

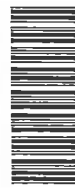
# Bilingualism

## Second Edition

*Suzanne Romaine*  
Merton College, University of Oxford

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(1959) gave bilinguals nonsense words such as *dansonodent* and asked them to identify as many English and French words as possible. If the persons detected as many English as French words in a given amount of time, they were considered balanced bilinguals. Another type of test relies on an ambiguous stimulus such as *pîpe*, which could be a French or an English word, given to a bilingual in a reading list. If a bilingual pronounces it as French, he or she is taken to be dominant in French. These two tests happen not to pose too many problems when the languages are as similar as French and English. When the languages concerned are more divergent with respect to their graphological conventions and phonotactic patterns, there is more difficulty. There may well be no ambiguous stimuli, or one of the languages may be written in an entirely different script like Russian. Moreover, the bilingual may not be able to read in one of the languages.

Synonym tests rely on the assumption that a bilingual will have a larger and stronger network of semantic associations in the dominant language. In one kind of task, subjects are asked to name as many words which are synonymous with a given stimulus. Languages, however, differ in the number of synonyms which exist in a semantic field. English happens to be a particularly rich language due to the borrowing of Latin and French vocabulary. This gives rise to semantically related items like *commence*, *start*, *begin*, etc., which are stylistically differentiated. There is also the difficulty that a person may be able to use synonyms in context, but may not be able to recall them in a list fashion.

Lambert, Havelka and Gardener (1959) found that rating scales, fluency, flexibility and dominance tests yielded measures of bilingualism which could be intercorrelated. Thus, they concluded that although these tests appeared to be assessing distinct skills, they were measuring a single factor. This indicates that competence is not divisible into isolated components (see 6.5).

It is obvious that there are other problems with each of the tests I have discussed. Although self-ratings have often been found to be highly related to independent assessments of language skills and tests of language proficiency, they sometimes are not for various reasons I have noted.

Jakobovits (1969) has questioned whether it is valid to measure dominance by taking the difference between two language scores, especially in tests involving speed of response. Various non-linguistic factors may lead a subject to respond more slowly in one or the other language (see the discussion of domain congruence in 2.2). There is no real basis for the assumption that reaction speed will be the same cross-linguistically. Tests which rely heavily on performance measures, where limitations of memory and time can affect the results should not be regarded as adequate estimates of competence. These tests also do not take into account the contexts in which language is used. Cooper (1971) found that Spanish/English bilinguals had different scores on word naming tasks depending on whether the domain was family,

neighborhood, school etc. In some domains they would have been rated as balanced bilinguals, while in others they would not (see also 5.6).

There are a variety of other problems with both the notions of balance and dominance and the tests which are used to measure them. Fishman (1971: 560), for example, has cautioned against the notion of balanced bilingualism in more general terms. He says that bilinguals are rarely equally fluent in both languages about all possible topics. This reflects the fact that the allocation of functions of the languages in society is normally imbalanced and in complementary distribution. Any society which produced functionally balanced bilinguals who used both languages equally well in all contexts would soon cease to be bilingual because no society needs two languages for the same set of functions (see 2.3). Because of the inherent connection between proficiency and function, Malherbe (1969: 50) has concluded that it is doubtful whether bilingualism *per se* can be measured apart from the situation in which it functions for a particular individual.

The search for the true balanced bilingual depicted in some of the literature on bilingualism is elusive. The notion of balanced bilingualism is an ideal one, which is largely an artefact of a theoretical perspective which takes the monolingual as its point of reference. It can be seen too that given the relative nature of dominance, other notions like 'mother tongue', 'native language' and 'native speaker' become problematic too.

## 1.5 Mother Tongue: Definitions and Problems

Although the term 'mother tongue' has often been used by linguists in a technical sense to refer to an individual's first learned or primary language, it also has popular connotations (see e.g. Skutnabb-Kangas 1984: ch. 2). Lieberson (1969: 291) says that the United Nations adopted the definition of mother tongue as the 'language usually spoken in the individual's home in his early childhood, although not necessarily used by him at present'. Many researchers now prefer terms such as 'first' or 'second' or 'community' language, etc.

In one of its popular senses, the term 'mother tongue' evokes the notion of mothers as the passive repositories of languages, which they pass on to their children. An interesting anecdote is related by Saunders (1982: 152), who brought up his children bilingually in German and English (see 5.6). He spoke German to them, and his wife, English. In this extract the father introduces the term 'mother tongue' to see what his son (age 7) makes of it.

Thomas: *Pavel spricht sehr gut Deutsch.* - 'Pavel speaks very good German'.

Father: *Ja, und auch sehr gut Tschechisch. Das ist seine Muttersprache.* -

'Yes, and also very good Czech. That's his mother tongue.'

Father: *Was ist deine Muttersprache?* - 'What is your mother tongue?'  
Thomas: *Deutsch*. . . . *Nein, Englisch ist meine Muttersprache. Deutsch ist meine Vatersprache.* - 'German. No, English is my mother tongue. German is my father tongue.'

This draws attention to the fact that in some communities it is fathers who transmit their language to their children. Such a case obtains, for example, in the Vaupes area of Colombia and Brazil (Grimes 1985). There groups are patrilineal and one's primary language is the language of the father. Because marriage is exogamous, one may not marry a person from his or her own or 'brother' language group. The husband and wife speak his or her own language to each other, and are passive bilinguals in the other language (see also 2.4). The children may become fluent in the language of both parents, but consider the father's language to be their own.

Another interesting case is reported by Sutton and Rigsby (1979) for Cape York Peninsula, where social networks and linguistic communities do not overlap. Different speakers of one language may belong to geographically and politically distinct networks and have little contact. Sutton and Rigsby stress the importance of understanding traditional patterns of socioterritorial segmentation and communication networks, along with marriage patterns, residence rights, etc. in order to make sense of the fact that people claim ownership of languages they never use. Thus, there is a major difference between the spatial distribution of languages when mapped according to their association with land-owning groups and when mapped according to their actual usage by members of land-owning groups.

It is easy to find examples of cases where the first language learned may not necessarily be the language which one would designate as one's mother tongue, or as the best mastered. Malherbe (1969: 45) notes that it is quite common to find white infants in South Africa who grow up with Zulu nannies and can speak Zulu before they can speak either English or Afrikaans.

A widely cited and influential document arguing the advantages of vernacular education uses the term 'mother tongue' (UNESCO 1953). It states: 'On educational grounds we recommend that the use of the mother tongue be extended to as late a stage in education as possible. In particular, pupils should begin their schooling through the medium of the mother tongue, because they understand it best and because to begin their school life in the mother tongue will make the break between home and school as small as possible.'

Other influential pieces of legislation use the term 'mother tongue', such as the 1977 Directive of the Council of the European Community on the education of the children of migrant workers (Brussels 77/486/EEC). It instructs member states of the European Community to 'take appropriate measures to promote the teaching of the mother tongue and of the culture

of the country of origin of the children of migrant workers, and also as part of compulsory free education to teach one or more of the official languages of the host state'.

When various minority groups campaign for provision of so-called 'mother tongue teaching', the question of what one's mother tongue is designated to be can be crucial because it determines who has a right to education in a particular language. In Britain, for example, Pakistani speakers of Panjabi will claim Urdu, the national language of Pakistan, as their mother tongue, and not Panjabi, which is a spoken language used in the home (see Saifullah-Khan 1980). Ethnic groups are often defined as belonging to a linguistic minority on the basis of their mother tongue. Minority groups such as West Indians in Britain would like to claim that varieties of West Indian creole constitute a language and therefore deserves recognition as their mother tongue. There was, for instance, one black child in one of the classes I surveyed (Romaine 1983), who wanted to fill in a language diary, claiming 'Jamaican' and English as the languages she knew. Others of West Indian origin and their parents do not admit to speaking creole.

The belief that having one's own language is criterial for ethnicity may be used by a state and its mainstream population to deny the legitimacy of claims to special status and land rights made by a group who have shifted from their indigenous languages to the language of the majority (see 2.1 and 6.6). In some cases courts have become battlegrounds for issues, which although not primarily linguistic, have had fundamental linguistic implications. The Ann Arbor decision on Black English in the United States is an example of a case in which litigation was brought under Equality of Opportunity legislation, which makes no mention of language rights. It guarantees that no one shall be denied equal educational opportunity on account of race, sex or national origin through 'the failure by an educational agency to take appropriate action to overcome language barriers that impede equal participation by its students in its instructional program' (United States Code section 1703(f) of Title 20). The issue of language, in particular the autonomy of Black English, became salient in this case, because it was argued that a language group, i.e. speakers of Black English, coincided with a racial group (see Romaine 1984a: 253-5).

In other cases demands for language rights have followed from official recognition of the special status of a minority group. The Danish government was not prepared for the demand made by Greenlanders for a fully functional national language in which to run their government, a right which was granted to them in 1979 under the Home Rule Act. It will be interesting to see if any linguistic implications follow from the British court's recent recognition of 'travellers' as a distinct ethnic group (see 2.6 for some remarks on travellers' 'language').

Other definitions of the term 'mother tongue' have relied on competence.

Thus, a mother tongue would be the language one knows best. Given the fact that competence in more than one language is rarely ever equally distributed across all domains of life, many bilinguals might know one language better because they have been schooled in it, yet feel a stronger affective attachment to another language which was learned and used in the home. Thus, the language an individual identifies with is often referred to as the mother tongue.

In some cases the identification may be external. Others may recognize a person as having a particular mother tongue, whether or not this matches what the individual feels. Skutnabb-Kangas (1984: 16-17) gives an example of how this can come about in her description of Tero, a Finnish boy who emigrated to Sweden. Today he has almost completely forgotten Finnish, although his mother still speaks only Finnish. On a return to Finland for a visit he was treated like a foreigner because he had a Swedish accent. He regards himself as both a Finn and a Swede.

Some may feel they are equally competent in and identify with both languages, and therefore might say they have two mother tongues. Such is the case with many of the children whose development I will discuss in chapter 5. Depending on which criterion is invoked at a particular stage in the bilingual's experience with the languages, the language designated as mother tongue might change. Thus, the notion of mother tongue is a relative one and one's mother tongue can change over the course of a lifetime.

## 1.6 Summary

I have shown how bilingualism is best studied as an interdisciplinary phenomenon. While popular opinion has it that a bilingual is someone who knows two languages fluently, we have seen that the concept of bilingualism is a relative notion. Factors other than proficiency, itself a relative concept too, have to be taken into account. Thus, a Hawaiian child growing up in a predominantly English-speaking home who attends a Hawaiian language immersion program may be considered bilingual as would, for instance, the so-called 'semi-speakers' of Scottish Gaelic, who very rarely say anything in Gaelic. The type of bilingualism found in any particular individual community or individual will depend on various factors which I discuss in the next chapter.

# The Bilingual Speech Community

In this chapter I will treat bilingualism primarily as a societal phenomenon and examine some of the linguistic and social consequences of linguistic heterogeneity. I will also look at some of the ways in which multilingual communities organize their resources into repertoires, and discuss concepts such as domain, diglossia, language maintenance, shift and death.

It is not possible to make a neat separation between bilingualism as a societal and individual phenomenon (see Adler 1977), particularly in the treatment of certain aspects of bilingual behavior, like borrowing and interference (see, however, Hamers and Blanc 1989, who propose the term 'bilinguality' to refer to individual bilingualism and reserve the term 'bilingualism' for societal bilingualism). The connection between individual and societal bilingualism also becomes evident when we consider some of the reasons why certain individuals are or become bilingual. Usually the more powerful groups in any society are able to force their language upon the less powerful. If we take Finland as an example, we find that the Sami (Lapps), Romanians and Swedes have to learn Finnish, but the Finns do not have to learn any of these languages. Or similarly in Britain, the British child does not have to learn Panjabi or Welsh, but both these groups are expected to learn English.

In Europe, it has generally been the case that language differences have been associated with distinguishable territories, and later, the nation-states occupying those territories. Because of the identification of national entities with linguistic integrity, heterogeneity has tended to be limited to the frontiers and was for that reason local and peripheral, e.g. the Basques in Spain and France, and the 'Celtic fringe' in the British Isles and France. Thus, twenty-five out of thirty-six of the European countries are officially monolingual. In most of them, however, there are minorities (both indigenous and non-indigenous), whose languages do not have the same rights as those granted to the official languages (Skutnabb-Kangas 1984: 71). The marginalization of the languages and cultures of minority peoples in the European states can be seen as a form of 'internal colonialism' (see e.g. Hechter 1975).