Defining 'Everyday Multilingualism'

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Abstract

The reality of global mobility, ease of communication and
movement of ideas, the blurring of distinctions between written and
oral styles, as well as regionalisation trends -- all these impact on
the practical aspects of maintaining multilingual repertoires, and
call for a review of conventional descriptive paradigms of
multilingual reality. While traditional models have tended to define
languages as static systems as well as coherent emblems that help
rally loyalty, contemporary research into language use and changes
in practices now place us in a much more confident position to
assert the dynamism of linguistic repertoires as adjustable and
adaptable instruments of communication, in the first instance, and
as such as the property of individuals and the social networks that
they form, rather than of institutions or states. Ownership over the
shape of language and linguistic practices is therefore best
transferred back to the users of language, who should be given the
skills and the opportunities to manage their own multilingual
repertoires in a manner that is de-coupled from debates about
loyalty, control, and power.

I have chosen to devote my talk to the challenge of defining the key theme of this meeting -- Everyday Multilingualism. The principal point which I wish to make is this: lobbyists, practitioners and many theorists have called for state institutions to embrace multilingualism through a set of constitutional acts and provision of state-backed resources. As an alternative direction I propose that we should transfer ownership of language back to the communities of speakers, making sure that no obstacles stand in their way when they set out to make use of appropriate opportunities. We should expect institutions to be responsive to the local needs of speakers, but otherwise to avoid the use of language as a token of loyalty to a centralised collective.

Before I return to this agenda, let me revisit the very basic definition of our shared area of interest, and ask: What is multilingualism?

For many generations educators and policymakers alike have regarded multilingualism as an intellectual skill, acquired and sustained at an expense through formal education. At this level, it can be an asset to the individual, and so potentially also to the society that is served by this individual. This is not to say that policymakers' commitment to academic multilingualism is necessarily stable and secure. Just a few years ago, the Labour government in England decided to abolish the

compulsory instruction of foreign languages at lower-secondary school level -- not because the target of producing individuals skilled in languages was no longer appreciated, but because it was downgraded to second priority, lagging behind the need to present convincing statistics on improving school results, which in turn motivated the removal from the curriculum of those subjects in which student performance tended to be lower.

The worries traditionally associated with multilingualism are thus obvious: The effort required to learn another language through formal instruction is seen as a potential distraction from other academic domains. Where bilingualism comes naturally, it is seen as a potential disturbance to loyalty and control. Hence the words of the former UK Home Secretary David Blunket, who encouraged immigrants to speak English to their children.

As a consequence, governing institutions that do engage in the promotion of smaller languages make sure they adopt a clear hierarchy of roles and status, distinguishing between official and non-official languages, between national and regional languages, and between majority and minority languages. States appear to feel safer within such highly regulated division of roles and responsibilities among languages.

Many academics and practitioners have consequently considered the anchoring of linguistic human rights to be a key toward the abolition

of linguistic discrimination (e.g. Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson 1995). The European Charter for Minority and Regional Languages, widely acknowledged as one of the most far-reaching mechanisms of language policy reform, appeals to governments to formally designate languages for protection. It is felt that languages are better-off if they enjoy a symbolic status enshrined by legislation.

It is perhaps not entirely obvious what the ingredients are of a successful model of multilingualism following such parameters. Countries like Canada, Belgium, Switzerland, and Ireland, for example, have for many years practised policies based on what Nelde (1993) had called 'the territoriality principle', coupled with tight regulation of the symbolic presence of languages in state institutions: flagging of state languages on official documents, allocation of broadcasting time in state media, and requirement of language skills within the civil service and the military. Models of this kind appear to view multilingualism as a cumulative multiplication of the status and roles given to each individual language.

The view of multilingualism as cumulative monolingualism has its tradition within descriptive linguistics, too. Early debates surrounding child bilingualism, for example, were pre-occupied with the age at which bilingual infants are able to distinguish between their linguistic systems, a question which dominated the discussion for a considerable

period of time after it was launched in the late 1970's by Volterra &

Teaschner (1978; see also Redlinger & Park 1980, Vihman 1985, and

many more). Practice-oriented attempts to describe the process of

second language acquisition had viewed it as a sequence of events on

the learner's path toward the ultimate goal of acquiring native-like

competence in navigating the rules of the target language (see Klein

1986). Early sociolinguistic research into bilingualism focused on how

extra-linguistic factors such as context and setting could trigger specific

and predictable choices of language (Fishman 1965). Models of contact-

induced language change have taken the position that languages are self-

contained systems that influence one another either as a result of the

greater social prestige that one language enjoys over another, or else in

an attempt by speakers to fill so-called 'gaps' in the lexical and

grammatical representation of the recipient language, by extending it to

cover functions that are present in the donor language (for an overview

of hypotheses see Thomason 2001, Winford 2003). And in

psycholinguistics, intrigued by the fact that bilinguals suffering from

language impairment may show differentiated loss or recovery patterns

for their individual languages, researchers had until recently

hypothesised about differentiated storage or accessibility of languages in

the brain (e.g. Albert & Obler 1978).

Contact linguistics has in the past generation or so been experiencing a shift in some of its descriptive paradigms through a combination of new empirical research, the infiltration of new theoretical models and growing interface with discussions in cultural theory and other academic disciplines. The results can be detected in almost all the aforementioned domains of study. In the study of bilingual language acquisition among infants, for instance, Lanza's (1997) groundbreaking research has shown that the ability to separate languages is a direct response on the part of the child to the consistency of context-bound language use within the parental model; multilingualism is thus a form of social behaviour that is acquired in interaction with behavioural role models. Similarly, we are beginning to understand second-language acquisition as a process by which learners acquire communicative skills, in the first instance, whether or not they conform to the native-language target model (see Goglia 2006). Following Auer (1984) we now understand language choice in conversation as a strategic interplay of factors involving the metaphorical use of language boundaries in order to emphasise emotions and subjective evaluations. We now also accept that not all environments trigger consistent use of either one language or another, and that monolingualism is not at all the prevalent norm in any given conversational context; rather, bilinguals will find themselves interacting in a continuum of contexts, many of which are likely to trigger what

Grosjean (2001) has described as the 'bilingual mode', where language mixing is itself the default choice.

Recent work by the Manchester Working Group on Language Contact has highlighted the role of individual speakers' creativity in discourse as a major trigger for long-term language change. This view of contact-induced language change regards innovations not as 'gaps' or as mere accommodation to social pressure, but as an attempt by speakers to make optimal use of the full range of expressive structures within the linguistic repertoire that is at their disposal (cf. Matras 2007, Matras & Sakel 2007, Matras forthc.). In some cases, speakers have been shown to consciously manipulate structural choices within their bilingual linguistic repertoire, leading to the emergence of stable codes, now referred to in the linguistic discussion as 'Mixed Languages' (see Matras & Bakker 2003). Indeed, in some instances the deliberate construction of a mixed language is the speaker community's own informal, non-institutionalised answer to language death, ensuring that an old community language that is in the process of being abandoned altogether maintains some form of an afterlife (Matras et al. forthc., McConvell & Meakins 2005). Finally, psycholinguistic models of bilingual language processing are gradually developing a consensus according to which bilinguals have their full set of linguistic structures available to them at all times. The selection of individual lexical items

and constructions proceeds, following this view, in much the same way as the selection of stylistic variants in a monolingual repertoire -- namely by reviewing context appropriateness, and inhibiting inappropriate choices (see Paradis 2004).

Put together, these new approaches to language contact and bilingualism challenge the view of multilingualism as the cumulative addition of static, self-contained linguistic systems. Instead, they tend to view multilingualism as an individual speaker's dynamic, goal-oriented and often creative use of a complex repertoire of linguistic structures. Multilingualism is thus an individual's diverse and differentiated network of communicative choices made during interaction with other individuals.

This new understanding of multilingualism equips us from a theoretical angle to entrust individuals with defining and shaping their own language choices in concrete settings and situations.

We must of course address the question whether today's society is equipped to handle a shift in the paradigm of managing multilingualism at the societal level. I will mention a number of factors that lend support to a more dynamic, bottom-up and user-oriented approach to language management in multilingual settings:

Globalisation is gradually leading to a shift in the balance of powers and responsibilities between national governments, and trans-national as well as regionally based forms of governance. Both create windows of opportunity for smaller languages, which are no longer dependent on a complex, ideological negotiation of roles and powers within a national system. In Scotland, for instance, it is in the context of the protection of the environment and the promotion of local heritage, as well as in pre-school education run by local councils, that use of Scottish Gaelic is flourishing. The inclusion of a Romani delegation in deliberations of trans-national organisations such as the Council of Europe has created a practical opportunity to introduce Romani as one of the ad hoc working languages, without the need for extensive statutory reform. In Turkey, the partial relaxation of control and restrictions on the use of Kurdish in the public domain was a direct response to the opportunities created by the country's EU candidacy.

A further feature of globalisation is greater mobility and increased transposition of identity to the level of cross-region networking -- in Appadurai's (1992) words, the 'de-territorialisation' of identity. Trans-national and super-regional networking is facilitated through communication technology. Our own world is thus very different from the one in which Fishman (1964) predicted the step-by-step retreat of

ethnic languages in urban immigrant communities. Today's linguistic diasporas are able to support one another not just through physical contact, facilitated by more frequent mobility, but also through the exchange of media -- films, websites, and satellite broadcasting.

Immigrants speaking their ethnic language are no longer isolated, and are no longer necessarily pressured by a choice between languages. In fact, they often see their choices expand: I am thinking of an Arabic-speaking family from Khuzistan province in Iran, who settled in Manchester a decade ago. In Iran, under pressure to accommodate to mainstream urban norms, the younger generation is abandoning Arabic and shifting to Persian. In immigration, English is of course the most natural dominant language. But contacts with Arabic speakers form Iraq, Syria and other countries and the sharing of facilities such as Sunday schools, mosques and social gatherings reinforce Arabic, leading to a situation where three children, aged 5-15, are more fluent in their family ethnic language than their cousins of the same age group back at home in Iran. But what about the chances of these youngsters to visit or perhaps even return to Iran? Regular exposure to Iranian television through satellite broadcasts and regular visits in Iran, enabled through cheap flights and, in historical terms an objectively high albeit entirely average standard of living, have enabled the children to acquire fluency in Persian as well.

Closely associated with the increasing reliance on communication technology is users' flexibility in communication, and the blurring of distinctions between oral and written mediums. Text messaging and chatrooms provide real-time, almost face-to-face interaction opportunities via a written medium, while emails and blogs are private documents with a wide dissemination potential. Such media allow and even encourage the use of non-standard forms of written language and often of linguistic creativity and improvisation.

We are thus in an age in which the link between identity and ideology is weakening, and multiple identities are more and more acceptable; an age in which responsibilities for culture and communication are devolved and no longer centralised; in which mobility and communication technology facilitate language maintenance and communicative creativity; in which speakers and users of language are accustomed to exploring new channels of communication and to sharing the responsibility for shaping key aspects of their communicative vehicles through mutual accommodation; and it is an age in which linguistic theory emphasises the pluralistic and dynamic nature of multilingualism itself as the creative use, by individuals, of a broad repertoire of communicative structures.

In this age, we can rely on users' creativity and aptitude and call for a transfer of ownership over language and language management from state institutions to user communities. This means in practice de-regulation of language use, de-coupling of language support measures from constitutional issues, and flexible responsiveness to community needs and initiatives.

Some aspects of this approach have already been put into practice. In Melbourne, Australia, SBS Television is a state-backed company that broadcasts community-level productions, initiated and edited by private individuals in various community languages. In Manchester, community libraries respond to acquisition requests from users of all backgrounds, and have recently recorded a rise in purchases of books in Polish. Russian immigration to Israel in the early 1990s resulted not only in the proliferation of Russian-language private radio broadcasting, newspapers, and bookshops, but in response to demand, and drawing on the availability of qualified personnel, significant parts of the secondary school curriculum were translated into Russian and an entire generation of immigrants was allowed to take their school examinations in their native language, which otherwise lacks any regulated or legal status whatsoever in the country.

None of these cases might serve as the ultimate model of multilingual management; but they provide some examples of the

dynamic, responsive system that we need. Everyday multilingualism cannot be a top-down process of constitutional debate, legislation, and central regulation. It must, instead, empower non-state initiatives to create and manage language resources for practical communicative needs.

Multilingualism is the property of multilingual individuals. Its future in everyday life lies in the hands of individual language users and the initiatives and opportunities which they choose to pursue.

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