

BILINGUALISM, A PERSPECTIVE*

HUGO GUSTAVO FABILA PATIÑO**
Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana-Iztapalapa

Resumen: El presente texto es una reflexión acerca del apasionante tema del bilingüismo que por muchos años se ha analizado y discutido. Hace un breve repaso en asuntos como el entorno y la formación de personas bilingües, la situación y el futuro del bilingüismo, así como la definición misma de este fenómeno.

PALABRAS CLAVE: BILINGÜISMO, CAMBIOS, EDUCACIÓN, FENÓMENOS, LENGUAS

Abstract: *The text herein is a reflection regarding the enthralling subject of bilingualism; a topic that has been analysed and discussed for many years. The text briefly goes over issues such as the environment and education of bilingual individuals, the situation and the future of bilingualism, as well as the very definition of this phenomenon.*

KEY WORDS: BILINGUALISM, CHANGES, EDUCATION, PHENOMENA, LANGUAGES

* This essay was originally presented as an assignment for the “Introducción al lenguaje” course, taught by Héctor Muñoz at the Linguistics Department, Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana-Iztapalapa.

** hugo_fabilap@yahoo.com.mx

PREFACE

It is said that, in ancient times, mankind—who only spoke one language—tried to build a tower in order to reach the heavens. To punish this boldness, God inflicted confusion amongst them through their speech—humans were no longer able to understand one another as various languages had been created.

The latter is the widely known tale of the Tower of Babel, which explains the existence of many languages all over the world. But that was then, though. Today, human beings have managed to surpass all trace of punishment and are now able to communicate using several of the distinct languages without any effort. This ability has always interested me. I have found people's ability to speak, to understand two languages at random, quite fascinating.

The essay herein will then present my own ideas on bilingualism (especially that of English-Spanish), aided of course, by the thoughts of those scholars who have devoted a fair share of their careers to the study of this challenging (to say the least) topic.

'Bilingualism' encompasses many aspects from various disciplines (*e.g.* sociolinguistics, psychology, sociology) which made me have many issues to address in this essay. I ultimately decided to choose amongst some of these and started to tackle them.

I begin with the ever present question: what is bilingualism? Many scholars throughout the years have dealt with the problem that coming up with a coherent definition represents. But not only that, they have also managed to get around the fact that bilingualism has been long disregarded. I continue with the current place bilingualism has in the world and particularly in Mexico.

Then, I reflect a little bit upon the question (mainly mine): is bilingualism something real? Are people regarding bilingualism as what it really is? Are there other cases with which we can confuse it? If so, what are they?

And finally, I speak about the future of bilingualism and the influence other phenomena (*e.g.* pidgin and *creole* languages) have on it.

By such innovations are languages enriched, when the words are adopted by the multitude, and naturalized by custom.

MIGUEL DE CERVANTES SAAVEDRA

Americans who travel abroad for the first time are often shocked to discover that, despite all the progress that has been made in the last 30 years, many foreign people still speak in foreign languages.

DAVE BARRY

1. ON BILINGUALISM

1.1 What is bilingualism?

Just as Josiane F. Hamers and Michael H. A. Blanc state, “the concept of bilingualism seems at first sight to be non-problematical” (1989: 6). I assume this is why people tend to use it indiscriminately. One can find a Mexican mother bragging about her son being ‘bilingual’ only because he attends a school that is believed to provide bilingual instruction; some job applicants claim to be ‘completely bilingual’ in order to get the job of their dreams, and so forth. However, are we really aware of what the term bilingual means and what it encompasses?

John Edwards states that “everyone is bilingual” and even makes the initial assumption¹ that “there is no one in the world (no adult, anyway) who does not know at least a few words in languages other than the maternal variety” (Edwards, 1995: 55). I partly agree with his clever words. True. When Mexican or American speakers answer with a ‘thank you’ or a ‘gracias’, correspondingly (among other foreign words), we realise that there is an awareness of foreign languages. But bilingualism goes far beyond that. I thought of two definitions mentioned by Hamers and Blanc. The first one proposed is the following: “Macnamara (1967a) proposes that a bilingual is anyone who possesses a minimal competence in one of the four language skills, *i.e.* listening com-

¹ This is merely Edward’s initial assumption indeed, as he later admits that this notion would not lead several people to deem this as bilingualism.

prehension, speaking, reading and writing in another language than his mother tongue” (1989: 6); whereas the second one is: “proposed by Titone (1972) for whom bilingualism is ‘the individual’s capacity to speak a second language while following the concepts and structures of that language rather than paraphrasing his or her mother tongue’” (1989: 7).

I can do nothing but agree with the latter. The way I see it, when defining bilingualism, it is impossible for us to go for Macnamara’s views, as having a certain level of proficiency in any of the four skills does not guarantee that we will be able to be called ‘bilingual’. Let’s imagine we excel at writing, but listening comprehension is practically impossible for us. What would happen should we find ourselves forced to listen rather than to write or read? Can we then assume we are ‘bilingual’ if we are unable to communicate in a foreign language? Before answering these questions, it should be borne in mind that listening is an essential part of oral communication; if we happen to fail to listen to others, we would not be able to communicate, thus winding up as non-bilingual.

Then, who can be deemed bilingual? I do not believe it is just a matter of language proficiency, but a group of factors that intertwine influencing a person towards developing the ability of managing the proper use of two or more languages. Factors such as cultural background in which the individual is developing (*i.e.* a Mexican with American-born parents or living in the United States), the education this individual is receiving, his own cultural identity and the age in which all of these factors occur. We should also consider that when we talk about bilingualism, we are, as a matter of fact, talking about two languages that will be struggling to prevail. The bilingual speaker will choose both, which one and when to use it; but by doing that he will, momentarily or not, dismiss the other language —put it on hold, that is.

I will turn to both the educational factors and the struggling languages later in this text. For the time being, it is quite clear to me that although no exact definition can be provided for bilingualism, it is true that we can consider many factors in order to understand it, thus, speaking about it with a little bit more of knowledge —we will no longer find ourselves repeating the dictionary definition: “[of a person] able to use two languages for communication” (Walter, 2008: 132). And at least I can be thankful for that.

1.2 *Bilingualism in Mexico*

If we ever want to find a place where bilingualism issues are always relevant, Mexico is the one. Not only are The United States of America our influential neighbours, but they are also allowed to bring a lot of their culture into our country. Artistic expressions such as music, films and TV programmes have “invaded” our own culture finding a very comfortable niche where to stay. Besides, The United States has managed to become both, an authority and a standard worldwide in terms of economy, trade, science, etcetera.

It should come as no surprise then, that Mexicans (and practically everyone else on Earth) have taken *American* English as *the lingua franca*, as Robert McCrum points out:

British English had enjoyed global supremacy throughout the 19th century age of empire, after centuries of slow growth from Chaucer and Shakespeare [...] the power and influence of English passed to The United States, largely through the agency of the two world wars. Then, throughout the Cold War, Anglo-American culture became part of global consciousness through the mass media-movies, newspapers, and magazines [...] Now you could still hate George W. Bush and burn the American flag while simultaneously idolizing American pop stars. (McCrum, 2010: 26)

And that is exactly what has happened, what we have done.

On the one hand, and considering that language changes as the world turns, the most important goal of Mexican people for the last ten years (roughly) has been to create bilingual citizens, or so it has been understood. People tend to believe that teaching English in schools has got to work in order for younger generations to succeed globally. Therefore, a whole new generation has been raised with the I-must-learn-how-to-speak-English motto; and bilingualism has taken an important ‘educational’ relevance in this country, whether we like it or not.

On the other hand, we must consider those who either marry or emigrate to the United States (or other English-speaking countries). If they happen to form a family abroad (or here) with a foreign mate and have children, there will be two types of bilingual people, the couple —perhaps— and the children; the latter being the most important part of the equation, as they are to grow up within a bilingual environment.

2. IS BILINGUALISM A REAL THING? TAKING A GLANCE AT THE BILINGUAL MIND

I used to believe there was no such thing as ‘bilingualism’. Somehow, my mind was not able to reconcile with the idea of people not speaking two languages perfectly, or without recurring to one of them at certain points. Nevertheless, these viewpoints have changed radically.

Probably the views I expressed in the previous paragraph find a match to someone else’s. Well, let us know we had been horribly mistaken, as there are phenomena that happen in the mind of the bilingual individual. These phenomena, although somewhat apologetic about forgetting words in a certain language or recurring to another one, are real, relevant and unavoidable.

2.1 *The bilingual mind*

As Edwards mentions: “studies of bilingual production and access have been, as one might expect, inconclusive” (1995: 71). I think the bottom line here is that scientists and linguists have to make a joint effort and try to access individual’s minds. As Rafael Javier points out: “bilingualism is a unique phenomenon whose complexity cannot be fully understood by just looking at the way language is developed in general” (2007: 23).

In the same fashion, Edwards also mentions that “bilingual or multilingual capacities may have anatomical consequences which, in turn, may lead to different ways of processing and producing different varieties” (1995: 72). Edwards then helped me realise that it is on this point that exact sciences and social sciences converge. There have been multiple examples of people who go through medical ordeals (such as seizures) and deal with normal speech impending issues (related to bilingualism) of any sort: they either remember the language they learnt last or they start speaking in different accents (the famous Foreign Accent Syndrome; FAC).²

So I believe that, and agreeing with Javier, “many psycholinguists are focusing their attention on the effort of bilingualism (the acquisition of two linguistic codes) on processes such as perception, memory, intelligence,

² Examples of FAC can be found at the following websites [<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-1311835/Gran-Kay-Russell-goes-bed-migraine-wakes-French-accent.html>] which includes a video by the BBC on this topic, and [<http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/story?id=6241218>] consultado el 19 de octubre de 2010.

learning and personality formation” (Javier, 2007: 23). We have yet many things to achieve and accomplish, and many things to discover.

2.2 Bilingual phenomena

Considering a number of studies of bilingual individuals, scholars and researchers have made fascinating findings. One of them, which has interested me a lot, is that of ‘mixing and interference’. Susan Döpke mentions that “the mixing of elements of both languages on the word or sentence level and the switching from one language into the other at the constituent or sentence boundary are often taken as evidence that the individual is overburdened” (Döpke, 1992: 6). I guess this has to do with the fact that bilingual people are generally in a consistent environment and do not have to switch to another language until a fair amount of time has passed. This may be why Döpke states that “the issue of interference and separation is as much a sociolinguistic one as it is a linguistic one” (Döpke, 1992: 8). Only depending on their environment will bilingual individuals be compelled to use another language, and make the switch.

However, this switch can be somewhat unfortunate (perhaps only at the beginning) encircling more than the morphological ground; as there might be semantic or phonological mistakes as well, that is, people might not be able to pronounce words appropriately nor to convey the meaning they wanted to convey using a certain word in the first place. This may be due to the fact that, as Javier points out, switching “requires a certain level of functional proficiency in each of the languages, which then allows the interplay between the languages while adhering to the grammatical, syntactical and phonetic rules of each of the languages involved” (Javier, 2007: 53).

We then have that, although a potentially difficult feat, bilinguals generally manage to make the switch, which is always nice to witness. According to Javier, “it is quite amazing and fascinating to observe bilingual individuals changing languages in the middle of a conversation with other bilinguals as they go from one topic to another, or as they interact with monolingual members from any of their languages” (Javier, 2007: 53).

The mixing and interference phenomena have been dealt with, so far. Nonetheless, I have yet to discuss the so-called ‘borrowing’; and according to Edwards, we can depart from the concepts mentioned above: “we divide the subject up, and whatever labels we apply—code interference, code-switching,

mixing, transference, etc.— it is clear that in all cases something is borrowed from a language” (Edwards, 1995: 76). And he is right. Although not at the most conscious level there is, people all over the world have found themselves borrowing words from other languages. In Mexico, this *trend* stopped being that and turned into a *habit*—one that is imperceptible in today’s every day speech, and one which we have come to accept wholeheartedly—. Today it is common for Mexicans to say “*pisa el clutch*” (‘step on the clutch’, instead of the Spanish “*embrague*”); “*tiene un feeling extraño*” (‘it’s got a strange feeling/vibe’, instead of saying the Spanish “*sensación*”). Then again, bilinguals are not entirely at fault. This is how languages are supposed to evolve and progress, isn’t it?

2.3 *To be or not to be? Bilingual, that is*

Having analysed the acknowledged bilingualism phenomena, and having had the following in mind even before writing this essay, I would very much like to tackle an issue that can raise a lot of interest as well. I am referring to the question: when has bilingualism stopped being bilingualism?

When talking about English specifically, we can say that it has widespread all around the globe. As I had previously mentioned in this text, many people are keen on learning the English language and using it on a daily basis. If we recall Macnamara’s words (invoked by Hamers and Blanc earlier in this text) we might presume that everyone who has a minimal awareness on how to use the English language, whether the usage is wrong, has the right to be called a bilingual. I don’t think so.

The English spoken nowadays all around the globe is not even English *per se*; as McCrum mentions:

Contagious, adaptable, populist, and subversive, the English language has become as much a part of the global consciousness as the combustion engine. And as English gains momentum as a second language all around the world, it is morphing into a new and simplified version of itself—one that responds to the 24/7 demands of a global economy and culture with a stripped-down vocabulary of words like ‘airplane,’ ‘chat room,’ ‘taxi,’ and ‘cell phone’. (McCrum, 2010: 25)

Well, what have we here? I believe people speaking that language are not as proficient in English as to be deemed completely bilingual, or English-Spanish bilingual. They are actually speaking a pidgin, what McCrum and many other linguists call *Globish*. McCrum writes: “Having neatly made the transition from the Queen’s English to the more democratic American version, it is now becoming a worldwide power, a populist tool increasingly known as Globish” (2010: 25). This is a proof that speakers (of English or any other language that use English) have reached a milestone. The fact that a variant of a language is used thanks to the diffusion it has had at a global scale sounds marvellous to me. At first, I thought we were not supposed to look away and that we were responsible for acknowledging the fact that this *new language* did not have any grammar rules whatsoever—having universal speakers, they can only follow the grammar inherited from the English they were taught or from their own grammar—. Then I started thinking, is that really a big deal? We find ourselves modifying grammar (both in English, Spanish, you name it) as we please so, should these people that are trying to communicate (or learning the language) through their own version of English be condemned? Not at all.

The latter makes me recall what David Crystal mentions: “English is now spoken by more people (as a first, second or foreign language) than any other language, and is recognised by more countries as a desirable lingua franca than any other language” (1999: 12). So, what lies in future for us, our language and bilingualism?

3. BILINGUALISM’S FUTURE

There are many current arguments, such as the importance of looking at the bilingual experience and the consideration of the benefits that bilingualism can bring to society. Alas, as Colin Baker points out:

The argument that bilingualism results in cognitive difficulty, split identity, cultural dislocation and poor self-image at the individual level, and in regional and national disunity and intergroup conflict at the society level has not found much support in literature. (Baker, 1993: 400)

Nevertheless, I think both sides make an excellent point. People should find the balance between their own cultural realities and try to preserve that which has walked past them, *i.e.*, Mexican immigrants in The United States should do everything in their hands to continue to speak Spanish and to pass it on to future generations. They should also add themselves to the culture they now belong to, without forgetting, of course, that of their own.

There is one thing for sure: the world will continue to change as well as its peoples, places and languages. Some of them will come and some of them will leave us forever. It is almost certain that this “only English (or Globish?)” implicit policy will still be in force tomorrow, mainly due to the American English domination. Therefore, foreign language teachers are unlikely to become extinct which will help people to integrate and embrace a different culture; a different language.

As Javier mentions: “bilingual groups are now demanding more understanding from our society in terms of their unique cultural and linguistic needs. They are also demanding more linguistically appropriate programmatic interventions, better teachers and more study abroad programs” (Javier, 2007: 133). I am confident this requests, thanks to globalisation, not only will be met, but also exceeded. They will go from being a simple request to a necessity (that is, if it is not a necessity *already*).

Anyhow, should the above happen, bilinguals and potential bilinguals can remain calmed, we have bilingualism to spare.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Baker, Colin (1993), *Foundations of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, Clevedon, England, Multilingual Matters Ltd.
- Crystal, David (1999), “The future of englishes”, in Chris Kennedy (ed.), *Innovation and Best Practice*, London, England, Longman.
- De Cervantes, Miguel (1952), *The history of Don Quixote*, Chicago, Estados Unidos, Great Books of the Western World.
- Döpke, Susanne (1992), *One Parent-One Language: An Interactional Approach (Studies in Bilingualism)*, num. 3, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, The Netherlands/United States, John Benjamins Publishing.

- Edwards, John (1995), *Multilingualism*, London/New York, England/United States, Routledge.
- Hammers, Josiane F. and Michel H. A. Blanc (1989), *Bilinguality and Bilingualism*, Cambridge, United States, Cambridge University Press.
- Homel, Peter, Michael Palij and Doris Aaronson (1987), *Childhood Bilingualism: Aspects of Linguistic, Cognitive and Social Development*, Hillsdale, United States, Lawrence Erlbaum Associate Publishers.
- Javier, Rafael (2007), *The Bilingual Mind: Thinking, Feeling and Speaking in Two Languages*, New York, United States, Springer.
- McCrum, Robert (2010), *Speak Globish?*, *Newsweek*, [<http://www.newsweek.com/2010/06/12/glob-ish.html>] accessed online on June 12, 2010.
- Walter, Elizabeth (ed.) (2008), *Cambridge Advanced Learner's*, Singapore, Cambridge University Press.