

## Is bilingualism a handicap or facilitation?

Yahia fatima

University kasdi merbah/ ouargla

### Abstract:

The term communication, with its variant dimensions, lies in the world's different nations and communities. It is created by people's universal experiences of meeting and living in communities of different linguistic codes. Being a good communicator involves the realization of the equation of being a bilingual. Bilinguals are persons whose linguistic ability in two languages is similar to that of the native speaker. However, language alone is not the only arm needed in the field of code switching since culture has its great share in the operation. Thus, a bilingual must have the linguistic resources and social strategies to affiliate with many different cultures and ways of using language. Hence, isn't bilingualism a sign of the acceptance of language diversity and cultural pluralism (in a multicultural world)? Isn't it a way to abandon one's own language loyalty – one's identity and rejection of the ancestral culture? On the one hand, through bilingualism, a bilingual feels socially and cognitively enriched by an additional language (the spread of intercultural sense). On the other hand, a bilingual may fall in the trap of anomia ( the suffering from a feeling of social uncertainty or dissatisfaction ) as it is widely believed that there is a natural connection between the language spoken by members of a social group and that group's identity: by their accent, vocabulary, and their discourse patterns. Despite of the fact that a bilingual may live in a state of flux of losing or keeping one's identity (the individual's sense of the self), the world's communities have to bear the slogan of 'the dialogue of cultures'.

**Keywords :** communication, bilingualism, language, cultural pluralism, identity, a bilingual.

### الملخص:

يتواجد مصطلح "التواصل" بمختلف أبعاده ضمن مختلف أمم ومجتمعات العالم. وقد تبلور هذا المصطلح من خلال تبادل الشعوب لمختلف الرموز اللسانية والتجارب التواصلية. ان امكانية الحصول على التواصل الناجح بين مختلف الامم يعتمد على ضرورة أن يكون المتكلم ثنائي اللغة. الثنائي اللغة هو من قدراته اللسانية بين لغتين تكون مكافئة لحاملي اللغة الأم. ولكن المتكلم لا يحتاج فقط الى الكفاءة اللغوية للانتقال من لغة الى أخرى وانما يجب أن يكون كذلك ملما بالثقافة التي تغلف اللغة الأجنبية وشعبها. اذن على ثنائي اللغة أن يمتلك المصادر اللسانية للغة وكذا الاستراتيجيات الحوارية التابعة للمجتمع الخاص بها كي ينتسب الى مختلف الثقافات واللغات. وعليه هل تعتبر ثنائية اللغة علامة لتقبل اختلاف اللغات وتعددية الثقافات (ضمن العالم المتعدد الثقافات)؟ أم هل هي دافع لتخلي الفرد عن الانتماء للغة الأم وهويته باعتبار تأثره باللغة الأجنبية وقواعدها؟ من خلال ازدواجية اللغة, يمكن للمتكلم أن يكون مشبعا اجتماعيا وفكريا بلغة أجنبية اضافية لرصيده اللغوي مما يساعد على نشر مفهوم تعددية الثقافات وتقبلها. وعلى نحو اخر, يمكن لثنائي اللغة أن يسقط في فخ المعاناة من فقدان هويته اللغوية نظرا لتشبعه بلغة وأخرى. ويأتي هذا الاستنتاج نظرا للاعتقاد العام على وجود علاقة طبيعية بين لغة المجتمع وهوية أفراده من خلال انفراده بلهجة ومفردات معينة وكذا استراتيجيات خاصة للتواصل. بالرغم من امكانية أن يعيش ثنائي اللغة حالة المد والجزر بين فقدان أو الحفاظ على هويته اللغوية, الا أنه على مجتمعات العالم أن تحمل شعار "حوار الثقافات".

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** التواصل, ثنائية اللغة, اللغة, تعددية الثقافات, الهوية, ثنائي اللغة.

### Is bilingualism a handicap or facilitation?

The term communication, with its variant dimensions, finds its roots in the world's different nations and communities. It is created by people's universal experiences of meeting and living in communities of diverse linguistic codes. In order to produce a tasty and acceptable piece of communication, prepare your ingredients of languages and linguistic proficiency (syntax, grammar, lexis); a great amount of cultural skills; motivation; and the audience's awareness. Leaven your linguistic devices until they rise. Shape them. Then, mix them with the amount of cultural strategies appropriate to the mould of your communicative situation. After that, taste your mixture for fluency and accuracy. Add the required pinch of motivation you have. Finally, if the piece is tasty enough, serve it to your audience to be appreciated and don't forget to decorate it by some discourse patterns and the required community accent.

However, the success of the operation depends on many factors related to the operator – the interlocutor. The interlocutor needs proficiency, as well as willingness to be a bilingual since being a good communicator involves the realization of the equation of being a bilingual.

Bilinguals are supposed to have linguistic ability in two languages is similar to that of the native speaker. However, language alone is not the only arm needed in the field of code switching since culture has its big share in the operation. Thus, a bilingual must have the linguistic resources and social strategies to affiliate with many different cultures and ways of using language. So, isn't bilingualism a sign of the acceptance of language diversity and cultural pluralism (in a multicultural world)? Isn't it a way to abandon one's own language loyalty (it is an obstacle), one's identity and rejection of one's ancestral culture? Can a bilingual achieve a comfortable bicultural identity?

On the other side, bilinguals are proficient in both receptive and productive skills. The speaker's knowledge and use of each language are affected by changing sociolinguistic and linguistic contexts. So, is monolingualism, in this case, a cognitive limitation? Is it an advantage or a disadvantage to be a bilingual?

Before answering the previous questions, let's first spotlight the notion of bilingualism through discovering its different aims of use and defining it through the eyes and the views of various linguists.

The types of orientation towards learning an other language may be either instrumental or integrative. The former reflects a utilitarian value of linguistic achievement such as getting ahead in one's occupation, reading documents in the target language, etc. The later, refers to learning more about the culture of the target community or to identify with its speakers, etc.

A bilingual person is popularly believed to be someone who can function with equal skill in two or more languages; people do also think that a bilingual society is one in which two or more languages are used with equal regularity and effect. Mackey (1962) suggested that bilingualism is not usefully considered something that does or does not exist in an individual. It is rather ' a relative trait ' that needs to be described and measured in some detail: as how bilinguals develop, how their bilingualism can be measured, how their behaviour can be described, how interlingual effects can be measured, and how the roles of each language can be characterized (in Chin and Wigglessworth, 2007: 32). In another more elaborate model, Mackey (1968) believes that 'bilingualism is the property of the individual.' It appears when a person must function in two distinct language communities. A more precise definition requires measuring a number of dimensions. The first of these is degree. That is to say, languages used by a bilingual must be tested at the level of mastery of the four skills of listening , reading , speaking , and writing on each of the appropriate linguistic levels (phonological or graphic, grammatical, lexical, semantic, and stylistic).

The second is function: the reasons of using each language and the condition under which a given language is used. Bilingualism may be used for external functions; for example, the individuals daily contact (people in the home, community contacts, school, mass

media, correspondence), duration and frequency of contact as how often this person speaks to his grandfather, etc., and the pressures that apply in each area of contact: economic, administrative, political, etc (in Brisk, 2008: 45). Bilingualism also contains internal functions which include counting, praying, cursing, dreaming, and note taking. The third dimension for description is alternation: how readily and how often does the bilingual switch languages? Under what conditions does he/she switch? How much of time of the time does he/she speak each of his/her languages? Finally, there is interference: how much does the bilingual fuse his languages? Do words, grammatical patterns, or sounds from the one language influence his/her use of the other?

However, other linguists prefer to focus on the bilingual or multilingual community rather than the individual bilingual. Lewis (1972) characterizes a number of different levels of bilingualism in his description of multilingualism in the Soviet Union. On the first level, there are stable bilingual communities, where over centuries two linguistic communities have been in contact without any tendency toward role differentiation or assimilation. At a second level is dynamic bilingualism resulting from social mobility and role differentiation. The third level involves overlapping functions, for instance, in many parts of the Soviet Union, laws are published in both Russian and the national language. The fourth level is almost complete assimilation, with only symbolic bilingualism (in Hamers and Blanc, 2000: 18).

Returning to our questions, bilingualism has its positive effects on the bilingual's cognitive development. According to the theory of linguistic relativity, thought is dependent on language. Consequently, people who speak or handle different languages perceive and reality and think differently. Benjamin Whorf demonstrated that an observer's perception of the world around him/her is controlled to some great extent by the language he/she speaks. In other words, language plays a great role in widening the cognition of notions and concepts. So, if one can speak more than one language, he/she has more than one eye for the world's perception. Whorf compared an Indian language, Hopi, with what he called Standard Average European to see how each handled such concepts as time, space, substance, and matter. Standard Average European languages use their verbs to place an action in time; there is a distinction between past, present, and future. Hopi, on the other hand, does not have verb tenses, but makes statements about a speaker's knowledge of the validity of what he/she is asserting, distinguishing between reports, expectation, and general truths. Whorf mentioned other cases in which language might constrain thoughts. One of them is that of colour names in various languages. Navajo, for example, has a single word for gray and blue. Hebrew does not have one word for blue, but it distinguishes between sky blue and sea blue.

By contrast, Lenneberg (1967) believes that the cognitive processes are independent from peculiarities of any natural language and that cognition can develop to a certain extent even in the absence of knowledge of any language. On the light of this, although the Eskimo has many different words for 'snow,' the English-speaking skier is able to express all the distinctions he needs in his situation. However, Hymes agrees with Sapir that the real limitation is a monolingual's naive acceptance of fixed habits of speech as guides to an objective understanding of the nature of an experience (in Lasker, 1995: 74). He considers linguistic study as a method of liberating one from acceptance of absolutes. In this case, there are a great number of social and cultural advantages beyond the ability to access to two cultures, two societies, two ways of thinking and feeling about things.

Languages are in some way unsatisfactory to their speakers; each language is an instrument shaped by its history and the community's norms and patterns of use. As a result, monolingualism is seen as a cultural limitation; and bilingualism is viewed as a sign of cultural solidarity and integration: it is an out look of biculturalism and language diversification.

Many argue that bilinguals have many skills and are not only intellectuals, but they have more opportunities to drown through the traditions and the history of each language. That's what will make them a melting pot of several languages, subsequently cultures. They find themselves enriched and equipped with choices for social gradation with diversified views.

Being a bilingual creates a bridge between generations; a bilingual is able to communicate with various nationalities. Therefore bilingualism helps in constructing a sense of belonging to the extended world. Bilinguals develop relationships, and transmit cultural issues since language is the basic barrier for discovering two different worlds of experience.

On the contrary, a bilingual may fall in the trap of anomia (the suffering from a feeling of social uncertainty or dissatisfaction) as it is widely believed that there is a natural connection between the language spoken by members of a social group and that group's identity: by their accent, vocabulary, and their discourse patterns. In many cases, bilingualism gradually leads to the loss of some typical cultural issues; since culture shapes, to a great extent, the individual's language, the native language repertoire will be affected. Culture is considered as a cluster of attributes such as values, beliefs, behaviour patterns and symbols unique to a particular human group. So, bilinguals may feel culturally hyphenated. A person's identity is normally determined by the age of about 10. Minoura (1984), for example, shows in her research with Japanese children living in Los Angeles, that children who went to the United States before the age of 9 or 10 and had been living there for over four years would not only acquire English to a near-native degree, but would also think, behave, and feel like an American (Arena, 1990: 24).

In addition, a good number of studies show that bilinguals are weaker than monolinguals in their common language. In a study in Chiapas, Modiano (1973) showed that Mexican-Indian children who were taught to read in their own language first and in Spanish second turned out to read better in Spanish three years later than children who received all the education in this language (Downing, 1979: 54).

Bilingualism is not so much a problem as it is a solution. Bilinguals have problems; they are suspected of divided loyalties; they are sometimes labeled as mentally handicapped; they find it hard to keep their languages apart. However, bilingualism is the only way to deal with the situation created by the natural diversification of languages.

To conclude, although a bilingual may live in a state of flux of losing or keeping one's identity (the individual's sense of the self), the world's communities have to bear the slogan of 'the dialogue of cultures'.

## References

- Arena, L. A., 1990, **Language Proficiency: Defining, Teaching, and Testing**, Great Britain: Wm. Collins & Co, Ltd.
- Brisk, M. E., 2008, **Bilingual Education: from Compensatory to Quality Schooling**, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Chin, N. B. and Wigglessworth, G., 2007, **Bilingualism: An Advanced Resource Book**, London and New York: Routledge of the Taylor & Francis Group.
- Downing, J., 1979, **Reading and Reasoning**, Washington: United states Information Agency.
- Hamers, J. F. and Blanc, M. H., 2000, **Bilinguality and Bilingualism**, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kramsch, C., 1998, **Language and Culture**, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lasker, G., 1995, **The Teaching of Anthropology**, England: Longman Group Limited.
- Williams, R., 1983, **Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society**, Oxford: Oxford University Press.