

Bilingualism in Holistic Perspective
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Most people in the world speak two or more languages, simply because multiple languages are used in their environment. Researchers and educators in the field of bilingualism and bilingual education have been interested in defining what “bilingual” means and how a bilingual person’s competences can be measured. Among the several views of bilingualism, two have predominated in the field: the fractional and the holistic perspectives. The fractional view describes bilinguals as being the equivalent of two monolinguals in one person. This view considers bilinguals as developing parallel linguistic competence in both languages simultaneously, and studies following this perspective often compare bilinguals with monolinguals.

The holistic view, proposed by Grosjean (1982), argues that each bilingual is a unique individual who integrates knowledge of and from both languages to create something more than two languages that function independently of each other. This view holds that the total of the two languages is greater than their sum because the two languages interact with each other to increase the functionality of each. Both perspectives describe as ideal the development of *balanced* bilingual competence in speaking, thinking, reading, and writing, meaning equivalent fluency in the two languages.

Balanced bilingualism is a concept that is not easily achievable; instead, bilingualism must be understood as a continuum in which language ability changes constantly in relation to the individual’s social, educational, and linguistic contexts. In addition, bilingualism may be described as simultaneous or sequential. Simultaneous bilinguals grow up learning two languages in their environment from infancy. Sequential bilinguals develop mastery, or at least some proficiency, in their native language before acquiring the second language.

Bilingualism emerges when two different language communities come in sustained contact. Language contact in different communities creates a variety of bilingual discourses that meet the needs of the members of those specific communities. Bilingualism is more valuable when some members of each language group are not bilingual. Logically, if everyone in a particular environment were bilingual there would no longer be a need for anyone to know both languages purely for communicative purposes. Some communities and countries have a policy of official acceptance of bilingualism, and consequently both languages are taught and have fairly equal status in society. For example, Belgium has an official policy of bilingualism in French and Flemish, not only on paper but in practice. Thus, in the school and community people receive training and motivation to learn both languages and use them in the public sphere.

In some countries the general public identifies a particular language with nationalism and labels the widespread use of other languages as a problem rather than an asset. An example of this dynamic in the United States are the so-called English-only laws that restrict the use of languages other than English in public schools. Such laws are motivated by political and ideological considerations rather than sound pedagogical theory or societal benefit. They have little if anything to do with what constitutes a good education or an adequate linguistic preparation for the future.

The research in this field shows that the child's native language is a good foundation on which to build the second language. In addition, English-only policies often have unrecognized impacts beyond education when speakers of other languages absorb negative attitudes toward their home language (or varieties of their home language) and culture that are prevalent in mainstream society. The effects of these attitudes are apparent in that historically, immigrant families in the United States have tended to preserve their native language as an important part of their culture. Immigrants traditionally have been bilingual for two or three generations after immigrating and eventually, abandon the immigrant language altogether. Today, immigrants evidence a stronger preference for speaking English and less motivation for preserving their native language, so that the shift to English monolingualism occurs more rapidly, in most cases in two generations. In this context English-only rules seem to be unnecessary since there is no threat on the English language posed by the new immigrants and their linguistic

orientation. Ironically, while English-only campaigns in the public schools promote having minority children abandon their home language and make the transition to English as soon as possible, private corporations which now tend to operate in several countries at once, regard second languages as a valuable job skill that increases U.S. competitiveness in the international marketplace.

It is important to note, however, that in addition to its purely communicative value, bilingualism has social, psychological, and cognitive benefits. In terms of their social communicative competence, bilinguals are able to maintain family communication and interaction across generations; psychologically, the identity of belonging to a particular language and culture group can increase bilinguals' self-esteem as well as the cohesion of their families. In terms of cognitive competence, studies have shown that young bilingual children have greater semantic flexibility than their monolingual peers in specific tasks such as object labeling. The findings of various studies differ on whether some cognitive benefits (e.g., metalinguistic awareness) may be temporary rather than permanent, adding to the existing societal ambivalence about whether the effort to maintain or develop bilingual competence is worthwhile. This ambivalence is due in large part to the fact that the researchers have not controlled for the effect of partial bilingualism as opposed to full mastery of both languages. There are indications in the research that fully bilingual and biliterate individuals benefit more from being bilingual than persons who are haphazardly or only partially bilingual. However, even if there is no easy answer to this question, there is no harm in a child being able to communicate with members of his or her family in their first language.

For whom is it most important to develop communicative competence in two languages, and why? Bilingualism develops when people participate in day-to-day activities that require them to use two languages. For example, it may be an asset to be able to address family members in the native language but be able to use the second language when necessary in the broader community. Beyond the linguistic competence aspect of bilingualism, it is also necessary to consider socio-cultural and political aspects. *Bilingualism is more than just speaking two languages.* Specifically when people,

children and adults, become bicultural through diverse socio-cultural experiences, this impacts their level of bilingualism. For bilinguals who live in the linguistic borderlands, whether geographically or ideologically, a primary goal is to develop and maintain their bicultural identity through preserving their customs, values, and ways of speaking among members of their community. Bilinguals who grow up in these borderlands develop a bicultural worldview and identity that governs when, with whom, and where they use each of their languages. From a negative perspective, the bilingual may be viewed as being “caught” between two languages and two cultures, proficient in neither. From a borderlands perspective, in contrast, the bilingual can be viewed as the creator of hybrid spaces where experiences and knowledge in two languages and cultures contribute to his or her abilities to negotiate the social, political and economic environment in which they live.

The languages people speak influence the cultural values they acquire as part of their bilingual world. Each language one learns brings with it a set of values, beliefs, and attitudes that belong to the members of a language community at a given point in time. Among immigrant communities, therefore, language is seen as a symbol and instrument of group identity. Moreover, the relationship between language and group identity varies as a function of the power relations between the different groups in a particular society. Children who attend schools in areas where their language is not valued and validated tend to learn early that the language of school is the one that holds power; as a result they typically become dominant in their second language, since most of their spoken and written instruction occurs in that language. In general, this type of ethnocentric environment leads to a form of subtractive bilingualism where bilingual children and youth feel continual pressure to assimilate by using their native language less and less. Children in such a situation may become either passive first-language bilinguals, able to understand but not use their native language or reluctant monolinguals in the majority language. When one’s native language is devalued (as, for example, with indigenous languages) and speaking the majority language is key to achieving economic and social success in the mainstream society, there is little motivation to retain one’s first language. This is why speakers of low-status languages typically do not resist the pressure to

assimilate linguistically and culturally into the dominant society, which typically leads to rapid loss of bilingualism.

When individuals do succeed in becoming fluent bilinguals, their socio-psycholinguistic competences in the two languages overlap creating a hybrid. One way this hybrid competency manifests itself is when speakers use both languages in the same conversation, a phenomenon known as code-switching. Historically and to some extent even today, critics have described code-switching pejoratively as reflecting an inability to speak either language properly (hence leading to epithets such as Chinglish, Spanglish, or Portuñol [a mixture of Portuguese and Spanish]). Even parents who are raising bilingual children have expressed concern that mixing the two languages may have negative educational consequences. There is no evidence however, that code-switching has negative effects on children's cognitive or linguistic development. Instead, research has identified code-switching and borrowing as instruments that competent bilingual speakers use deliberately as symbols of group identity. They may switch from one language to the other for pragmatic reasons, for example, to subtly convey their attitude toward the topic under discussion. Or, they may engage in code switching purely for fun as is common with teenagers in many cultures.

The experience of becoming bilingual has effects not only at the individual level, but also at the levels of family, community, and society. The circumstances of linguistic and biliteracy acquisition are in many ways unique to each individual child, because he or she is able to draw from two sets of linguistic and cultural resources. In terms of educational policy it is not enough for teachers, educators, and policymakers to consider only the linguistic aspect of bilingualism. A comprehensive understanding of how children become bilingual, how they acquire a second language and how they use each of the two languages in similar or different ways must incorporate knowledge of how social, cultural, and linguistic factors interact and influence their socio-psycholinguistic development. University professors and others who are responsible for preparing bilingual teachers must keep all of this in mind.

See also: Code-switching; High and low status languages; Highly qualified teachers; Views of bilingual education; Attitudes on language diversity; Language policy in global perspective; Bilingual education in the U.S. as seen from abroad; Metalinguistic awareness; Language and identity; Language maintenance goal denied.

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