

# **PART I**

## The Bilingual Person

## Introduction

This first part contains two chapters. Chapter 2, “A Wholistic View of Bilingualism”, was first published in 1985 under the title, “The bilingual as a competent but specific speaker-hearer”. Parts of it appeared again in other publications such as, “Neurolinguists, beware! The bilingual is not two monolinguals in one person” (see the Appendix at the end of the book for the references). The article was written only three years after the publication of *Life with Two Languages: An Introduction to Bilingualism* (Harvard University Press) and was, in many ways, a belated epilogue to the book. A number of points that emerged whilst writing the book deserved further attention: the dominant role played by the monolingual view of bilingualism in our study of people who use two or more languages; the importance of a newer—wholistic—view of bilingualism which states that bilinguals are fully competent speakers-hearers; and the contribution this latter view makes when we compare monolinguals and bilinguals, study language learning and language forgetting, and attempt to understand the bilingual’s speech modes as well as the so-called “semilingualism” of the bilingual child. Topics such as the complementarity principle, language restructuring, and language mode are mentioned in this chapter and are dealt with in more detail in the next two chapters.

Chapter 3, “The Complementarity Principle and Language Restructuring”, stresses the fact that bilinguals usually acquire and use their languages for different purposes, in different domains of life, and with different people. It describes the consequences this has on both language performance and language competence. Two studies that have examined the impact of the complementarity principle on bilingual language production—language mixing in particular—are summarized. Research that examines language restructuring, that is, the long-term influence of one language on the other (in our case, a second language on a first language) is then reviewed. It was conducted by Bernard Py and myself, and by one of our Master’s students in Neuchâtel, Switzerland.

## A Wholistic View of Bilingualism\*

Only rarely do researchers working on the many facets of bilingualism take the opportunity to sit back from their on-going work and reflect on some fundamental issues regarding bilingualism and the bilingual person. Among the many issues that should be kept at the forefront of research, we find the following:

1. What do we mean when we use the terms “bilingual” and “bilingualism”?
2. Is the bilingual person the “sum” of two monolinguals or a specific speaker-hearer in his or her own right?
3. Can one adequately compare monolinguals and bilinguals, and if so, can one continue to do so with traditional procedures?
4. Can the linguistic tools and methods developed to study monolinguals be used without reservation to study bilinguals?

These are some of the questions I wish to raise as I examine the bilingual as a specific speaker-hearer. I will first discuss and criticize a particular view of bilingualism that has been prevalent in the field for decades; this I will term the monolingual (or fractional) view of bilingualism. I will then propose a different, much less accepted, view of bilingualism which I will name the bilingual (or wholistic) view. Finally, I will examine a number of areas of bilingual research that are affected by

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this different perspective. Before proceeding, however, it is important that I state what I mean by the terms “bilingualism” and “bilingual”. Bilingualism is the regular use of two or more languages (or dialects), and bilinguals are those people who use two or more languages (or dialects) in their everyday lives. A more detailed description of these concepts is given in later pages of this chapter.

## **2.1 The monolingual (or fractional) view of bilingualism**

I wish to argue that a monolingual (or fractional) view of bilingualism has played too great a role in our study of people who use two languages in their everyday lives. According to a strong version of this view, the bilingual has (or should have) two separate and isolable language competencies; these competencies are (or should be) similar to those of the two corresponding monolinguals; therefore, the bilingual is (or should be) two monolinguals in one person.

It is interesting to ask why this view of bilingualism has been so prevalent among researchers and educators, as well as among laypersons, be they monolingual or bilingual. Perhaps the main reason is that language sciences have developed primarily through the study of monolinguals who have been the models of the “normal” speaker-hearer. The methods of investigation developed to study monolingual speech and language have been used with little, if any, modification to study bilinguals; strong monolingual biases have influenced bilingual research, and the yardstick against which bilinguals have been measured has inevitably been the ideal—monolingual—speaker-hearer. (One should add to this the strong impact of writing systems which are always monolingual.) It is worth asking how the research on bilingualism would have evolved and what state it would be in today, had the scholars in the field all been bi- or multilingual (in fact *and* in spirit) and had the research been conducted in societies where bi- or multilingualism is the norm and not the exception.

The monolingual (or fractional) view of bilingualism has had a number of consequences, among which we find:

### **(a) Bilinguals have been described and evaluated in terms of the fluency and balance they have in their two languages**

The “real” bilingual has long been seen as the one who is equally and fully fluent in two languages. He or she is the “ideal”, the “true”, the “balanced”, the “perfect” bilingual. All the others (in fact, the vast

majority of people who use two languages in their everyday life) are “not really” bilingual or are “special types” of bilinguals; hence the numerous qualifiers found in the literature: “dominant”, “unbalanced”, “semilingual”, “alingual”, etc. This search for the “true” bilingual has used traditional language tests as well as psycholinguistic tests which are constructed around the notion of “balance”; among these we find tests in which visual stimuli have to be named as fast as possible in one language or the other, or tests in which associations have to be given to stimuli in each of the two languages. Invariably, the ideal bilingual subject is the one who does as well in one language as in the other. All other subjects are somehow “less bilingual” and are put into an indeterminate category—they are neither monolingual nor “really bilingual”!

**(b) Language skills in bilinguals have almost always been appraised in terms of monolingual standards**

The tests used with bilinguals are often quite simply those employed with the monolinguals of the two corresponding language groups. These tests rarely take into account the bilingual’s *differential needs* for the two languages or the *different social functions* of these languages (what a language is used for, with whom and where). The results obtained from these tests invariably show that bilinguals are less proficient than the corresponding monolinguals. This, in turn, is seen as a problem by the monolingual environment. It would appear that much of the controversy surrounding so-called “semilingualism” or “alingualism” in children is affected by the prevalence of the monolingual viewpoint and by the monolingual tests which have been used. These may be appropriate for monolingual children but not for other kinds of children: those who are monolingual in the other language, those who are in the process of becoming bilingual, or those who have attained a stable level of bilingualism. Monolingual tests are, for the most part, quite inappropriate to evaluate the language skills of bilinguals.

**(c) The effects of bilingualism have been closely scrutinized**

Because the monolingual viewpoint considers bilingualism as the exception (when, in fact, half of the world’s population is bilingual) and because bilinguals should be two monolinguals in one person, the cognitive and developmental consequences of bilingualism have received close scrutiny. (As a bilingual myself, I have often wondered why the cognitive consequences of *monolingualism* have not been investigated with the same care!) Numerous studies have “pushed” the apparent

negative effects or the apparent positive effects of bilingualism, and have done so with such force that it is rare to find an educator or a layperson who does not have an opinion on the subject. What we fail to remember is that numerous problems still surround the “effects” literature: children have rarely been tested in the appropriate language or languages (how many tests use mixed language with children whose normal input and output is mixed language? how many tests use the language variety the child is used to?, etc.); matching and sampling procedures remain questionable despite all the criticisms that have been made; and few studies manage to show a direct, unambiguous, causal relationship between using two languages in one’s everyday life and various cognitive effects.

**(d) The contact of the bilingual’s two languages is seen as accidental and anomalous**

Because bilinguals are (or should be) two separate monolinguals in one person, covert or overt contact between their two languages should be rare. The two language systems should be autonomous and should remain so at all times. If there is contact, it is accidental and is simply the result of language interference; “borrowings” and “code-switches”, which are often . . . intentional in conversations with other bilinguals, are either included in the interference category or are explained away as the product of “sloppy” language.

**(e) Research on bilingualism is in large part conducted in terms of the bilingual’s individual and separate languages**

The monolingual view of bilingualism has influenced the many domains of bilingualism research. For example, researchers studying language acquisition have too often concentrated solely on the development of the new language system and, with some exceptions, have paid no real attention to what happens concurrently to the first language as it restructures itself in contact with L2. In addition, researchers have invariably used the monolingual child as the yardstick against which to judge the bilingual. Sociolinguists have long been interested in what the bilingual’s languages are used for, when they are used, with whom, etc. and yet many surveys are still done solely in terms of the two separate languages; they then have problems categorizing the “both languages at the same time” answers. Psycholinguists have been interested in how the bilingual’s two languages are activated one at a time, how one language gets switched on while the other gets switched off, and hence have paid little attention to the simultaneous activation of the two languages

as in the case of borrowing and code-switching. Linguists have shown little interest in the bilingual's language competence in the Chomskyan sense, maybe because the bilingual can never be an "ideal speaker-hearer" in the same way that the monolingual supposedly can; there is no real acceptance among linguists that the bilingual's two grammars can be quite different from the corresponding monolingual grammars or that language competence (and especially first language competence) can actually change when it comes into contact with another language. Finally, many speech therapists and neurolinguists are still using standard monolingual tests with their bilingual subjects; these tests very rarely take into account the situations and domains the languages are used in, nor do they take into account the type and amount of code-mixing the person is involved in on a daily basis. Thus, much of what we know about bilingualism today is tainted—in part at least—by a monolingual, fractional, view of bilingualism.

**(f) Bilinguals rarely evaluate their language competencies as adequate**  
The monolingual view of bilingualism is assumed and amplified by most bilinguals, and they exteriorize this in different ways. Some criticize their own language competence: "Yes, I use English every day at work, but I speak it so badly that I'm not really bilingual"; "I mix my languages all the time, so I'm not a real bilingual", etc.; others strive their hardest to reach monolingual norms (how many bilinguals have been put down by other bilinguals who strive to be "pure" monolinguals?); and still others hide their knowledge of their "weaker" language.

To conclude this section, it is important to stress how negative—often destructive—the monolingual view of bilingualism has been, and in many areas, still is. It is time that we accept the fact that bilinguals are not two monolinguals in one person, but different, perfectly competent speaker-hearers in their own right. It is this view that I will now develop.

## 2.2 The bilingual (or wholistic) view of bilingualism

The bilingual or wholistic view of bilingualism proposes that the bilingual is an integrated whole which cannot easily be decomposed into two separate parts. The bilingual is *not* the sum of two complete or incomplete monolinguals; rather, he or she has a unique and specific linguistic configuration. The co-existence and constant interaction of the two languages in the bilingual has produced a different

but complete language system. An analogy comes from the domain of track and field. The high hurdler blends two types of competencies, that of high jumping and that of sprinting. When compared individually with the sprinter or the high jumper, the hurdler meets neither level of competence, and yet when taken as a whole the hurdler is an athlete in his or her own right. No expert in track and field would ever compare a high hurdler to a sprinter or to a high jumper, even though the former blends certain characteristics of the latter two. A high hurdler is an integrated whole, a unique and specific athlete, who can attain the highest levels of world competition in the same way that the sprinter and the high jumper can. In many ways, the bilingual is like the high hurdler: an integrated whole, a unique and specific speaker-hearer, and not the sum of two complete or incomplete monolinguals. Another analogy comes from the neighboring domain of biculturalism. The bicultural person (the Mexican-American, for example) is not two monoculturals; instead, he or she combines and blends aspects of the two cultures to produce a unique cultural configuration.

According to the wholistic view, then, the bilingual is a fully competent speaker-hearer; he or she has developed competencies (in the two languages and possibly in a third system that is a combination of the first two) to the extent required by his or her needs and those of the environment. The bilingual uses the two languages—separately or together—for different purposes, in different domains of life, with different people. Because the needs and uses of the two languages are usually quite different, the bilingual is rarely equally or completely fluent in the two languages. Levels of fluency in a language will depend on the need for that language and will be extremely domain specific, hence the “fossilized” competencies of many bilinguals in each of their two languages (see Chapter 3).

Because the bilingual is a human communicator (as is the monolingual), he or she has developed a communicative competence that is sufficient for everyday life. This competence will make use of one language, of the other language or of the two together (in the form of mixed speech) depending on the situation, the topic, the interlocutor, etc. The bilingual’s communicative competence cannot be evaluated correctly through only one language; it must be studied instead through the bilingual’s total language repertoire as it is used in his or her everyday life.

A number of areas of research are affected by this wholistic view of bilingualism; a few will be discussed below.



### 2.2.1 *Comparing monolinguals and bilinguals*

A wholistic view of bilingualism should lead, hopefully, to a more complete and fairer comparison of bilinguals and monolinguals in terms of language competence, language performance, language learning, etc. The comparison will need to stress the many specificities of the bilingual:

- the structure and organization of the bilingual's language competencies; it may well be that these competencies are in some ways different from those of the two corresponding monolinguals;
- the structure and organization of the bilingual's mixed language competence; that is, the language system(s) that is (are) activated when the bilingual is in a bilingual (mixed) speech mode and is borrowing and code-switching with other bilinguals;
- the bilingual's language processing systems when the language input and output are monolingual (as when the bilingual is speaking to monolinguals; we know that in such cases the other language is never totally deactivated);
- the linguistic and psycholinguistic operations involved in producing and perceiving mixed speech.

But the comparison of bilinguals and monolinguals will also need to stress the many similarities that exist between the two at the level of communicative competence. A first question that needs to be answered is the following: Does the stable bilingual (and not the person in the process of learning or restructuring a language) meet his or her everyday communicative needs with two languages—used separately or together—and this to the same extent as the monolingual with just one language? Because the bilingual, like the monolingual, is a human communicator with similar needs to communicate with others, I hypothesize that the answer to this question can only be affirmative. The bilingual will develop a communicative competence that is equivalent to that of other speaker-hearers, be they monolingual, bilingual, or multilingual, even though the outward manifestations of this competence may at first appear quite abnormal to the monolingual researcher (as in the case of mixed speech, which so often is seen as a reflection of semilingualism or alingualism). To answer the communicative needs question, we will need to develop new testing procedures. Traditional language tests that put more stress on the *form* of the language than on the speaker's ability to communicate in context are not appropriate.

Having shown that bilinguals do indeed have the same communicative competence as monolinguals, one will then need to study in more detail how the two types of speaker-hearers implement this competence; that is, how the bilingual and the monolingual meet their everyday communicative needs so differently on the surface: the former with his or her two languages, used separately or together, and the monolingual with just the one language. The issue has started to be addressed and we will return to it below.

### *2.2.2 Language learning and language forgetting*

If the bilingual is indeed an integrated whole, then it is interesting to study the wax and wane of languages in that person; in other words, how changes in the language environment, and therefore in language needs, affect his or her linguistic competence in the one language and in the other, but not in his or her communicative competence in general. The following hypothesis can be made: a person can go in and out of bilingualism, can shift totally from one language to the other (in the sense of acquiring one language and forgetting the other totally), but will never depart (except in transitional periods of language learning or restructuring) from a necessary level of communicative competence needed by the environment. Because bilinguals, like monolinguals, have an innate capacity for language and are, by essence, communicators, they will develop competence in each of their languages to the extent needed by the environment (the competence in one language may therefore be quite rudimentary, as the interlanguage literature has shown) but they will always maintain a necessary level of communicative competence. New situations, new environments, new interlocutors will involve new linguistic needs in one language, in the other, or in both simultaneously, and will therefore change the language configuration of the persons involved; but this will in no way modify his or her communicative competence. After a period of adjustment (of language restructuring) the person will meet his or her new communicative needs to the fullest.

It is critical to differentiate between the process of restructuring a language and the outcome of restructuring, in other words, between becoming bilingual or readjusting one's bilingualism and attaining stability in one's bilingualism. It is also important to study what is happening to the two languages (and to the interaction of the two) during this period of readjustment. In the long run, the really interesting question

of language learning and language forgetting is how the human communicator adjusts to and uses one, two, or more languages—separately or together—to maintain a necessary level of communicative competence, and not what level of grammatical competence is reached in each language taken individually and out of context. Unfortunately, too much stress has been put on the latter in bilingual research, especially when children are being studied.

### 2.2.3 *The bilingual's speech modes*<sup>1</sup>

An aspect of bilingual behavior that takes on added dimensions when seen from the wholistic perspective concerns the bilingual's speech modes (see also Chapter 4). In everyday life, bilinguals find themselves at various points along a situational continuum which induces a particular speech mode. At one end of the continuum, bilinguals are in a totally monolingual speech mode in that they are speaking to monolinguals of *either* language A *or* language B. At the other end of the continuum, bilinguals find themselves in a bilingual speech mode in that they are speaking to bilinguals who share languages A and B and with whom they normally mix languages (code-switch and borrow). For convenience, we will refer to the two ends of the continuum when speaking of the monolingual or bilingual speech modes, but we should keep in mind that these are endpoints and that intermediary modes do exist between the two.

It is important to note two things before describing these endpoints. First, bilinguals differ among themselves as to the extent they travel along the continuum; some rarely find themselves at the bilingual end (purists, language teachers, etc.) whereas others rarely leave this end (bilinguals who live in tight knit bilingual communities where the language norm is mixed language). Second, it is critical to know which speech mode a bilingual is in before making any claims about the individual's language processing or language competence. For example, what might be seen as the accidental (or permanent) interference of one language on the other during language production may in fact be a perfectly conscious borrowing or code-switch in the bilingual speech mode. Rare are the bilingual corpora that clearly indicate the speech mode the bilinguals were in when their speech was recorded; as a consequence, many unfounded

<sup>1</sup> In later writings (see Chapters 4, 5, and 14), "speech mode" is referred to as "language mode" so as not to exclude written language and sign language.

claims are made about the bilingual's knowledge of his or her languages.

In the monolingual speech mode, bilinguals adopt the language of the monolingual interlocutor. They also deactivate, as best they can, the other language. This deactivation has led to much theorizing and much controversy around the notion of a language switch or a monitor system. What is certain, however, is that bilinguals rarely deactivate the other language totally, and this leads to the following question: In what way is the language processing of bilinguals in the monolingual speech mode different from that of monolinguals, given that there is always some residual activation of the other language in bilinguals? The specific processing operations that will be uncovered in the future will only strengthen the view that the bilingual is a unique speaker-hearer.

In the bilingual speech mode, where both languages are activated, bilinguals become quite different speaker-hearers. Once a particular language has been chosen as the base language, they bring in the other language in various ways. One of these ways is to code-switch, that is to shift completely to the other language for a word, a phrase, a sentence (for example, "*Va chercher Marc and bribe him avec un chocolat chaud with cream on top*"). Code-switching has received considerable attention from linguists who have asked questions such as: What rules or constraints govern the switching? Is there a code-switching grammar? Sociolinguists have also studied code-switching extensively and have concentrated on when and why it takes place in the social context. The actual production and perception of code-switches have received much less attention and psycholinguists will ultimately have to answer questions such as: How does the bilingual speaker program and execute an utterance that contains code-switches? At what point in the acoustic-phonetic stream does the speaker actually switch from one language to the other? How complete is the switch? How does the bilingual listener perceive and comprehend a mixed language input? What strategies and operations lead him or her to process the utterance appropriately? How does the listener keep up with the interlocutor who is producing code-switches? These and other questions will find the beginnings of answers in the chapters that follow.

The other way a bilingual can mix languages is to borrow a word from the other language and to adapt it phonologically and morphologically into the base language ("bruncher" or "switcher" in French, for example). Again, the linguistic aspects of borrowings have been investigated carefully, but much less is known about their processing. One

question of interest here is: How do bilingual listeners access (look up) a borrowing in the appropriate lexicon when the acoustic-phonetic (and sometimes morphological) information signals a word from the base lexicon? Note that this question only pertains to speech borrowings as opposed to language borrowings; the latter are already part of the base language lexicon and are therefore accessed normally.

Future bilingual research on the production and perception of languages will have to take into account the speech mode the bilingual is in when speaking or listening. As things stand, many published studies have not controlled for this variable and much of the data obtained is thus quite ambiguous. It is time that the complexity of the bilingual's speech modes is taken into account by researchers.

#### 2.2.4 *The bilingual child and "semilingualism"*

So much has been written about the "semilingualism" or "alingualism" of certain bilingual children and adolescents. And yet before coming to rapid conclusions about language deficit in these children, it is important that we consider the points made so far on comparing bilinguals to monolinguals, on language learning and language forgetting, and on the bilingual's speech modes. We will then be ready to answer the following questions:

- Is the child in the process of becoming bilingual (structuring or restructuring his or her language competencies), either because he or she is learning two languages simultaneously and is in the fusion stage (a stage (sometimes) found in infant bilinguals<sup>2</sup>), or because he or she is simply in the process of learning a second language (or a different variety of the first language)? Could so-called "language deficit" simply be a reflection of language learning or language restructuring in process?
- Is the child mostly in a "bilingual speech mode" at home? Is the language input usually mixed and the output therefore also mixed? Is the child only just discovering the monolingual versions of the two languages? Can one expect the child to know how to behave in the monolingual mode when he or she has had no experience with this mode? Learning to use only *one* language at a time, when the two have always been used in a mixed language mode, takes

<sup>2</sup> Since writing this article, evidence has been produced showing that children acquiring two or more languages simultaneously may not go through a fusion stage.

time to get used to and needs the appropriate environment and feedback.

- Finally, is the child meeting his or her communicative needs in the home environment? Could “language deficit” simply be a reflection of the absence of particular formal skills that the child has never needed until he or she arrived in school?

These questions, among others, must be asked before concluding that a child really is “semilingual”. It is important that we do not talk of “language deficit” until we are sure the child has had the chance, and has been given every opportunity, to learn and use the new language or new language variety that is employed in school. Learning or restructuring a language (or variety) takes time, and yet the child is often tagged as “semilingual” or “alingual” *before* he or she has had the time to adjust to the new language environment. Time is a critical factor, as are need and motivation: the child must feel the necessity to learn the new language and must be motivated to do so. If neither need nor motivation is present, then the child will not become bilingual, but through no fault of his or hers. It is clearly up to the school system and the adult environment to motivate language acquisition and to create the opportunity for the child to learn the new language or language variety. Does the child meet his or her everyday communicative needs by remaining monolingual (in the minority language)? In a sense, the answer is “yes”, but communicating in school, with the majority language, is just not one of those needs. The child has not been given the opportunity to become bilingual and therefore remains monolingual.

## Conclusion

To conclude, I wish to express a hope, the hope that the bilingual or wholistic view of bilingualism will increasingly affect our thinking and our research on bilingualism, and that consequently we will consider the bilingual as an integrated whole, a unique and specific speaker-hearer, a communicator of a different sort.

This will have a number of positive consequences:

1. It will encourage us to study the bilingual as a whole. We will no longer examine one of the bilingual’s languages without examining the other(s); rather we will study how the bilingual structures and uses the two or more languages, separately or together, to meet his or her everyday communicative needs.

2. It will force us to use tests that are appropriate to the domains of language use: domains that involve mixed language will be tested in mixed language; domains requiring a monolingual speech mode will be tested monolingually, etc. Great care will be taken not to give bilinguals (and especially bi- or monolingual children) batteries of tests that have little to do with their knowledge and use of the two languages.
3. It will stimulate us to identify (or control) the speech mode the bilingual is in before recording or testing him or her. Too many studies have failed to pay attention to the speech mode issue and the results or data they have obtained are therefore difficult to appraise (see Chapter 4).
4. It will force us to differentiate between the person or child who is in the process of becoming bilingual, and the one who has reached a (more or less) stable level of bilingualism (whatever the ultimate level of proficiency attained in the two languages).
5. Finally, it will encourage us to study the bilingual as such and not always in relation to the monolingual, unless it is at a level of analysis that makes the comparison possible (for example, the level of communicative competence as opposed to formal competence). We should keep in mind that half the world's population is bilingual and that using the monolingual as a yardstick is questionable.

Each type of human communicator, whether he or she uses a spoken or a sign language, one or two languages, has a particular language competence, a unique and specific linguistic configuration. Our role as researchers is to recognize this and to develop our methods of analysis to reflect this. It is only when we start studying bilingualism in itself and for itself that we will make additional headway in this field.