

## LANGUAGE, IDENTITY AND UNITY IN EUROPE THROUGH BILINGUALITY

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*Abstract: Bilinguality is a phenomenon frequently encountered in all European countries, including Romania. The various definitions given to bilinguality might require a description of the forms of bilinguality as well as an analysis of their effect upon intellectual functions and the display of several occurrences of bilinguality. But, even more important than such theoretical approaches, bilinguality might be the answer to language identity and unity in Europe. On the one hand, it enables the emphasizing of the cultural origins representing the identity of the nations and, on the other one, it is a carrier of a language unity that, nonetheless, does not call off national identity.*

*Key-words: language, bilinguality, identity, unity, diversity*

Bilinguality is a phenomenon frequently encountered in all European countries, including Romania. While a series of authors assert the idea that bilinguality represents the current use of two different languages by the same person, others, emphasizing the degree of mastering the two different languages, assert the idea that there are a small number of persons who use two languages at a similar high level. Meanwhile, other researchers stress the fact that bilinguality should be regarded in terms of a minimal competence in verbal skills (understanding of speech, speaking, reading or writing), in a language that differs from an individual's mother tongue. The various definitions given to bilinguality might require a description of the forms of bilinguality as well as an analysis of their effect upon intellectual functions and the display of several occurrences of bilinguality. But, even more important than such theoretical approaches, bilinguality, as a topical phenomenon, might be the answer to language identity and unity in Europe. On the one hand, it enables the emphasizing of the cultural origins representing the identity of the nations and, on the other one, it is a carrier of a language unity that, nonetheless, does not call off national identity.

Researchers consider that, at present, almost half of the persons worldwide are bilingual or live within a bilingual environment and the number of bilingual people is continually increasing. Besides the term of "mother tongue", the phrase "father tongue" appears to gain ground and to be used whenever a child appropriates different languages from the two parents; meanwhile, terms like bilingualism (that refers to the state of a linguistic community in which two languages are in contact with the result that two codes can be used in the same interaction and that a number of individuals are bilingual) and multilingualism are also widely employed.

Although it is largely acknowledged that the acquisition of several languages represents an advantage, nonetheless scientists often wonder whether it is beneficial for a child to be bilingual. While certain researchers consider that it is recommended for a child to learn two languages from an early age, others, on the contrary, support the idea that the early acquiring of several languages leads to confusion and to a growing rate of language disorders. There are educators and schoolteachers who complain of

the problems encountered in case of those children that use, at home, in order to communicate with their family, a language that differs from the one employed in kindergarten and school.

### **Looking for a definition of bilinguality**

There are persons who perfectly understand and use two languages. Yet, there are also persons who understand what they are told in a language different from their mother tongue, but who difficultly and incorrectly are able to give an answer in that specific language. Which of them may be considered a bilingual? The answer to this question depends on the definition one is willing to accept.

Certain dictionaries define bilinguality as a “phenomenon implying the current use of two different languages by the same person”. According to Bloomfield, bilinguality is the use of two different languages, mastered according to the level of one’s mother tongue. Nevertheless, it is considered that there is a small number of persons who use two languages at the same high level.

Contrary to these definitions, which refer only to perfect bilingual individuals, McNamara supports the idea that bilingual persons are those who display a minimal competence of one of the following verbal skills: understanding of speech, speaking, reading or writing, in a language that differs from their mother tongue. Certain authors also use to mention a fifth linguistic skill, the cognitive one, which regards the capacity of employing the acquired languages as thinking devices.

While defining bilinguality, it is important not only to stress the level of language knowledge, but to emphasize their functional aspect, too. Wienreich, in his volume entitled “*Language in Contact*” (the first significant work in the field of bilinguality) asserts that “the practice of the alternative use of two languages is called bilinguality, and the persons doing this are called bilinguals”.

It appears that bilinguality may be regarded as a continual dimension along which bilingual individuals are represented according to their level of knowledge of two or several languages. One end displays the perfect bilinguals, while the opposite end exhibits those who possess, at least, one of the verbal skills appropriated at a minimal level.

Although the definitions previously mentioned regard individual bilinguality, there are a series of researchers who have analyzed bilinguality as a social phenomenon. With this in view, Hamers and Blanc employ the terms “bilingualism” and “bilinguality”, asserting that bilingualism (*societal bilingualism*) concerns the condition of a community where two languages are in contact and a lot of individuals are bilingual, while bilinguality (*individual bilingualism*), represents the psychological condition of an individual who is able to access more than one linguistic code as an instrument of social communication.

The verbal behaviour of a bilingual person is not equivalent to the sum of the behaviours of two persons who know only one language. In other words, bilingual persons are able to speak as monolinguals in one of the languages they possess or may use linguistic phenomena specific for bilinguals. Among the specific behaviours of

bilingual persons, the most important ones are the following: *code-switching* (the ability to switch from one code to another) and *code-mixing* (the blending of linguistic codes). Code-mixing may occur through the alternative use of the two languages during a conversation, whenever individuals, speaking a certain language, use words belonging to another language, while altering them according to the grammar rules of the first language. Such phenomena generally come out when communication occurs between persons who know both languages. At times, the hereby phenomena may be determined by the deficient knowledge of a certain language, yet, in most cases, code-switching and code-mixing represent a strategy specific to bilingual persons who, accordingly, are able to better express their ideas, attitudes or identification with a certain group. For instance, in India, the use of English in combination with various regional languages is a sign of high social status.

### **Operating with the various forms of bilinguality**

Although bilingual persons generally display similar characteristics, owing to the fact that they acquired two different languages during childhood, nonetheless, they also exhibit various degrees or forms of bilinguality, which, according to Hamers and Blanc are as follows:

1. Based on the criterion of competence in the two languages, there are two forms of bilinguality, namely: balanced bilinguality (where competence in language 1 is identical with competence in language 2) and dominant bilinguality (where competence in language 1 is higher than competence in language 2).
2. Based on the criterion of semantic organizing, two forms of bilinguality come out: combined or mixed bilinguality (meaning that the equivalent notions in language 1 and language 2 are associated with the same mental representations) and coordinate bilinguality (when the equivalent notions in language 1 and language 2 are not always associated with the same mental representations).
3. Based on the criterion of the age when languages were acquired, there are three forms of bilinguality: childhood bilinguality, which may be simultaneous (when both languages become mother tongues) and successive (when, generally, only language 1 becomes mother tongue), adolescence bilinguality (when language 2 is acquired between the age of 11 and 17) and adult age bilinguality (when language 2 is acquired after the age of 17).
4. Depending on the context according to which a person becomes bilingual, bilinguality may be natural (in the case when language 1 and language 2 are spontaneously acquired) and artificial or educational (when language 1 is acquired within the family and language 2 is acquired at school).
5. Based on whether language 2 is or is not used as a mother tongue within a community, two forms of bilinguality come out: endogenous bilinguality (when both language 1 and language 2 are used as mother tongues within the community) and exogenous bilinguality (when language 2 is the country's official language and is not used as a mother tongue in the community).

6. In terms of the relative status of the two languages, the forms bilinguality might display are as follows: additive bilinguality (when language 1 and language 2 are capitalized in community, determining cognitive opportunities) and subtractive bilinguality (when language 2 is capitalized within the community, while language 1 is not, bilinguality determining cognitive drawbacks).

7. From the point of view of group and cultural identity affiliation, four forms of bilinguality might come out: double-cultural bilinguality (that is double affiliation and double cultural identity), monoculture bilinguality (affiliation and cultural identity specific for language 1), acculturation bilinguality (affiliation and cultural identity specific for language 2 through acculturation, that is through sharing and learning the cultural traits or social patterns of another group), and de-cultured bilinguality (when there is no specific affiliation and cultural identity).

As far as balanced and dominant bilinguality is concerned, depending on the degree of linguistic competence, Lambert refers to a balanced bilinguality (linguistic competences in the acquired languages) or to a dominant bilinguality (when competence in one of the languages - mother tongue, as a rule - is higher than competence in the other language). The balance or dominance are not necessarily equally distributed in all fields; each individual possesses his/her own configuration of dominance (for instance, one may deal with balance in conversations on household activities and dominance in conversations dealing with the professional field).

In terms of combined and coordinated bilinguality, age and the context of language acquiring may determine differences of semantic organizing. Ervin and Osgood speak about combined or coordinated linguistic systems. In the combined system, the equivalent linguistic signs of the acquired languages are associated with the same mental representations. In the coordinated system, the equivalent terms have their correspondence in different representations. In terms of this situation, too, a bilingual person may be perceived as "combined", in case of certain concepts (generally, in case of concrete notions) and "coordinated", in case of other concepts (for instance, certain abstract notions) so that, we may solely speak about the dominance of a system.

Childhood/ adolescence/ adult age bilinguality. An individual may become bilingual during childhood (until the age of 10 or 11), adolescence (between 10 or 11 and 17) or adult age (after 17).

Childhood bilinguality may be simultaneous or successive. The individuals displaying a simultaneous bilinguality acquire both languages in the family environment, owing to an informal manner, through spontaneous, unintended learning. Such situations occur especially in bilingual families. While educating their children, a series of such families implement the so-called *Grammont principle* (also called OPOL method = *one person one language*). According to this principle, each adult employs only his/her mother tongue while communicating with the child. Researchers (Leopold), who have applied this principle in educating their own children, show that the method has multiple positive effects: the acquiring of the two languages develops simultaneously; beginning with the age of 2 or 3, children become aware of the existence of the two linguistic codes and use them depending on their interlocutor; they

become aware of the arbitrary character of language; and display an increased verbal flexibility. Usually, when such circumstances occur, children are going to possess two mother tongues. Other researchers have concluded that, in order to possess two mother tongues, it is not necessary to strictly observe Grammont principle. Instead, it is important to establish close relations between the child and the members of the communities that speak his/her parents' tongues.

Successive bilinguality involves the acquiring of a language, which differs from the mother tongue, during childhood, yet, after having acquired mother tongue. The acquiring of the second language may occur informally (through communication with the relatives, the children in the play group, etc.) or intentionally, according to a systematic learning within the educational activities organized at kindergartens, schools, etc.

Bilinguality acquired during adolescence or adult age can only be successive.

Natural and artificial (or educational) bilinguality. Children become naturally bilingual in case they acquire both languages spontaneously, in the familial milieu and/or the group of friends. In the case when they acquire the second language at kindergarten, school, etc., bilinguality is called artificial or educational.

There is an increased correspondence between age, the circumstances according to which languages are acquired and the type of semantic organizing. The individual who acquired both languages during childhood, in the same milieu, displays a single cognitive representation for the equivalent terms. Those who acquire two languages in different environments (for instance, one in the family milieu, the other one at kindergarten or school) probably have different mental representations for certain equivalent concepts, so that they possess a coordinated bilinguality.

Endogenous and exogenous bilinguality. Endogenous language is the language used by the members of a community as a mother tongue. Endogenous bilinguality means that both languages spoken by an individual are mother tongues in the community he/she leaves in. Exogenous language is the official language of the country, which is not spoken as a mother tongue by the members of a community. Exogenous bilinguality consists in having acquired both the mother tongue and the official language.

Additive and subtractive bilinguality are notions have been introduced by Lambert, who asserts that in the case of additive bilinguality, the acquiring of a language that differs from the mother tongue determines the improvement of the linguistic repertory of the individual. In case the two languages acquired by the individual are capitalized to the same extent by the members of the community, bilinguality is mainly additive. Under such circumstances, the child would cognitively benefit from bilinguality.

Subtractive bilinguality occurs when two languages are in "competition": one language tends to replace the mother tongue of a community. Such circumstances appear in the case when an ethno-linguistic minority rejects its own cultural values in favour of the values belonging to another group perceived as more prestigious. At school, the children in a minority group are educated in a language that differs from

their mother tongue. Such children frequently tend to abandon the use of their mother tongue and start employing the other language. Researches show that, under such circumstances, children's cognitive development and linguistic competence are negatively affected.

As far as double-culture, monoculture, acculturation and de-cultured bilinguality is concerned, let's notice that bilingual individuals may be ranged according to the manner they perceive their own cultural identity. Some of them, who effectively employ two languages, identify themselves with the two cultural groups and are acknowledged as belonging to both groups (double-culture bilinguality), to the same extent. Generally, this social and affective double identity matches a balanced and additive cognitive bilinguality. Certain individuals, although they effectively use two languages, culturally identify with only one of the two groups and are perceived as belonging to that specific community (monoculture bilinguality). Other individuals abandon their cultural identification with those who speak their mother tongue and integrate within the group of those who speak the other language. Under such circumstances, we deal with acculturation bilinguality (an "acquired" culture). Sometimes the individuals quit their cultural identity, yet, they do not manage to identify socially and affectively with the culture of those who use the other language. Berry employs the term of de-cultured ("lost" culture) bilinguality in order to define such cases.

### **Conclusions**

Bilinguality is a phenomenon encountered in all countries. It may be perceived as a continual dimension with one of its poles including the bilinguals or the perfect bilinguals and the other pole including those who possess a minimal competence in, at least, one of the following verbal skills: understanding speech, speaking, reading or writing.

Bilinguality may display various forms, each of them influencing the manner of communication as well as the cognitive function of the individuals.

In the present-day European context, owing to its possible forms and criteria according to which it might operate, bilinguality is able to acquire the dual role of addressing both language identity and language unity. If mother tongues and natural bilinguality objectively relate to the natural and cultural foundations representing the identity of the nations throughout Europe, enabling the freedom of expression and asserting nations' distinctiveness, educational (or artificial) bilinguality appears to play a decisive part in reaching a language unity that might be able to get European nations closer to each other, while obstructing neither singularity nor diversity.

While natural bilinguality already implies the spontaneous acquiring of two languages and relates to national, community, group identity, stress should be put on educational (artificial) bilinguality, which enables individuals to acquire a second or a third language on an organised basis (in kindergartens, schools, etc.). A lot of European countries include the study of foreign languages in their educational programs, yet, this requires a long-term designing of curricula and the training of professional staff.

Despite all challenges, educational bilinguality appears to be a powerful means for forging language unity.

Sometimes, we should all ask ourselves a simple question: why are we European ? And, while attempting at giving an answer to this key question, we have to bear in mind that a cross-nation community shares the fundamental values of each of the community member nation, which should be shared and understood with a view to be able to design unity through diversity. Language is an extremely powerful tool: through language, diversity might turn into assumed unity, which, as Pope Francis recently said, refuses ideological colonisation and the dissolution of identity.

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