Perspectives on Bilingualism in the South African Context

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Être Bilingue

Bilingualism is a topic which is of interest not only to linguists, but also to psychologists, teachers, language planners, political scientists and other social scientists. It is an extremely complex phenomenon which should be viewed from a variety of perspectives. Although bilingualism is a well-known phenomenon, it is not easy to define. What does it really mean to be bilingual? Let us consider the following examples of bilingualism:

1)   A young salesman, from a (linguistically) 'mixed-marriage' background, whose father has always spoken only English to him, and whose mother has always spoken only Afrikaans to him; he went to an English-medium primary school and an Afrikaans-medium high school.

2)   A widow, living in an extended family situation, who was brought up as a Gujerathi-speaker, but now she speaks Gujerathi and English to her daughter and only English to her son-in-law and grandchildren.

3)   A retired businessman who emigrated from Lithuania when he was 18 but has not spoken his mother tongue (Lithuanian) since his arrival in South Africa over 50 years ago.

4)   A businesswoman who came from an Afrikaans-speaking home and has lived in Johannesburg all her life and whose first husband was Afrikaans-speaking, but her second husband and younger children only speak English to her.

5)   A Zulu-speaking miner, living in Soweto, who has married a Sotho wife who cannot speak Zulu.

6)   An Afrikaans-speaking professor of Economics at Unisa who spends most of his work time reading and writing in English but who seldom speaks the language outside of his work.

7)   A three-year-old child from mixed Tsonga/Venda parentage who regularly uses a mixture of both languages.

8)   A young man with Xhosa-speaking parents who grew up in exile in the USA and has recently returned to South Africa.

9)   A nurse whose parents were Afrikaans-speaking but who was sent to an English medium school and has married an English-speaking husband.

10)   A Zulu-speaking student who learnt English at school but has only come into contact with mother-tongue speakers of English since his arrival on the campus of Natal University a year ago.

Since each one of the above could be regarded as an example of bilingualism, they raise a number of questions. Which one of these examples should be regarded as the most bilingual? Is bilingualism a matter of degree and, if so, are some people more bilingual than others? What factors should be considered in deciding which individuals should be considered as bilinguals? Is it possible to construct a clear idea of prototypical bilingualism? Some bilinguals grow up as bilinguals in the home. Some acquire second languages later in life, and even discard the language of their childhood. Some have a good knowledge of a second language as a written language. In fact, it may even be better than their first language, and yet they speak the language with difficulty. Others are illiterate in their second language. There are numerous variations on the theme.

Definitions of Bilingualism
In the light of the above examples, it is not surprising that an adequate definition of bilingualism has eluded scholars over the years. Definitions of bilingualism are notoriously vague. They range from Bloomfield's (1933:55) 'native-like control of two languages' to Haugen's (1953:7) claim that 'bilingualism is understood ... to begin at the point where the speaker of one language can produce complete meaningful utterances in the other language'. Many of the traditional definitions of bilingualism focus on the degree of bilingualism that a speaker possesses, but bilingualism is much more than a matter of proficiency in two (or more) languages. It is a dynamic and multifaceted phenomenon which needs to be examined from a

number of perspectives. The concept of bilingualism is closely linked to the concepts of multilingualism and plurilingualism, and these terms are sometimes even used synonymously. (Some scholars like Abudarham 1987:4 prefer to avoid the term altogether and speak of a 'dual language system', a more general term which they feel can accommodate all aspects of bilingualism.)

Traditionally, sociolinguists distinguish between two main types of bilingualism, namely *individual* and *societal bilingualism*. Individual bilingualism focuses on the cognitive aspects of bilingualism and is concerned with the study of the bilingularity of the individual. Societal bilingualism, on the other hand, is concerned with the interrelationship between language and social, political, educational, cultural, and economic factors and language in a speech community. Societal bilingualism falls within the domains of sociolinguistics and the sociology of language, whereas individual bilingualism is more in the domain of psycholinguistics and psychology.

In this paper we will view bilingualism from these two broad perspectives. The following three sections will focus mainly on issues pertaining to individual bilingualism and then we will move on to issues related to societal bilingualism, bearing in mind that all aspects of bilingualism are interrelated. Although the general features and principles of bilingualism will be explicated, special attention will be paid to issues that pertain to the South African linguistic context.

Degree of Bilingualism

As mentioned above, the degree of bilingualism, or level of proficiency in two languages, has often been used as the basis for definitions of bilingualism. Bloomfield's definition (op.cit.) represents one pole on the proficiency continuum. This form of bilingualism is known as *ambilingualism*. The term was first used by Halliday et al. (1970) to describe a person who is capable of functioning equally well in either of his/her languages in all domains without any trace of interference from one language in the use of the other (Baetens Beardsmore 1986:7). Some regard this type of person as the only 'true' bilingual (Thiery 1976). Halliday et al. (1970) point out, however, that it is unlikely that bilinguals who are equally fluent in both languages will be equally fluent in all possible domains or topics, so that this type of bilingualism is likely to be extremely rare. A more realistic term is *equilingualism*, which refers to the case where the speaker's knowledge of two languages is roughly equivalent. The speaker has achieved roughly the same level of proficiency in both languages as his/her monoglot counterparts, but s/he is not necessarily equally proficient in all domains (Baetens Beardsmore 1986:9). This type of bilingualism is alternatively called *balanced bilingualism* (Lambert et al. 1958).

At the other pole of the proficiency continuum we have *semibilingualism*.

This term (which should not be confused with the term, 'semilingualism', mentioned later) refers to bilinguals who have a passive or receptive knowledge of a second language, but no active mastery of it (Hockett 1958). In other words, they can understand a second language but have difficulty expressing themselves in it.

The measurement of bilingual proficiency has been the object of much research and poses a number of problems (cf. Kelly 1969). Quakenbush (1992:61-62) defines proficiency as 'the degree to which a language can be used successfully in face to face interaction'. A variety of techniques have been employed to measure proficiency. For the measurement of oral proficiency two main types of tests have been used, namely (a) self-evaluation techniques and (b) direct testing. The most generally recognised method for measuring overall oral proficiency by direct testing is the one developed by the United States Foreign Services Institute (Adams & Firth 1979). A modification of the oral proficiency method for preliterate societies is the SLOPE test (Grimes 1992:53). The best known tests for proficiency in written English are the Cambridge Proficiency Examination and the Cambridge First Certificate Examination.

In the past in South Africa much of the measurement of bilingualism seems to have been done in a somewhat ad hoc way. One of the concerns of many employers in the past was how to ascertain a prospective employee's proficiency in the two official languages, English and Afrikaans. In some cases employers were happy with self-evaluation and in other cases the results of the matriculation examination for these languages were often used as a guide. At one stage the Taalbond examinations were also highly regarded. Teachers were required to have a bilingual endorsement on their teaching certificates to state whether they were able to teach through the medium of both official languages and the methods and standards were as many and varied as the institutions that issued them.

In the light of the current situation of eleven official languages in the country, there is a need for in-depth research on bilingual proficiency in South Africa and the development of techniques for measuring it. The sort of question that needs to be examined is what type and level of proficiency is required by hotel receptionists, nurses, senior company officials, business executives, public servants and teachers? Tests that meet practical requirements in all 11 official languages need to be developed. Hopefully suitable outcomes based programmes and tests will be developed for the measurement of language proficiency in specific vocational fields.

Acquisition of Bilingualism

The acquisition of second languages has been the object of considerable research and debate. Bilingualism has often been viewed from the perspective of the timing or the context and development of acquisition. The literature on bilingual acquisition

abounds in terms relating to the timing of acquisition of the second language. We have infantile, childhood, adolescent, adult, early, late, primary, secondary and achieved bilingualism.

Haugen (1956) uses the term *infantile bilingualism* to refer to the acquisition of two languages from birth or infancy. Adler (1977) uses the term *ascribed bilingualism* to refer to this phenomenon. The term infantile bilingualism has now generally been replaced by the term *simultaneous bilingualism*. McLaughlin (1978) and Kessler (1984) regard any bilingualism acquired before the age of three as simultaneous bilingualism. Any bilingualism acquired after this age is regarded as *successive* (or sequential) *bilingualism*.

The issue of when a second language should be introduced (simultaneously or successively) has been hotly debated, but no conclusive research exists (Arnberg 1987:76-81; De Jong 1986:39-41; Harding & Riley 1986:46-66). Proponents of simultaneous bilingualism argue that the infant or very young child is uninhibited and less likely to offer resistance to learning another language. There is also evidence that phonological acquisition is much easier at this stage. Those who support successive acquisition maintain that presenting two languages at the same time in the early years can lead to confusion and 'mixed' language. However, the findings of Volterra & Taeschner (1978) have been used to refute this argument. They identified three phases in the development of bilingual acquisition in young children in which the bilingual child moves from an initial stage where the two languages are not separated to a final stage of complete differentiation. Although the bilingual child may appear to be confused by the two languages at first, it is claimed that this is only a passing phase in bilingual development (cf. Meisel 1987).

The above debate is also tied up with another issue which has long been the concern of psycholinguists, namely how bilinguals process their languages. Psycholinguists are interested in the nature of the mental representation underlying bilingual competence. The question has been asked whether the bilingual possesses two separate, coexistent systems or one merging system to accommodate his/her two languages. Following research by Weinreich (1953), Ervin & Osgood (1954) proposed two types of bilinguals, compound and co-ordinate bilinguals, based on environmental or acquisition context. Bilinguals who were brought up in bilingual homes and acquired two languages simultaneously or very early were regarded as compound bilinguals, whereas co-ordinate bilinguals were those who learned their second languages at a later stage. It was hypothesised that in compound bilingualism there is complete interdependence between the two languages, there being one underlying system of which the two languages are different manifestations, whereas in co-ordinate bilingualism there are two separate underlying systems and complete functional independence of the two languages. The issue of whether the neurolinguistic correlates of these different types of bilingual can be related to

acquisitional histories has led to controversy and confusion (cf. Baetens Beardsmore 1974; Lambert et al. 1958), but psycholinguists have continued to develop models of bilingual production and perception (cf. Romaine 1995:98-102). Many thorny issues remain, some of which will be discussed in the next section.

Effects of Bilingualism

The effect of bilingualism on an individual can be viewed as positive or negative. Lambert (1974) introduced the terms *additive* and *subtractive bilingualism* to reflect this dichotomy. Where the acquisition of a second language can be regarded as complementary and enriching, the situation can be described as additive. In situations, however, where ethnolinguistic minorities are dominated by a more prestigious language, subtractive bilingualism is likely to arise. This is typically the case in language shift situations such as Welsh and Gaelic in Britain (Dorian 1977). The classic case of language shift in South Africa is the demise of the Khoisan languages. There was a progressive shift where bilingual Khoi speakers moved to a state of monolingualism in Afrikaans or Xhosa. In the current South African context, could we speak of subtractive bilingualism in the case of the Afrikaans or Xhosa-speaking child who is sent to an English-medium school? This is of course a highly debatable and complex issue. If the child's mother tongue is taken as a second language at the school there is some possibility of additive bilingualism, but in a monolingual school where the mother tongue is not even offered as a subject, the danger of subtractive bilingualism is ever present and at best the school produces bilinguals who are monoliterate.

Probably one of the most extreme forms of subtractive bilingualism is *semilingualism*. This occurs when a speaker fails to reach 'normal' monolingual proficiency in any language. Hamers & Blanc (1989:53) define semilingualism as

> a linguistic handicap which prevents the individual from acquiring the linguistic skills appropriate to his linguistic potential in any of these languages.

The term semilingualism (*tvåspråkighet*) was first introduced by Hansegård (1968) to describe the linguistic deficit of Finnish-Swedish linguistic minorities in Tornedal, Sweden. The notion of semilingualism has been hotly debated (cf. Skutnabb-Kangas 1984; Toukomaa & Skutnabb-Kangas 1977; Martin-Jones & Romaine 1985). Although the term semilingualism is not generally accepted, the issues raised by the polemic surrounding it led to the development of threshold view of proficiency and the introduction of the notions of BICS and CALP to account for the differences between general conversational skills and the type of linguistic skills required to successfully handle academic discourse (Cummins 1984). Cummins

(1984) hypothesised that different types of bilingualism will reflect differences in cognitive development according to the threshold of competence reached (Romaine 1995:266). Above a certain level of competence bilingualism is positive but below it the effects of bilingualism can be negative. Without going into the whole debate around the issue, it is important to note that these issues have considerable relevance to the South African situation where the majority of the population are taught through the medium of a second language and where often the first language vernaculars are neglected educationally. Disadvantaged students are often disadvantaged because of linguistic disadvantage, or scholastic disadvantage is often compounded by linguistic disadvantage. There is an urgent need for more serious research and consideration of these issues (see also Macdonald 1991; Young 1988 and comments on 'diagonal bilingualism' below).

Another area which has been the subject of debate is the issue of childhood bilingualism. In earlier times considerable prejudice existed towards the idea of a child acquiring two or more languages at an early age. Even famous linguists like Jespersen (1922) argued that early bilingualism could have a detrimental effect on a child's cognitive and linguistic development (Arnberg 1987:21; Palij & Homel 1987:132). In their watershed study on Montreal schoolchildren Peal & Lambert (1962) found that French-English bilingual school children performed better on both verbal and non-verbal intelligence tests than their monolingual counterparts. Their findings, and other studies which followed, helped to dispel the myth that early bilingualism impairs intelligence. In one such study the South African researcher, Ianco-Worrall (1972), discovered that Afrikaans-English bilingual children were more advanced in their semantic development than their monolingual peers and showed greater metalinguistic awareness.

These discoveries had considerable impact on the Canadian education. While Canadian educators were experimenting with new forms of bilingual education such as the renowned immersion programmes, South African education remained entrenched in a policy of linguistic separation. Prior to 1948 various forms of bilingual education such as dual medium and parallel medium schools existed (Malherbe 1946), but with the advent of the apartheid ideology came the deification of the principle of mother-tongue education, which caused a move towards schools rigidly segregated along linguistic lines. In much the same way as the current 'right' of the mother to abortion has been forced on the unborn child so the 'right' to mother-tongue education was forced upon all to the exclusion of other rights such as the parents' freedom of choice of the language medium. Ironically, in black schools the right to mother tongue education was denied after std. 3 where either English or Afrikaans became the medium of instruction or language of learning (cf. Macdonald 1991). In the nineties, with the new political dispensation, much greater freedom exists in the choice of the language of learning in schools, but this has brought with it

great challenges in dealing with the complex set of historical, pragmatic, ideological and psychosocioligical factors involved in the issue of choosing and developing languages of learning in the classroom in our multilingual society. There is a great need for thorough on-going research in this area, before effective educational programmes can be developed to meet the requirements of Curriculum 2005.

One of the negative effects of bilingualism which has been identified is the problem of anomonie or cultural dislocation. It is claimed that children brought up bilingually do not acquire emotional ties with any one culture, consequently some bilinguals do not feel that they belong to any one group or their dual/joint membership of two groups is experienced as a source of inner conflict. According to a survey by Grosjean (1982:268), such cases were found, but it was generally not perceived as a major problem by the majority of bilinguals. Arnberg (1987:14) also claims that the overwhelming majority of bilinguals do not find anomonie to be a major problem. The problem of anomonie has also been identified in South African research on bilingualism (Barnes 1991:23), but no real research has been done on it in this country.

Societal Bilingualism

In contrast to individual bilingualism societal bilingualism refers to the ability of groups of people in a society to use more than one language. In other words, it is concerned with the phenomenon of bilingualism in a speech community. Baetens Beardsmore (1986:2) offers the following definition:

> Bilingualism is the condition in which two living languages exist side by side in a country, each spoken by one national group, representing a fairly large proportion of the people.

Again, this phenomenon can be viewed from different perspectives. On the basis of language dominance Pohl (1965) distinguishes *horizontal, vertical* and *diagonal bilingualism* (see figure 1 below).
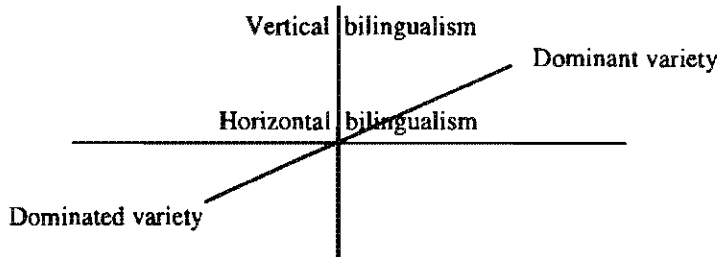

Figure 1 (from Haugen 1987:16).

Horizontal bilingualism describes a situation where two languages are accorded the same official, cultural and social status. This type of bilingualism is found, according to Pohl, amongst educated Flemings in Brussels, Catalans in Spain and Québecquois in Canada. This could also be descriptive of English and Afrikaans in the white speech community in South Africa where neither language could be regarded as dominant. Vertical bilingualism describes a situation where a standard language is used together with a distinct but related dialect. This term is synonymous with diglossia (a term which goes back to Ferguson 1959). One of the best known examples of this type of situation is found in German-speaking countries where Hochdeutsch functions as a standard high status variety together with a local dialect of German which is regarded as a lower variety. In this type of society one variety is clearly dominant over the other. In the case of diagonal bilingualism a dialect or non-standard language functions together with a genetically unrelated standard language, e.g. Louisiana French and English in New Orleans (in the United States of America) or Maori and English in New Zealand. Perhaps this is the most typical type bilingualism in South Africa. In South Africa, despite the existence of standardised varieties, the relationship of the African languages to English and/or Afrikaans in this country could be also be typified as diagonal bilingualism. A full discussion of this topic (which has been the subject of considerable research in many countries) is beyond the scope of this article, but it raises a number of issues pertaining to the South African situation, such as the question of language dominance, the role and development of vernaculars and minority languages and the whole question of language maintenance and shift, which are all of vital importance to language planners and educators in South Africa.

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Quo Vadis?

In this paper we have reviewed the major issues in the field of bilingualism: the definition and classification of types of bilingualism, the measurement of bilingual proficiency, the acquisition of bilingualism and some of the debates around issues such as the effects of bilingualism and the structure of bilingual societies. The scope of this field is vast and each one of the aspects discussed is a major study in itself. We have pointed out the need for viewing the topic from a multitude of perspectives and for conducting research from a multidisciplinary approach.

In a multilingual country like South Africa, issues around bilingualism are of vital concern to linguists, educators, businessmen, politicians, language planners and the community at large. There is a need for research to be conducted into many aspects of bilingualism in this country. Sociolinguistic profiles of bilingual/multilingual communities, issues such as the assessment of proficiency bilingual models of education, the use of code-switching in the classroom, family

bilingualism the issue of semilingualism, language attitudes and many more. Training and development of translators, interpreters, teachers and educational programmes are not possible without them being grounded in proper research. In the light of current developments and the vital role that language plays in our society, we will need to take up the challenge of multilingualism even more seriously in the 21st Century. Particularly in the field of education there is a need to develop and implement curricula to adapt to the changing needs of a multilingual country, but at all levels of society language issues will have to be taken seriously if we hope to foster prosperity and harmony in our society.

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