different languages.

Even though multilinguals can speak different types of languages, when two languages are spoken in the same community, there are important differences between speakers of majority and minority languages. Speakers of majority languages can usually choose to learn the minority language or not, but speakers of the minority language need to learn the majority language.

According to Harrison (2007), more than 40% of the languages in the world are endangered. Many other languages are not in this situation, but are surrounded by strong languages so their vitality may also be threatened to some degree. Lesser-used languages can provide a sense of identity and, apart from being used for communication, they can have a symbolic value. One of the first measures undertaken to revitalize a minority language is the provision of some form of teaching. This teaching can be extracurricular

or inside the official curriculum, and in some cases a minority language is used as the language of instruction for all levels in education. Research on the acquisition and use of minority languages in contact with other languages can be relevant for areas such as L1 literacy, second language acquisition, bilingualism and multilingualism, language and identity, language policy, and the acquisition of additional languages.

The study of multilingualism in the linguistic landscape offers a different perspective in the study of multilingualism. The linguistic landscape refers to the signs of different types that can be found in different cities. Studies on the linguistic landscape conducted in different settings confirm the spread of multilingualism and are indicators of linguistic diversity in the public space (Shohamy & Gorter, 2009). The multilingual linguistic landscape that can be found in different parts of the world usually includes English as one of its languages. The intensity of the use of English in different domains all over the world is a new phenomenon as compared to other languages of international communication used in the past. Multilingualism with English can be found on the street but also in the school curriculum, at work or on the Internet. English is a very strong language but it is very often used in contact with other languages. For example, English is the most widely used language on the Internet; it is estimated that English was used for 51.3% of the information on the Web in 2000, but only for 27% in 2009 (Graddol, 2006; Internet World Status, 2009). This means that other languages are useful for their speakers in their everyday lives. English is considered a resource which opens doors for better opportunities and it is associated with social and economic mobility. At the same time the spread of English is also felt as a threat.

The study of individual and societal multilingualism focuses on all the topics that have been discussed in this section and many others. In fact multilingualism is related to cognitive and affective dimensions of individuals but also to their social interaction, and has historical, political, social, psychological, economic, and educational dimensions. Multilingualism at the level of the individual and of society has great diversity regarding the structural characteristics, roles, and use of the languages involved, as well as the social or educational contexts, among others. As the number of existing languages is much larger than the number of independent states, individuals and whole communities need to speak more than one language in many cases.

Multilingualism is an umbrella term that covers different processes and situations which are very common in the world. Taking into account its broad scope, a single theory cannot possibly explain its diversity and complexity.

Multilingual Competence

The definition of multilingualism that we have adopted here is that of the European Commission, which refers to the ability "to engage . . . with more than one language." The term "engage" refers to "being able to communicate," but it is obvious that communication can happen at different levels, through different channels, and usually results from a combination of different modalities that include languages but also gestures, visuals, and other semiotic systems. One of the concerns of scholars has been to define the level of proficiency needed in two or three languages to be considered multilingual. The idea of "native control of two languages" suggested by Bloomfield (1933) is not very realistic, particularly if a multilingual uses three or more languages. The idea of the native speaker as a reference for language learning is no longer unanimously accepted. Becoming a native speaker of several languages is very exceptional because multilingual speakers are not the sum of several monolinguals. Even the idea of balanced multilingualism with similar levels of proficiency in the different languages is not realistic. Multilinguals do not use all

the languages in their repertoire in the same way for all functions. They choose different languages according to the context, taking into account factors such as the interlocutors, the action, or the setting. They have preferences for some languages to carry out some actions. The emperor Charles V (1500–58) famously said: "I speak Spanish to God, Italian to women, French to men and German to my horse"—this is an example of the preferences of a multilingual speaker. Nowadays multilingual speakers also have different preferences and domains of language use when they choose different languages as they browse the Web, answer the phone at work, read a novel, or chat to a friend. In fact, multilinguals use languages for different purposes according to their own preferences and the communicative needs of their interlocutors, and very often do not use all the languages they know to the same extent in different communicative situations. Cook (2007) sees the need to adopt a multicompetence view that considers multilinguals as the norm and not the exception. Multicompetence is the knowledge of two or more languages in the mind and it is a reaction against the traditional focus of SLA research that used the native speaker of the target language as a reference. The idea is that a multilingual person's competence cannot be compared to that of native speakers because their minds are different. Knowledge of the L2, L3, or L4 is different, but the process of acquiring these languages has an impact on the first language. Furthermore, multilingual speakers use languages in different ways because they can switch languages; their different languages make them change perceptions and affect their conceptual representation (see also Pavlenko, 2009). Therefore, multilinguals are different from monolinguals and should be seen to possess unique forms of competence, or competencies, in their own right.

Multilingual speakers use languages as a resource in communication. Code switching and code mixing are more common in some contexts than in others. Grosjean (1982) proposed the concept of language mode to refer to the state of activation of the languages spoken by bilinguals depending on the interlocutor, the content of the discourse, the setting, or the function of the interaction. Language mode can be represented as a continuum with two poles. When bilinguals interact with monolinguals, they are toward the monolingual end of the language-mode continuum and only one language is active. When they interact with bilinguals, they are toward the bilingual end of the language-mode continuum and they mix languages more often because both languages are active. Bilinguals can also find themselves in positions between these two poles. Although code switching in real communication is obviously linked to contextual factors, psycholinguistic experiments suggest that the role of the nonlinguistic context is not as important in the activation of the languages in the brain (Dijkstra & Van Hell, 2003). Psycholinguistic experiments show that bilingual speakers activate their languages in parallel and become skilled in negotiating the existing competition among the languages they know so as to use the language (or languages) that is most suitable to the context (Kroll, Bobb, Misra, & Guo, 2008).

Multilingual speakers switch languages to convey their communicative intent and in many cases to achieve a specific communicative effect. Baker (2006) lists 13 possible reasons for code switching that include, among others, when it is difficult to retrieve a word, when the concept does not have an equivalent, or when a special point needs to be emphasized. Code switching is sometimes regarded as a negative practice, particularly in educational contexts, but there is a recent trend called "translanguaging" that uses the alternation of two languages as a pedagogical strategy. Translanguaging can refer to receiving input in one language but producing output in another language (see García, 2008). Another way of switching languages that also distinguishes between productive and receptive skills is "receptive multilingualism." Speakers of related languages use their respective first languages, which are closely related, and try to understand the languages used by their interlocutors (see Ten Thije & Zeevaert, 2007).

Conclusion

Multilingualism is a very common phenomenon in the world and it is often said that being multilingual is the norm and being monolingual the exception. Estimations about the number of multilinguals in the world are not easy to make, but there is no doubt that a large number of people in the world speak two or more languages. Multilingualism is not a new phenomenon but it has some specific characteristics nowadays, such as the spread of English or the use of different languages in education.

Theoretical and empirical work on multilingualism shows that multilingual individuals have some characteristics due to the existence of two or more languages in their minds and the use of those languages in specific social contexts. After many years of rigid monolingual approaches in the study of different aspects of multilingualism, there is a trend toward considering multilinguals as such and not as speakers or imperfect speakers of each of their languages. This approach, based on the multilingual's whole linguistic repertoire, can open new perspectives for the study of both individual and societal multilingualism.

SEE ALSO: Bilingual and Monolingual Language Modes; Bilingual and Multilingual Education: Overview; Bilingualism and Bilinguality; Code Switching; Crosslinguistic Influence and Multilingualism; Dynamics of Multilingualism; Early Bilingualism; Linguistic Landscape; Multicompetence; Multilingualism and English; Multilingualism and Metalinguistic Awareness; Multilingualism and Minority Languages; Receptive Multilingualism

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