

Eng124: Language and Society

Individual and Societal Multilingualism-1

Societal Multilingualism

- Societal Multilingualism
 - Takes the nation state as the reference point
- **Official (*de jure*) and Actual (*de facto*)**
 - Switzerland – the territoriality principle: officially multilingual with French, German, Italian and Romansh, but actually of the 26 Cantons, 22 are monolingual.
 - China – officially monolingual, de facto multilingual.
- **Grassroots vs. Literate multilingualism** in India, both constitutionally recognized and patronized by the state

Swiss Multilingualism



Individual Multilinguality

- Individual as the locus of languages in contact
- Normative notions of individual multilinguality
- Native-like control on more than one languages is unrealistic
- In actual fact, multilinguality entails a repertoire of languages, with varying levels of control on the languages involved.

Dissociation

- Societal multilingualism and individual multilinguality are sometimes dissociated
- In India there is a high degree of individual multilinguality, with an average person knowing more than one language.
- In Canada, although officially multilingual in English and French, there are many more French Canadians who also know English as their second language than English Canadians who also know French.

Dissociation

- Similarly, in Britain, the British do not have to know Welsh or Punjabi but both these groups know English.
- Questions of power and powerlessness, control and marginalisation enter into the discussion here.

Multilinguality

- A Western myth about multilinguality
 - It is a special way of life which leads to
 - Linguistic deficits
 - Cognitive deficits
 - Cultural rootlessness
- Questioning the myth
 - Our own multilingual experience
 - An investigation of the empirical reality of languages in contact

Linguistic deficits

- Simultaneous and sequential bilinguality or multilinguality
- Irrespective of the kind of multilinguality they experience, multilingual speakers often complain that they cannot use any of their languages like a native speaker would.

Linguistic deficits

- Native-like control may be a theoretical notion which comes either from an idealised notion of a native speaker, or worse still, from linguistic *purism* of some kind.
- In actual practice, multilinguality entails an *ability to communicate* in all the languages one knows.

Linguistic deficits?

- Multilinguality or semi-linguality?
- Multilinguality is not a normative construct. It entails varying degrees of control on the languages in a multilingual repertoire

Cognitive deficits?

- Goes back to IQ tests which reported African multilingual children as underperforming and hence obtaining lower scores.
- Underperformance in IQ tests may be due to a host of reasons: poverty, lack of access to cultural resources etc, even the IQ tests themselves, and not necessarily multilinguality.

Cognitive deficits?

- Recent experimental findings on bilingual language processing indicate that in a 'one mind many languages scenario', the human brain exhibits a remarkable ability to control the differential language use.

What psychologists say. . .

- Evidence available from neuroimaging studies involving bilinguals claims that:
- There are common neural networks subserving L1 and L2, which get activated in parallel.
- Inhibition is a key mechanism in language control and lexical access/selection – suppression of a response.

Lexical Access

- Bilingual individuals have at least two mental lexical representations for a concept and they are able to successfully select words from one language without significant interference from the other language.
- Inhibitory mechanisms are the control mechanisms bilinguals use to suppress the language not in use when in a monolingual mode.
- Inhibitory mechanisms, as against facilitatory or amplificatory mechanisms, suppress certain kinds of responses.

Two possibilities

- Language-selective access: the exclusive activation of information in the contextually appropriate language system.
- When a bilingual encounters a spoken or written word, the activation is restricted to the target language subsystem, which contains the input word.

- Language non-selective access
- Language non-selective access is the co-activation of information in both linguistic systems.
 - When a bilingual encounters a spoken or written word, the activation happens in both contextually appropriate and inappropriate linguistic subsystems.

What do the two hypotheses say

- These hypotheses seek to determine whether lexical choices from different languages that share similar lexical features are activated when a word is presented.
- For instance, when the Hindi word *kitaab* is activated in a Hindi-English bilingual, is the English word *book* also activated?

What do the two hypotheses say?

- If the answer is “no”, it might suggest that language selection happens before the recognition of a word and only the lexical information of the target language is selectively activated, in which case lexical access is language selective.
- If the answer is “yes”, it might suggest the other possibility that the recognition of a word is processed in parallel for both languages and the lexical information of both languages is activated, in which case lexical access is language non-selective.
- Research on lexical access indicates that it is not possible to completely suppress a known language.

What psychologists say. . .

- Not only do the two languages get activated in parallel even when only one language is needed, but also constant monitoring and attentional control is at work to select the appropriate language.
- As a consequence there is an enhancement and strengthening of general purpose executive functions, in particular inhibitory control, which are believed to be at work in controlling the two languages.

- Research evidence also indicates that increase in language proficiency is accompanied by a shift from controlled to automatic processing (cortex activation studies).

What Psychologists say...

- Bilinguals are reported to have outperformed their monolingual counterparts on a wide variety of tasks requiring conflict resolution, monitoring, switching, and inhibitory control.

What the language teacher says...

- Metalinguistic awareness among bi/multilinguals
- Easier for a multilingual person to abstract about language
- Multilingual classroom is a resource rather than a disadvantage.

Cultural deficit

- Anomie: Cultural rootlessness / uncertain cultural identity
- **Anomie** is a "a condition in which society provides little moral guidance to individuals".
- It is the breakdown of social bonds between an individual and the community, resulting in fragmentation of social identity and rejection of self-regulatory values.

- The notion was popularized by French sociologist Émile Durkheim in his influential book *Suicide* (1897).
- It is sometimes claimed that multilinguality can result in a cultural normlessness because the bonds between the individual and the community lose their strength.

Cultural enrichment

- It may be argued that, on the contrary, a multilingual individual has an enhanced, enriched cultural experience.
 - A broader framework of choices
 - Cultural bridges between conflicting sets of values
 - Openmindedness, less prejudice
 - Greater Inclusiveness