

Who Is a Bilingual?

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ABSTRACT: The question of who is and who is not a bilingual is more difficult to answer than it first appears. Bilingualism was long regarded as the equal mastery of two languages, a definition that still prevails in certain glossaries of linguistics. However, today's complex world requires a more exact definition and analysis of the competencies that community members require to interact with speakers of other languages. As Weir (2000) points out, it is now recognized that a bilingual or multilingual speaker uses different languages for different purposes, in different contexts, with various degrees of proficiency to communicate with other interlocutors. It seems obvious, therefore, that if we are to study the phenomenon of bilingualism, according to Mackey (1959, cited in Mackey, 2000), we are forced to consider it as something entirely relative. Grosjean (1985) suggests that native-like proficiency in both languages, referred to as true bilingualism, is rare. Therefore, as Baker (2006) points out "defining exactly who is or is not bilingual is essentially elusive and ultimately impossible" (p. 16).

Keywords: bilingualism; biculturalism, multilingualism, monolingualism

Bilingualism is a major fact of life in the world today. People who are brought up in a society where monolingualism and uniculturalism are promoted as the norm, often think of bilingualism as a rare phenomenon. According to Crystal (1997), about two-thirds of the world's children grow up in bilingual environments. In fact, as Weir (2000) asserts, one in three of the world's population routinely uses two or more languages for work, family life, and leisure. There are even more people who make irregular uses of languages other than their mother tongue. For example, many people have learned foreign languages at school and they use these languages whenever the occasion arises. If we count these people as bilinguals, then monolingual speakers would form a small proportion of the world population. According to Edwards (2006), everyone is bilingual; that is, there is no one in the world who does not know at least a few words in languages other than the maternal variety. Edwards (2003) takes a strong

position by asserting that nowadays “monolingualism is an aberration, an affliction of the powerful, and a disease to be cured” (p. 28).

Defining Bilingualism

The question of who is and who is not a bilingual is more difficult to answer than it first appears. The concept of bilingualism, according to Weir (2000), has broadened since the beginning of the 20th century. Bilingualism was long regarded as the equal mastery of two languages. Bloomfield (1933, cited in Mackey, 2000) considers bilingualism as “the native-like control of two languages” (p. 56). Mackey (2000) also cites Haugen (1953) who defines bilingualism as the ability to produce “complete meaningful utterances in the other language” (p. 7). Unlike those scholars who define bilingualism as the perfect mastery of the two languages, Macnamara (1967) considers minimal competence in only one of the four second language skills as the minimum requirement of bilingualism. Between these two extremes, one encounters a whole array of other definitions of the concept. For example, Titone (1972, cited in Harmers & Blank, 2004), defines bilingualism as the individual’s capacity to speak a second language based on the patterns and structures of that language than the patterns of the first one.

These definitions, which range from a native-like competence in two languages to a minimal proficiency in a second language, raise a number of theoretical and methodological difficulties. For instance, Harmers and Blank (2004), argue that such definitions “lack precision and operationalism” (p. 7) in specifying the native-like proficiency. They raise the following questions to clarify this point: Can we exclude from the population of bilinguals someone whose accent does not resemble that of the native speakers despite his/her high proficiency in that language? Can a person who has taken one or two courses in a foreign language without being able to use it for communication be called a bilingual? How do we know whether a speaker is following the structures of his/her mother tongue when speaking the other language?

Harmers and Blank go on to assert that “these definitions refer to a single dimension of bilinguality, namely the level of proficiency in both languages, thus ignoring non-linguistic dimensions” (p. 7). Paradis (1986, cited in Harmers & Blank, 2004) suggests that bilingualism should be defined on a multidimensional continuum. Mohanty (1994) limits the definition of bilingualism to its social-communicative dimension, when he says that

bilingual persons or communities are those with an ability to meet the communicative demands of the self and the society in their

normal functioning in two or more languages in their interaction with the other speakers of any or all of these languages (p. 13).

More recent definitions of the concept capture the specific characteristics of bilingualism. According to Grosjean (1985), a bilingual should not be held as the sum of two monolinguals for the fact that bilinguals develop unique language behaviors. Ludi (1986, cited in Harmers & Blank, 2004), also regards bilingualism as an extreme form of polylectality, which is far beyond the addition of two monolingual competencies. Grosjeans (1998) considers those using two dialects of the same language as bilinguals. Baker and Prys Jones (1998, p. 2) suggest that in defining a bilingual person, we may wish to consider the following questions:

- Should bilingualism be measured by how fluent people are in two languages?
- Should bilinguals be only those people who have equal competence in both languages?
- Is language proficiency the only criterion for assessing bilingualism, or should the use of two languages also be considered?
- Most people would define a bilingual as a person who can *speak* two languages. What about a person who can *understand* a second language perfectly but cannot speak it? What about a person who can speak a language but is not literate in it? What about an individual who cannot speak or understand speech in a second language but can read and write it? Should these categories of people be considered bilingual?
- Are there different degrees of bilingualism that can vary over time and with circumstances? For instance, a person may learn a minority language as a child at home and then later acquire a majority language in the community or at school. Over time, the second language may become the stronger or dominant language. If that person moves away from the neighborhood or area where the minority language is spoken, or loses contact with those who speak it, he or she may lose fluency in the minority language. Should bilingualism therefore be a relative term?

As Weir (2000) points out, it is now recognized that a bilingual speaker uses different languages for different purposes, in different contexts, with various degrees of proficiency to communicate with other interlocutors.

The existing confusion over the concept of bilingualism is largely due to the difficulty of defining a threshold for the bilinguality.

Bilingualism and the Question of Degree

It seems obvious, therefore, that if we are to study the phenomenon of bilingualism, according to Mackey (1959, cited in Mackey, 2000), we are forced to consider it as something entirely relative. We must, moreover, include not only the use of two languages, but also the use of any number of languages. Bilingualism should, therefore, be considered as the alternate use of two or more languages by the same individual.

What does this involve? Since bilingualism is a relative concept, it involves the question of DEGREE. How well does the individual know the languages he/she uses? In most cases, as Stranzy (2005) points out, bilingual speakers have one dominant language; that is, they are more proficient in the processing aspects of one language over the other. In most cases, the dominant language is the native or the first language spoken; However, balanced bilinguals can be equally proficient in both languages.

In describing bilingualism, the most obvious feature to determine is how well an individual knows the languages he or she uses. Mackey (2000) believes that the ability in two or more languages is best realized by the use of a continuum. For example, some bilinguals enjoy productive competence; hence, they actively speak and write in both languages. Others, in contrast, have more passive or receptive ability in a language; they may understand or read in a language but may not be able to speak or write it very well. Ability in each domain may be relatively advanced in both languages or may only be developed in a second or third language. Furthermore, a bilingual's mastery of a macro skill (i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing) may not be the same at all linguistic levels. For example, a bilingual may have an extensive vocabulary but a poor pronunciation, or a native-like pronunciation but underdeveloped grammar.

Bilingual Competencies

Traditionally, bilingualism had been loosely defined as the ability to speak and understand two or more languages. Today's complex world, however, requires a more exact definition and analysis of the competencies that community members require to interact with speakers of other languages. Cummins (2000) extended the concept of cognitive competency, which relates to reasoning and thinking abilities, as the fifth ability factor in bilingualism. This notion was first introduced by Skutnabb-Kangas (1981, cited in Cummins, 2000) who referred to the ability to use both languages as a thinking tool. Cummins (2000) took the idea further to include the ability to reason and create new cognitive patterns for handling the abstract uses of language as legitimate parts of bilingualism.

Bilingualism and multilingualism, according to Baker (2006), must include the ability to sustain growth in low-frequency, abstract vocabulary, and complex structures. Baker introduces five basic competencies and asserts that they are three-dimensional and reflect the inter-relation of various skill areas that make up general competencies:

1. Pronunciation (phonetic aptitude),
2. Vocabulary (lexical development),
3. Grammar (syntax and rule development),
4. Meaning (comprehension and discourse features), and
5. Style (context, register, and function).

An individual speaker may be more or less advanced in one competency but not in others. For example, a student may be quite good at reading English and understanding the meaning of words, while he may lack the ability to produce the same level of language in pronunciation and style competencies. On the other hand, a speaker may be able to decode and pronounce words proficiently with no comprehension of their meanings.

The three dimensional aspect, as Easthouse (2003) believes, comes from the spiral nature of the competencies. The depth of learning is constrained by the learner's cognitive ability and the learner's exposure to the written and oral forms of the language. Language learners who develop all five competencies at relatively equal rates will learn more because the networking between the abilities strengthens their overall learning. For example, vocabulary learning enables a language learner to learn more syntax from a reading assignment, and in turn learning grammar enhances the ability to control the registers and style. It is very much a network that is strengthened because of more cross-connections.

Easthouse (2003) goes on to assert that socio-cultural issues and educational policies compound the already complex definition of bilingualism. In many countries, the definition of bilingualism and decisions about the services to offer to bilinguals are politically motivated. For example, in some foreign countries, being literate is defined by the ability to sign one's name on official documents. Similarly, being bilingual is the ability to carry on a simple conversation. So if an individual can carry on a conversation and put his signature on a form, he does not need second language assistance or literacy classes, and the government is thus relieved of the responsibility for providing adequate educational opportunities for him. Yet, the person who can carry on a conversation and sign his name in two languages may still need assistance in both second language acquisition and literacy in order to proceed through the school system and/or to function in the employment sector. Some countries, however, do allow for first language literacy and schooling for 1-3 years but then expect students to function entirely in the second language for the remainder of their education. If we agree that bilingualism is the ability to read, write,

speak, listen, and think (to continue learning and developing new cognitive patterns) in two languages, then we can see that most learners will not be able to gain all five competencies in both languages in such a short time, especially given the kinds of programs offered.

Concluding Remarks

We live in a world of linguistic diversity. Since the recent attempts at globalization necessitate high-level human transactions, present strides towards bilingualism are justified. Acquiring a compound state of mind that functions with two grammars (Cook, 2003) remains an inclination which is followed by relatively very few individuals, but this does not mean that there are few bilinguals. Bilingual continuum helps us realize that bilinguals enjoy varied language skills. Some bilingual individuals are able to speak and write in both languages, others are able to understand and read. Some are at an early stage of acquiring a second language; they can understand it but cannot speak it. Some are in the middle, and others are at the end. Grosjean (1982) suggests that native-like proficiency in both languages, known as true bilingualism, is a rare phenomenon. Therefore, as Baker (2006) points out “defining exactly who is or is not bilingual is essentially elusive and ultimately impossible” (p. 16).

In short, from the above discussion, it can be concluded that any person who is able to understand a second language or communicate his message in a second language, regardless of the proficiency level, can be labeled as a bilingual. With proper instruction and time, bilinguals can continue to improve in the areas where fluency or competency is lacking, because bilingualism and multilingualism are not static conditions.

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