

Multilingualism

“Quot linguas calles, tot homines vales” (One is worth as many people as languages known)

Emperor Charles V

“Notitia linguarum est prima porta sapientiae” (Knowledge of languages is the doorway to wisdom)

Roger Bacon (1214-94, *Opus Tertium*)

Multilingualism is a powerful phenomenon, which evolves from the need to communicate across speech communities. **Multilingualism is the ability to speak in more than one language and is a global phenomenon.** There are many important *lingua francas* which helps in cross-group understanding and often represent the language of a dominant society. *Lingua francas* like French, Arabic and English have been very significant, but they had failed to eliminate more local forms of language. It may be said that the *lingua francas* coexist with the more local forms in a multilingual world.

A close observation of the wide variety of existing languages and the degree of their usage, justifies the evolution and existence of multilingualism. Development of multilingualism may be easily attributed to various factors like -

- i. immigration
- ii. territorial expansion – even in the case of imperialist and colonial expansion
- iii. political union among different linguistic groups

Imperialist or colonial expansions often transports languages and brings them into contact with others through military and economic pressure with the help of only a handful of soldiers, merchants and bureaucrats. For instance, only a few thousand colonizers ruling the Indian subcontinent brought about an expanded base for English language among the teeming millions of India. Again, in the case of political union among different linguistic groups, a broadened linguistic ability is found to be necessary for unity among diverse groups which had so long existed in isolation. For instance, Switzerland unites four official language groups, namely, the German, Italian, French and Romansch. Again Belgium is a country of French and Flemish speakers, while Canada has English and French ‘charter’ groups. Besides these, the world today has federations based upon more arbitrary and involuntary amalgamations. Examples may be found in the colonial boundary-marking and creation of new countries in Africa and Asia.

Apart from the reasons discussed above multilingual competence is also developed through cultural and educational motivations. In most cases multilingualism evolves through contact and necessity. Even in countries where only one or two languages have legal recognition or official status, the societies may be linguistically so complex that multilingualism emerges as a common phenomenon. For instance, in Nigeria English is recognized officially but 80 million people speak about 400 languages. Linguists show that different social levels and different domains are associated with different varieties of language and thus multilingual competence may not imply equal degree of refinement in the use of all the languages. Development of multilingual competence is thus somewhat need based and language use usually extends only as required and multiple forms of language intertwine for multiple purposes. This phenomenon is known as *code-switching*. Code-switching is a process by which individuals change languages frequently, even within one single sentence. The changes are not random and each switching signifies something. Thus it may be said that multilingualism involves deeper psychological implications when it comes to the different uses of the various languages known by an individual.

Educational institutions, especially schools are powerful and visible instruments of the state and thus officially sanctioned linguistic practices are usually reflected in its curriculum and policies. Interactions among parents, teachers, children and multiple speech communities in the educational institutes reflect wider social currents and policies of cultural-linguistic pluralism.

Multilingualism is the act of using multiple languages, either by an individual speaker or by a community of speakers. Multilingual speakers outnumber monolingual speakers in the world's population. Multilingualism is becoming a social phenomenon governed by the needs of globalization and cultural openness. Owing to the ease of access to information facilitated by the Internet, individuals' exposure to multiple languages is becoming increasingly frequent thereby promoting a need to acquire additional languages.

A multilingual person, in a broad definition, is one who can communicate in more than one language, be it actively (through speaking, writing, or signing) or passively (through listening, reading, or perceiving). More specifically, the terms *bilingual* and *trilingual* are used to describe comparable situations in which two or three languages are involved. A multilingual person is generally referred to as a polyglot., the Greek word "Poly" meaning "many", and the Greek word "glot" meaning "language". Multilingual speakers have acquired and maintained at least one language during childhood, the so-called first language (L1). The first language (sometimes also referred to as the mother tongue) is acquired without formal education, by

mechanisms heavily disputed. Children acquiring two languages in this way are called simultaneous bilinguals. Even in the case of simultaneous bilinguals one language usually dominates over the other.

Cognitive Aspect of Multilingualism

There are sophisticated mechanisms to prevent cross talk in brains where more than one language is stored. The executive control system might be implicated to prevent one language from interfering with another in multilinguals. The executive control system is responsible for processes that are sometimes referred to as executive functions, and among others includes supervisory attention system, or cognitive control. Despite the fact that most research on the executive control system pertains to nonverbal tasks, there is some evidence that the system might be involved in resolving and ordering the conflict generated by the competing languages stored in the multilingual's brain. During speech production there is a constant need to channel attention to the appropriate word associated with the concept, congruent with the language being used. The word must be placed in the appropriate phonological and morphological context. Multilinguals constantly utilize the general executive control system to resolve interference/conflicts among the known languages, enhancing the system's functional performance, even on nonverbal tasks. In studies, multilingual subjects of all ages, showed overall enhanced executive control abilities. This may indicate that the multilingual experience leads to a transfer of skill from the verbal to the nonverbal. There is no one specific domain of language modulation in the general executive control system, as far as studies reveal. Studies show that the speed with which multilingual subjects perform tasks, with-and-without mediation required to resolve language-use conflict, is better in bilingual than monolingual subjects.

The multilingual **Language Processing Device (LPD)** consists of two (or more) **Constantly Available Interacting Systems (CAIS)** and has a **Common Underlying Conceptual Base (CUCB)**. The CUCB is a container of mental representations that comprise knowledge and concepts that are either language or culture neutral (i.e., universal or useable through both channels) or language and culture specific. This suggestion concurs with the new wave compound model proposed by **Paradis** (1995, 1997). He claimed that multilinguals have a compound system consisting of two parts: two or more lexicons that store word forms, phonological and morphosyntactic properties, lexicosemantic specifications, and constraints; and a single store for multimodal mental representations that are acquired through experience in discourse. Consequently, these representations are linguistically and culturally grounded.

Monti-**Belkaoui & Belkaoui** (1983) also noted that when concepts involve different or unique cultural, social, or environmental processes or phenomena the underlying dimensional structures differ in ways that reflect these processes. **Pavlenko** (1996) emphasized the importance of direct experience with the concept in its own cultural environment. She suggested that cultural exposure is crucial in the development of concepts. The full acquisition and proper use of a concept requires the learner to know not only its lexical-semantic counterpart and the associated declarative knowledge but also the multimodal mental representation and culturally based behavioral scripts and schemas that are acquired through genuine communication. Learners need direct experience with concepts in the target language because the conceptual system of each language operates differently.

Locke (1690), for instance, was convinced that lexical variation reflects cultural differences among different speech communities. He argued that if we look a little more nearly into this matter, and exactly compare different languages, we shall find that, though they have words which in translations and dictionaries are supposed to answer one another, yet there is scarce one ten amongst the names of complex ideas, especially of mixed modes, that stands for the same precise idea which the word does that in dictionaries it is rendered by. (p. 49) **Wilhelm von Humboldt** (1903- 1936) expressed similar ideas, saying that "thinking is not merely dependent on language in general but, up to a certain degree, on each specific language" (p. 2). He considered different languages as bearers of different cognitive perspectives and different world views. Language has also been found to be dependent on culture. The multilingual CUCB contains concepts that are language specific because they represent a unique part of the culture associated with that language (**Kecskes**, 1998). Osgood et al. found that connotations associated with certain words are quite similar across languages but a number of words have special emotional significance that varies in different languages. One difficulty of multilingual development is that each language has its own metaphorical and figurative system that are not compatible with the metaphorical system of another language: for instance, Americans "make money," Russians "work for money" ("зарабатывают"), Hungarians "look for money" ("pénzt keres"). Thus we see that CUCB is the result of the multilingual conceptual development and consequently is not language independent. Concepts, knowledge, and skills get into the CUCB through multiple linguistic channels and very often keep their language- and culture-specific features. "Beyond-threshold-level competence" in all the languages ensures a relatively free use of the content of the CUCB through all these linguistic channels.

Vygotsky's (1962) approach insisted that thought and word are inseparable because they are two sides of one thing and when taken separately neither of them possesses the

properties of the whole. According to **Levelt (1989)**, the conceptualizer has two levels, the macrolevel and the microlevel. This approach can be used to accommodate language assignment in the multilingual speaker. **De Bot (1993)** argued that the macrolevel, where intention originates, is language independent, whereas the microlevel, where thought is shaped, is language specific. Bringing together Vygotsky's, Levelt's, and De Bot's ideas it may be said that it is the microlevel of the conceptualizer where the interaction of thought and words takes place. When thought is being formed there must already be an interaction between the chunks of message and the words it will be embodied in. This interaction finalizes the shape of the verbal message. Vygotsky quotes **O. Mandelstam**: "I have forgotten the word I intended to say, and my thought, unembodied, returns to the realm of shadows" (cited by Vygotsky, 1962, p. 119). Conceptualization and verbal formulation are united through thought and word, which are amalgamated through word meaning. The relation between thought and word is a process, "a continual movement back and forth from thought to word and from word to thought. Thought is not merely expressed in words; it comes into existence through them" (**Vygotsky**, 1962, p. 125). Because thought and word are not cut from one pattern, there are more differences than likenesses between them. Speakers cannot put thoughts on words directly like ready-made units because, as Vygotsky said, "the structure of speech does not simply mirror the structure of thought" (p. 126). As a result of the thought-word interaction, thought usually undergoes several changes as it turns into speech. The same can be said about the word. Word meaning changes depending on the neighboring words in the utterance and as required by the context in which it appears. The result of this process is the sense of the word that is gained from the context

Language teachers can tap into their students' familiarity with multiple languages to advance learning and accomplish what may be referred to as "bringing one language to another." Engaging in and reflecting on activities that draw on multilingual experience is beneficial to students, their teachers, and to anyone who wants to add a new dimension to language teaching and learning. Multilingualism may be adapted for students of different ages, levels, and language contexts. The goal is to connect the acquisition of English with the students' previous language knowledge and make this multilingual awareness a part of oral discussions, written assignments, and projects in the classroom.

Multilingualism and subsequent language learning

The world has been rendered a global village today with international trade, commerce and technological enhancement have produced a whole new generation of multilinguals all over the world. Multilingualism, which is defined as speaking two or more languages, is a growing worldwide phenomenon. Due to increased mobility and closely linked economies, many countries currently have significant multilingual populations in their workforces and educational systems. The increasing demands of international commerce alone have engendered a large amount of interest and attention to multilingual education and training programs. In this time of unprecedented contact among different language groups and cultures, speaking two or more languages can make a difference in where one lives and may determine educational and career choices. English, as a major language of international business, is spoken as a second or third language in many countries around the world. In fact, English “can be seen as a factor in the creation of multilingualism today” (Jessner 2006, 2)

Research evidence suggests that acquiring more than one language creates different kinds of connections in the brain, which gives multilingual individuals an advantage in some respects compared with monolingual individuals. An important article by Lambert (1985) cites a number of studies about the enhanced *cognitive flexibility* that balanced bilinguals experience, which makes them better able to engage in problem solving and adapt to new ideas.

Despite the potential benefits of multilingualism, students who are learning additional languages in school do not always recognize the importance of already speaking more than one language. For example, multilinguals already know a great deal about language, often unconsciously, including grammatical knowledge, such as how different languages handle verb conjugation, and sociocultural knowledge, such as understanding that what is considered polite in one language may be rude in another. In addition, those who speak more than one language are also generally more aware of sociolinguistic variables and functions than those who speak one language, and they are adept at switching between different regional varieties, registers, and formal and informal language styles. This knowledge, especially when it is brought to a conscious level, is known as language awareness and metalinguistic awareness, and is a special advantage of multilingualism (Cook 1995; Jessner 2006; Svalberg 2007). Metalinguistic awareness, in particular, refers to knowing about and being able to talk about how language is

structured and how it functions. Ongoing discussions among language researchers and teachers concern the identification and explanation of exactly how language awareness originates and varies among learners. In a review of language awareness as a field of research and practice, Svalberg (2007) emphasizes the need to actively engage language awareness because it is not “a purely intellectual awareness and is not passive” (p.302). Garcia (2008) makes the point that *multilingual language awareness* is a necessity for teachers of multilingual students. Besides knowing about languages, subject matter, and teaching methodology, instructors should have an understanding of the political struggles and social circumstances of students’ schools and communities. Unfortunately, students (and even teachers) may enter the English classroom thinking that the languages students already speak inhibit or otherwise stand in the way of learning English. In addition, when studying English second language, multilingual students will not always make the connection between their previous language learning—which may have been acquired at an early age—and their current language learning. These same students may be discouraged by the fact that they have had less exposure to foreign languages compared to ones with which they are already familiar. Preconceived notions about the comparative value of different languages will also affect student learning and use of these languages. A goal of EFL teachers, therefore, is to counteract these notions and encourage their multilingual students to reflect and draw on their rich store of language information and skills in order to facilitate the learning of English.