

THE FUTURE OF BILINGUALISM IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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ABSTRACT

Bilingualism appears to be the norm rather than the exception. A common definition of bilingualism is the ability to speak two languages well. More academic definitions range from ‘*native-like competence*’ to ‘*producing meaningful utterances*’. However, all these definitions refer only to one aspect of bilingualism, namely the level of proficiency, and do not take any non-linguistic dimensions into consideration. The age at which a second language (L2) is acquired plays an important role, with the distinction being made between childhood, adolescent and adult bilingualism. Language acquisition can take place in an endogenous environment, where the L1 is not spoken within the community, or an exogenous environment, where the L1 is spoken within the community. A language with a positive status produces an additive form of bilingualism, while a devalued language produces a subtractive form. The way in which the bilingual individual perceives themselves is also important in establishing their cultural identity, which may be bicultural, monocultural, L2 acculturated, or deculturated. Individual bilingualism is therefore a combination of psychological and sociological factors.

Bilingualism is both an individual phenomenon as well as a societal one involving languages in contact. Both are integral to human behaviour. One of the most important aspects of societal bilingualism is diglossia, where two or more language systems coexist within a speech community. Each system has a distinct range of domains and functions, and the systems are used in complementary ways. Bilingualism is therefore the interaction of all these factors, as well as with individuals and society.

Bilingualism has become increasingly relevant in the 21st century due to globalisation, economic integration and cultural exchange. It is recognized as a valuable asset, both for individuals and societies, with benefits ranging from cognitive advantages to enhanced cultural understanding. The rise of globalisation and interconnectedness has amplified the need for multilingualism. This essay explores the future of bilingualism, considering its potential opportunities and challenges in various aspects of society.

KEY WORDS

Bilingualism, Individual, Societal, Diglossia

1. Introduction: Bilingualism

At the beginning of this century, Hamers and Blanc (2000) wrote “...*bilingual individuals already outnumber monolinguals...*” (Hamers & Blanc 2000:1). Therefore, it can be assumed that bilingualism is the norm rather than the exception. It is estimated that 70–80% of the world’s population are bi/multilingual and deal with at

least two languages on a daily basis. This is not an official figure, but an estimate taken from Trask (1996: 308). A popular definition of *bilingualism* is the ability to speak two or more languages equally well. More academic definitions range from Bloomfield's (1933) "...native-like control of two languages" to Haugen's (1972) claim that bilingualism starts "...at the point where a speaker can first produce complete meaningful utterances in the other language". These two definitions can be considered the 'maximal' and 'minimal' definitions of bilingualism. They refer only to a single dimension of bilingualism: the level of proficiency in both languages. They do not take any non-linguistic dimensions into consideration.

One of the most central concepts in the field of bilingualism is the distinction between *societal* and *individual bilingualism*. They are defined by Hamers and Blanc (2000) as: "*Languages in contact, that is bilingualism at the societal level and bilinguality, its counterpart at the individual level...*" (Hamers & Blanc 2000:1)

1.1 Individual Bilingualism

A person who is bilingual may not live in an officially bilingual country, nor may they be fluent in the country's official languages. There are many reasons why someone becomes bilingual, which can include:

- being determined by the education system, with certain educational aims set that can be achieved through language teaching;
- belonging to a particular religion;
- "admiration" for a particular country and therefore learning its language.

Bilingual competence can be defined as either *balanced* or *dominant*. In the former case, there is an equal level of competence in both languages. This does not necessarily mean a high level of competence, but rather an equilibrium between the two languages, nor does it imply an ability to use both languages in all domains and for all functions. A dominant bilingual person is more competent in one language than the other, usually using one language for some functions and the other for others. *Ambilingualism* is defined as performing equally well in both languages in all domains, with no trace of the other language. This is considered very rare, with these bilingual individuals having as much control over their second language as their first.

The age at which a language is acquired and the context in which this occurs also play an important role in determining individual bilingualism. It is important to distinguish between *childhood*, *adolescent* and *adult bilingualism*. Childhood bilingualism occurs alongside a child's cognitive, emotional and social development. A child may develop two mother tongues (*simultaneous bilingualism*), often in mixed families, or acquire a second language (L2) after mastering the first language (L1) (*consecutive bilingualism*). Simultaneous bilingualism often develops through the informal, natural acquisition of two languages, whereas consecutive bilingualism is the result of intentional, formal learning. Both adolescent and adult bilingualism occur after the basic skills of the L1 have been mastered, with adolescent bilingualism taking place between the ages of 11 and 18, and adult bilingualism taking place from the age of 18 onwards. They can occur in either a formal or informal setting. A formal setting may be a classroom or another form of intentional learning, whereas an informal setting involves no intentional learning. The presence of speech communities that speak the languages of the bilingual individual is also important, and this is referred to as *endogenous* or *exogenous bilingualism*. An endogenous language is used as a first language (L1) in the community, while an exogenous language is either not used, or is used as an official language, but has no speech community. Hamers and Blanc provide an example of exogenous language use:

"...a Benin child from Cotonou, speaking Fon at home and going to school where French is the exclusive language of instruction develops an exogenous bilinguality in Fon and French." (2000:29)

The absence of a speech community means that bilingual individuals have reduced linguistic input. The socio-cultural environment of the languages and their relative status in the community also influence the type of bilingualism that develops. Lambert (1974) distinguishes between *additive* and *subtractive bilingualism*:

- *Additive bilingualism* occurs when the two languages are highly valued and equal, providing maximum benefits for the cognitive and linguistic development of the bilingual individual, as well as fostering a positive cultural identity;
- *Subtractive bilingualism* is when the L1 is devalued, which can lead to a delay in cognitive and linguistic development, as well as a negative cultural identity.

Bilinguals can also be categorised by their cultural identity. There are four possibilities:

- *Bicultural*: the bilingual positively identifies with both cultural groups and is recognised by each group as a member (cultural integration);
- *Monocultural*: the bilingual is fluent but identifies only with the L1 group, either by choice (separatism) or due to being excluded by the dominant group (segregation);
- *L2 acculturated*: the bilingual renounces the cultural identity of the L1 group and adopts that of the L2 group (assimilation);
- *Deculturated*: the bilingual renounces the L1 cultural identity but fails to identify with the L2 cultural group. This results in a lack of cultural identity (anomie) (Berry, 1980).

Anomie has been described as the state of anxiety arising from an individual's inability to reconcile the conflicting demands of one or more cultures. Therefore, individual bilingualism is more than just competence in two or more languages. It can be considered a multidimensional reality consisting of psychological and sociological dimensions, including:

- relative competence;
- cognitive organisation;
- age of acquisition;
- exogeneity;
- social/cultural status;
- cultural identity.

1.2 Societal Bilingualism

A bilingual country has been defined as: "...a political concept recognizing the use of two languages within that country..." (Johnson & Johnson 1998:31). This implies the use of two or more languages by individuals or groups within a nation, but not that all members are bilingual. Examples of bilingual countries include Canada, which has French and English; Belgium, which has Walloon (French) and Flemish; and Switzerland, which has French, German and Italian. These are all examples of *territorial bilingualism*, in which different language groups, who are often monolingual, live separately within the same nation. This is a widespread phenomenon worldwide, with the choice of bilingualism at an official level reflecting the society's aspirations, trading aims and the attitudes of its ruling group, rather than the reality of bilingualism among its citizens.

Societal bilingualism develops from a number of language contact situations, either within or between countries. It is often found in border areas, due to the constant flow of people through visits, trade, work or war. An example of this can be seen in northern Italy, on the border with Austria, where the populations of cities such as Bolzano, Trento and Udine are all bilingual, speaking Italian and German. They prefer to speak the non-standard dialect amongst themselves rather than Italian. Political events can divide people who speak the same language or bring together people who speak different languages. Economic factors also bring people together, either voluntarily or by force. Religion can also bring together different linguistic groups. Societies may decide to make a second language (L2) available through the education system in order to access wider markets or create job opportunities. In a bilingual situation, two or more languages coexist within a society, each being used to a different extent in different domains and for different purposes.

Originally coined by Ferguson (1959) to describe two functionally distinct forms of the same language — the 'high' variety (*H*) used in formal contexts and learned formally, and the 'low' variety (*L*) used in informal contexts and learned informally — the term 'diglossia' is now used to describe multilingual situations in which different languages function in complementary ways, with one language used in formal contexts and the other in informal ones. There are various types of multilingual diglossia, including:

- simple binary diglossia;
- double overlapping diglossia;
- double nested diglossia;
- linear polyglossic diglossia.

When a multilingual community maintains different languages by reserving them for specific domains, roles, and functions, this is known as *stable diglossia*, which depends on the stable relationships between the community's different groups. However, when this relationship becomes unstable, one language or variety will 'invade' the domains or functions usually reserved for the other. The outcome of this is either a new variety ($H + L$) or the replacement of the weaker variety by the more dominant one. This is known as '*leaky diglossia*'. Bilingualism can therefore be described as follows:

"...a global phenomenon, which involves simultaneously a psychological state of the individual and a situation of languages in contact at the interpersonal level and the collective level." (Hamers & Blanc 2001:49)

2. Bilingualism in the 21st century

In the 21st century, bilingualism has become increasingly relevant due to globalisation, economic integration and cultural exchange. This section considers the future of bilingualism, exploring its potential opportunities and challenges in various areas of society. It examines the impact of bilingualism on individual development, education, the economy, technology and global interactions. It also discusses the role of policies, societal attitudes and technological advancements in shaping this future. Through analysing current trends and projecting potential trajectories, we aim to shed light on the evolving landscape of bilingualism in the 21st century.

The ability to speak and understand two languages proficiently has gained increasing attention and relevance in the 21st century. It has been recognized as a valuable asset, both for individuals and societies, with benefits ranging from cognitive advantages to enhanced cultural understanding. In an era characterised by globalisation, multiculturalism and technological advancement, bilingualism offers individuals and societies a variety of opportunities and challenges. This essay delves into the future of bilingualism, exploring its implications across different domains and considering the factors that shape its trajectory.

Bilingualism has a profound effect on individual development, influencing cognitive abilities, linguistic skills, and cultural identity. Research suggests that bilingual individuals often exhibit enhanced executive function, including better attention control, problem-solving skills, and multitasking abilities. Furthermore, speaking multiple languages can broaden one's worldview, facilitate cross-cultural communication, and foster empathy towards diverse perspectives. Consequently, the future of bilingualism is promising for those seeking to navigate an increasingly interconnected world while preserving their linguistic and cultural heritage.

There are several reasons why the future of bilingualism in the 21st century appears promising and increasingly significant:

1. Globalisation: In an increasingly interconnected world, the ability to speak more than one language is becoming an asset. As people interact across borders for work, travel and leisure, the ability to speak more than one language improves communication and understanding.
2. Economic advantages: Many businesses operate internationally, so being bilingual is a valuable skill in such environments. Companies often seek employees who can communicate with clients and partners in multiple languages, giving them a competitive edge in the global market.
3. Cultural exchange and understanding: Bilingualism promotes cultural exchange and understanding. When individuals learn another language, they gain insight into the associated culture, history and values. This can lead to greater empathy and cooperation between different communities and nations.

4. **Brain Health and Cognitive Benefits:** Research suggests that bilingualism can have positive effects on brain health and cognitive function. Bilingual individuals often demonstrate enhanced executive function, including improved attention control, problem-solving skills, and multitasking abilities.
5. **Educational Policies and Programmes:** Many countries are recognising the importance of bilingual education and implementing policies and programmes to support it. This includes providing bilingual schooling, promoting second language acquisition in early childhood education and offering resources for language learning.
6. **Technological advances:** Technological advances have made language learning more accessible and engaging. The proliferation of language learning apps, online courses and digital resources means that individuals now have more convenient and affordable opportunities to learn and practise languages.
7. **Migration and multiculturalism:** In regions experiencing high levels of migration and multiculturalism, bilingualism is becoming more commonplace and is highly valued. Immigrants often retain their native language while learning the language of their new country, thereby contributing to linguistic diversity and enriching society's cultural tapestry.

Conclusions:

Bilingualism appears to be the norm rather than the exception. While a popular definition of bilingualism is *'speaking two languages well'*, more academic definitions range from Bloomfield's *'native-like competence'* to Haugen's *'producing meaningful utterances'*. However, all these definitions refer only to one aspect of bilingualism, namely the level of proficiency, and do not take any non-linguistic dimensions into consideration. The age at which the second language is acquired plays an important role, with the distinction being made between childhood, adolescent and adult bilingualism. Childhood bilingualism can be either simultaneous with L1 acquisition or consecutive, occurring after the child has mastered the basics of the L1. Language acquisition can take place in an endogenous environment, where the L1 is not spoken within the community, or an exogenous environment, where the L1 is spoken within the community. A language with a positive status produces an additive form of bilingualism, while a devalued language produces a subtractive form. The way in which the bilingual individual perceives themselves is also important in establishing their cultural identity, which may be bicultural, monocultural, L2 acculturated, or deculturated. Individual bilingualism is therefore a combination of psychological and sociological factors.

Bilingualism is both an individual phenomenon, as well as a societal one involving languages in contact. Both are integral parts of human behaviour. One of the most important aspects of societal bilingualism is diglossia: two or more language systems co-existing within a speech community, each with a distinct range of domains and functions, used in complementary ways. Bilingualism is therefore the interaction of all these factors, as well as the interaction between the individual and society, when: *"...social and psychological realities are simultaneous: any person is at one and the same time an individual, a member of social networks and groups and part of the wider society."* (Hamers & Blanc 2000:24).

Overall, the future of bilingualism in the 21st century appears to be one of growth and increasing significance, fuelled by globalisation, economic demands, cultural exchange, educational initiatives, technological progress and changing demographics.

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