

Reflection Articles



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INSIGHTS ON BILINGUALISM AND BILINGUAL EDUCATION: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE

[PERCEPCIONES SOBRE EL BILINGÜISMO Y LA EDUCACIÓN BILINGÜE: UNA PERSPECTIVA SOCIOLINGÜÍSTICA]

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ABSTRACT

This paper is primarily intended to present some major considerations about bilingualism and bilingual education from a sociolinguistic perspective. In the first instance and due to the high complexity of the issue, I will deal with major definitions of these concepts. Furthermore, I will highlight features of individual and social bilingualism as well as some of their most common effects on individuals and on communities. Lastly, some conditions for the establishment of bilingual communities are put forward, followed by a reflection upon the kind of bilingualism within foreign language (FL) settings referring particularly to the Colombian case.

Keywords: bilingualism, bilingual education, sociolinguistics, FL communities

RESUMEN

El presente artículo expone algunas reflexiones sobre el bilingüismo y la educación bilingüe desde una perspectiva sociolingüística. En primer lugar, y dada la inmensa complejidad del tema, es necesario discutir algunas definiciones acerca de estos dos conceptos. También se resaltan las características del bilingüismo individual y social y algunos de sus efectos en los individuos y en las comunidades. Finalmente, se presentan algunas condiciones para la implementación de comunidades bilingües seguida de una reflexión acerca del bilingüismo que se manifiesta dentro de las comunidades con lengua extranjera (LE) haciendo hincapié en el caso colombiano.

Palabras clave: bilingüismo, educación bilingüe, sociolingüística, comunidades lengua extranjera

263

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1. INTRODUCTION

Talking about bilingualism and bilingual education is a very intricate matter. In some regions, however, it has been taken so simplistically that it may lead to serious misunderstandings, particularly in the determination of what bilingualism and bilingual education might mean for a specific community and what policies should be devised, adopted and enacted.

Even the establishment of a thoughtfully designed and defined linguistic policy has repeatedly proved to have serious difficulties from its very conception up to its implementation and often becomes an expensive and frustrating failure (Spolsky, 2005). As a matter of fact, conceptions about sociolinguistic situation, ethnic and identity perceptions, globalization trends, multilingual and multicultural communities, and language as a recognized human and civil right are some of the constructs that have to be considered as salient components of an inclusive discussion on bilingualism and bilingual education.

More studies need to be conducted so as to get a clearer depiction of the nature of language contacts that seek to understand language dynamism¹. More emphasis should be put upon the epistemological element of language policy in order to illuminate the panorama of likely endeavors in approaching the design and implementation of a bi or multi-lingual community.

I begin this article with some basic considerations on key definitions about bilingualism, both individual and social. In other words, I consider how bilingualism operates inside the individual, and how a bilingual person may affect or may be affected by bilingual communities. In the next section, some insights on bilingual education are presented remarking the fact that bilingualism and bilingual education may be erroneously

understood in some contexts, as may happen in the Colombian case. Further, I move toward the field of bilingual education within the foreign language setting with special reference to the Latin American situation. Finally, I provide some insights for bilingual education in Colombia. Here, I describe the bilingual situation of the country, highlighting the case of indigenous and minority communities which have been persistently neglected by the educational policies.

2. CONSIDERATIONS ON BILINGUALISM

Basically, a bilingual person is someone who knows and uses two languages, or, more specifically, one who speaks, reads, or understands two languages equally well (Richards, J. Platt, & H. Platt, 1992). The term *bilingualism* has been defined from different perspectives. As a matter of fact, disciplines like linguistics, psycholinguistics, and sociolinguistics propose, according to their particular domain, a definition for bilingualism. In general terms, bilingualism is characterized by the alternation of two languages. The problem arises when one wants to define the extent of language competence a person must have to be called bilingual.

The best known definitions of bilingualism, according to Moreno (2009), come from Bloomfield (1933), who states that bilingualism is the native mastery of two languages; Haugen (1953), who argues that bilingualism is the use of complete and meaningful sentences in other languages, and from Weinreich (1952), for whom bilingualism occurs when “two or more languages... are used alternately by the same persons” (p. 1). Clearly, those definitions (and others) may be situated along a continuum moving from a “radical” position to a more flexible one. For example, Macnamara (1967) describes a bilingual person as someone who, besides the

¹ I found particularly well-reasoned the discussion put forward by Ricento (2000) in terms of understanding the evolution of language from a historical and theoretical standpoint.

skills in his or her first language, has skills in one of four modalities of the second language. This is the case of speakers of indigenous languages or speakers of languages that may get in contact, for example communities that live along country borders. This definition would cover a wide range of speakers around the world.

In addition to the concepts above, we should also recognize some variations of bilingualism, for instance, *semilinguism*, (a concept introduced by Cummins and rejected by most scholars due to its discriminatory social connotations) which refers to the limited learning of one of the two languages; and *multi/plurilinguism*, when more than two languages are in use. Given this broad variation in the interpretation and definition of bilingualism, personal and social factors become a key element in establishing a more comprehensive yet nuanced definition of the term.

3. INDIVIDUAL BILINGUALISM

According to Siguán and Mackey (cited in Moreno, 2009) a bilingual person is someone “who, besides his/her L1, possesses a similar competence in a different language, and is able to use either of them within any circumstance with similar effectiveness” (pp. 17-18). The author states that such a definition may be considered as “perfect or ideal” —since what we actually find are individuals who approach this ideal to some extent. Also, he establishes some basic characteristics governing individual bilingualism. They are briefly summarized in the table below.

Table 1: Characteristics of individual bilingualism

Type	Features
Codes independence	Clearly defined codes; automatic language separation
Alternation	Quick and effortless shift from one code to another
Translation	Expressing similar meanings in either code

On the other hand, Weinreich (1952), considering the relationship between the languages that

have come into contact (in this case within the bilingual individual), established three types of bilingualism:

- a) Coordinate bilingualism: the bilingual speaker operates like two juxtaposed monolingual speakers.
- b) Compound bilingualism: two different referents for a single unit of meaning.
- c) Subordinate bilingualism: the dominated language is learnt and used through the dominant language.

It is clear that the factors that intervene in the acquisition of a second code are affected by the individual characteristics of a learner and also by the environment where the performance (and acquisition) takes place. Roughly speaking, we can annotate that a subject may have an active or passive bilingualism, depending on the capacity an individual has to actively use the language skills (listening, reading, reading and speaking), for the former, and the capacity to understand (not produce), for the latter.

4. SOCIAL BILINGUALISM

From a social perspective, bilingualism also affects societies or speech communities; in that sense, a bilingual community may be defined as the environment where two languages are spoken, or where all or some of their members are bilingual. The most widely accepted forms of social bilingualism are those put forward by Appel and Muysken (1986, p. 10), schematically presented below:

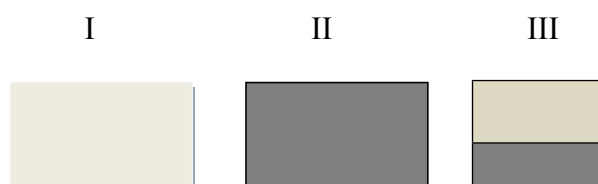


Figure 1: Forms of social bilingualism (adapted from Appel and Muysken, 1986)

For situation I, each language is spoken exclusively by separate groups; it deals with smaller monolingual communities which together make up a bilingual community which needs bilingual individuals for communication among the different language groups. For situation II, almost all of its members are bilingual. Situation III refers to the coexistence of a monolingual group, generally a dominant one from a social perspective. It is important to add that this typology has a theoretical character because it is infrequent to find communities that thoroughly fit one of the schemes.

It is practically impossible to determine how historical, cultural, political, and linguistic factors combine to lead to a bilingual situation. However, Siguan and Mackey (cited in Moreno, 2009, p. 212) identify the historical factors that may intervene to form bilingualism:

1. Expansion: processes to expand territories where a different language is spoken.
2. Unification: political processes to unify minor territories to make bigger states. Usually more powerful groups try to spread and impose their linguistic habits. When this process faces resistance by a minority group, a *linguistic conflict* may appear.
3. Post-colonial situations: independent territories or countries with a linguistically varied population.
4. Immigration: cities or countries that receive large numbers of people who speak a different language than that of their host. It is normal that immigrants need to learn their host language to survive. However, they try to keep their mother language to preserve their roots. It is quite possible that second or third generation may see their parents' language as one of "minor status" and a situation of subtractive bilingualism occurs.
5. Cosmopolitanism: places where international contacts take place, especially for commercial and political purposes.

On the other hand, within bilingual (and monolingual) communities, it is customary to find different uses and social functions of a language. This phenomenon leads to recognition of what has been called *diglossia*. For Ferguson (1959) the term refers to "a specific relationship between two or more varieties of the same language in use in a speech community in different functions" (p. 232). For his part, Bright (1966) provides perhaps, the simplest definition and states that diglossia refers to the sharp differences in form and function between formal and informal style. Moreno (2009) understands diglossia like a functional disparity in which some cultural factors (spread culture/ limited culture); socio-political factors (dominant group/dominated group); and linguistic factors (language distance, intelligibility, language diffusion, number of speakers) are involved.

Furthermore, Fishman (1979) provides a definition of diglossia which has been lately accepted within the sociolinguistic field. He asserts that there will be diglossia as long as two linguistic varieties exist. These varieties may be either dialects, registers of a same language or two different languages —to which different functions have been assigned. Taking this interpretation of an ample diglossia, Rojo (cited in Moreno, 2009) suggests the concept of *adscriptio diglossia*, which refers to the situation where the languages do not coexist within the whole environment of a community. In other words, certain groups use a linguistic system for particular functions and other groups use a different system for the same functions. Generally, those of a higher social stratum use a sort of language for more prestigious and formal settings, whereas those belonging to a lower social level will have limited access to those settings.

So far no study has been undertaken in Colombia to establish whether these varieties of foreign language (English) have been described in reference to our school communities. What is true is the fact that the learning of English as second/foreign language at bilingual institutions, mostly private ones, is more frequent than the learning of it in lower social strata establishments.

For instance, Mejia and Fonseca (2008) found that English is used (over 50%) as a medium of instruction and contact within international and national bilingual institutions in the country.

Given the fact that a language is predominantly used with social purposes, it is also relevant to consider the concept of domain and communicative situation. The first one involves the place, the time of the communication, the participants, topics and pragmatic conditions. Within bilingual settings it is important to distinguish between public or formal domains (school, work, religion, etc.) and private or informal domains (family, friends). On the other hand and whatever the language, the economic, cultural, social, political, religious, and even affective factors will determine the level of language within a communicative situation.

5. EFFECTS OF BILINGUALISM

Any time that two languages come into contact, inevitably they will affect both individuals and societies. From the point of view of people (a psychological perspective), and when the social conditions are not favorable to bilingualism (or to the bilingual individuals), a situation harmful to the individual's personality could arise, a sense of social isolation, *anomie*, that causes anxiety (Beardsmore, cited in Moreno, 2009). Likewise, the limited competence and use of one of the languages may provoke avoidance of social activities. Conversely, it has been demonstrated that bilingualism may be helpful for improving intelligence test scores (Lamber & Tucker, 1972) and may meliorate some of the individual's cognitive skills (Cummins, 1976).

The social advantages of bilingualism are quite evident. For instance, the need to establish a number of diverse relationships to increase the understanding and knowledge among people is crucial for the current world. When the acquisition of a second language which is prestigious (socially recognized) is attained, and when that acquisition is taken as a personal gain, we are talking about an *additive bilingualism*. Conversely, when the

acquisition of an L2 responds to a socio-economic need, and it supposes the separation or gradual loss of the L1, we face what is known as *subtractive bilingualism* (Moreno, 2009).

6. CONSIDERATIONS ON BILINGUAL EDUCATION

In some contexts where the teaching (and by inference the learning) of a language falls into the category of "foreign", that is the target language (TL) is taught within instructional setting and with very limited and particular purposes, bilingualism tends to be confused with bilingual education. Broadly defined, bilingual education encompasses the use of the two languages as a means of instruction (Brisk, 2005). Some of the people in favor of bilingual education argue that only dual language programs that consist of instruction in both languages equally distributed during the day are accepted as bilingual education. Siguán and Mackey (1986) state that bilingual education is the system in which two languages are used as the means of instruction, and one of those languages is normally the students' first language. The reality is that bilingual education may occur following particular circumstances, like the needs of the students and the availability of resources. However, some programs of education are misleadingly called "bilingual", since within these programs L1 is the only means of instruction and the TL is seen like one more subject on the syllabus.

The implementation and execution of bilingual education programs is, no doubt, a complex phenomenon that involves not only linguistic, sociological, cultural and psychological factors but also educational and political issues.

7. TYPES OF BILINGUAL EDUCATION

It is important to reflect upon the linguistic aims of a given educational system which are likely the result of the state political decisions. According to those purposes, a system may be interested in having its students fully competent in both

languages or just in one of them leaving the other to a lower level of competence. It is also important to consider the place assigned to the use of the languages within the curriculum. It is likely a balanced distribution of subjects or that one of the languages receives a special attention whereas the other one is left in a secondary place. Fishman and Lovas (cited in Moreno, 2009) propose a four-level taxonomy of bilingual education:

- b. Attitude dimension: linguistic attitudes may be affected by geographical factors, migration and by political and socio-economic situation of the country.
- c. Educational aims dimension: objectives proposed for minority and majority languages.
- d. Cultural dimension: level of literacy, mobility and contact among different groups within a territory.

Table 2: Taxonomy of bilingual education

Type of bilingual education	Main features
Transitory	L1 to approach the L2
Mono-literacy	L1 for conversations and to teach some subjects
Partial	To teach writing and reading in both languages; L1 for particular issues of the minority language, and L2 to teach scientific subjects
Complete	L1 and L2 are to be used to teach with no restriction

Undoubtedly, the existence of such varied and numerous factors make bilingual education a complex task to design and to apply. It is of pivotal importance that speech communities have to be considered. In this sense, Spolsky (2005) highlights that “language management remains a dream until it is implemented, and its potential for implementation depends in large measure on its congruity to the practices and ideology of the community” (p. 2161).

This insight supports the idea of the need for a policy design that stands on communities’ beliefs and actual language use (I use communities in plural for the vast array of speech communities). In other words, a bottom-up approach would pick up more real sustenance to build non-exclusive language regulation. Although being logical, this is an ideal method based on social construction which seems quite unlikely to happen especially in countries with strongly centralized governments.

7. BILINGUALISM IN FL SETTINGS

So far I have discussed some major issues regarding bilingualism and bilingual education in regions or territories where two languages meet. This fact implies that there may be a social need for the establishment of bilingual programs. However, this is not always the case, sometimes the language that is to be part of the bilingual community has the status of “foreign”, not “second language”, a slight semantic difference that has profound implications when talking about bilingual education. Roughly speaking, a “foreign” language is that which is not used for everyday communication among the

Additionally, model of immersion for bilingual education programs is well known. In this regard, we can talk about *early immersion* when all the early instruction is done in a second language, and *late immersion*, when the L2 is introduced in the last years of primary instruction.

The relationship between the student’s language and the instruction language may lead to a conflictive model of education. For instance, when the student’s language and the instruction language do not coincide and the educative model does not consider this imbalance, the instruction situation may become a failure. Anyhow, it is important to take into account the linguistic origins and the cultural and linguistic difference of the students. Lewis (cited in Moreno, 2009) points out four international dimensions for bilingual education:

- a. Demographic-linguistic dimension: distribution and effect of the bilingualism within urban and rural areas; sociological status of each language of multilingual nations.

people who share the same setting, and that it is commonly learned in classrooms during controlled times and for limited purposes (Graddol, cited in Garzón & Miranda, 2009, p. 110).

Given this situation, we have to contemplate that that type of language (the foreign language) is seen not as an immediate need, and consequently necessary curricular adjustment has not been considered urgent. It is mistakenly believed that training language teachers to reach higher TL standards is enough to qualify a society as bilingual. I am not asserting that mastering the TL is not important, but rather that it is just one step towards the implementation of bilingual education programs. Most countries in South America, for instance, have decided to implement bilingual education programs² to meet international standards in order to make those countries “more competitive” in terms of international markets.

In this regard, it is important to consider that a bilingual education model and bilingual education programs are not the same. The former deals with linguistic, cultural, and societal goals whereas the latter may be defined by features like students’ population, language teachers and the program structure itself (King, 2005).

On the other hand, Hornberger (cited in Mejia, 2005) proposes a typology of bilingualism applied to the South American context. She ascertains that there are a number of bilingual education programs throughout South America, but that the bilingual education models may be categorized in two basic types: a) an enrichment model that fosters language development and additive bilingualism —a model designed particularly for the elite—; and b) a traditional model especially intended for the maintenance of indigenous languages that in the long run, would promote a subtractive bilingualism. In the Colombian case, the efforts for developing a bilingual model may fit the enrichment model since this type has to

do with programs targeted at students who are monolingual speakers of the dominant (official) language, and that manages the instruction of English as a foreign language (King, 2005).

Hornberger (cited in Mejia, 2005) also highlights some of the major obstacles that the implementation of an enrichment bilingual education model may imply:

1. The development of appropriate pedagogical approaches and academic materials.
2. Moving beyond controversy concerning the dialect or variety to be used in instruction.
3. Addressing conflicting language ideologies within the community.

The above mentioned hindrances have to do with pedagogical, political and socio-cultural aspects involved in the complex issue of establishing a bilingual education policy. This implies that such a policy should be a multiparty construction involving most of the actors of a society. In my opinion, in Colombia, only the language that will be part of the bilingual project (English) has so far been decided.

Considerations for Bilingual Education in Colombia

In Law 115, article 21 (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 1994), the Ministry of Education of Colombia states that the acquisition of reading and conversation elements in a foreign language is a national educational objective; in article 22, it again states that comprehension and capacity to express oneself in a foreign language is an educational objective. Likewise, article 23 includes humanities, Spanish and foreign language as fundamental and mandatory areas. There seems to be a tacit understanding that English is the foreign language, given its commercial and international status although it is not explicitly stated in official

² For further discussion see (ed.) Anne-Marie de Mejia’s motivating book: *Bilingual Education in South America* (2005).

documents as evidenced in the legal support mentioned above.

In the same vein, the Political Constitution of Colombia of 1991 proclaims that “Castilian [Spanish] is the official language of Colombia. Languages and dialects of ethnic groups are also official within their territories. Teaching within communities with their own linguistic traditions will be bilingual” (my translation) (Pineda, 2000, p. 18). It is clear then that our nation has a legal support to respect and even promote vernacular languages all over the nation.

However, what it is not clear is how government is to implement measures to fulfill this policy. We have inevitably to refer to a more complex issue regarding the effects of contact between languages taking into account social relationships of power. In other words, although vernacular languages can be considered co-official within their own territories, there are wider contexts in the administrative and commercial life of the country that will limit the use of any indigenous language. On the other hand, the Law 115 also proposes education for the ethnic groups (Chapter 3). It defines it as the education offered to groups or communities that possess their own culture, language and traditions. In any case, this kind of education should be tied to the environment, production process, and social and cultural processes, always respecting their beliefs and traditions. Its main goal is to consolidate processes of identity, knowledge, socialization, protection and proper use of nature, organization criteria and practice, use of vernacular languages, teacher training and research within all domains of culture (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, Decree 804, 1994).

Nevertheless, those minority languages —deaf community languages, Afro-Colombian language and especially indigenous languages (around 64 languages and 300 dialectal varieties, according to Fundación Herrera [cited in Ayala & Alvarez, 2005]) also have their voices to be heard within the Colombian context. Policy-makers have overtly disregarded and disrespected the Universal

Declaration of Linguistic Rights that calls for the preservation of everyone’s right to a linguistic identity (Chacón, 2004). Whatever the case, it is clear that this issue deals with political decisions that do not always take social and cultural considerations into account when undertaking a project of such significance.

On the other hand, it appears that the type of bilingualism to be implemented in Colombia would be likely aimed at developing individual additive bilingualism rather than a social bilingualism. There are a number of reasons to support this insight. Firstly, there is no decision made in terms of considering some basic guidelines as to promote necessary adjustments in curricula and syllabi. The actions undertaken so far are focused on evaluating secondary education language teachers and developing language teachers’ linguistic competences; however, the language proficiency level attained by teachers does not guarantee students’ expected foreign language acquisition. Furthermore, not all of the evaluated teachers are foreign language teachers, particularly those teaching at the primary education level, that is to say, that pedagogical and didactic drawbacks might hinder, to a great extent, the teaching and learning of the FL subject. Also, it is one thing that a language teacher possesses good language proficiency, but it is another thing entirely different that his/her learners will reach a similar level; in other words, teaching does not ensure learning. Secondly, I wonder whether our policy-makers are sufficiently qualified as anthropologists, sociologists, linguists, psychologists and sociologists so as to be competent in undertaking serious discussion of the field of language planning and policy. What one can perceive is that after over six years of life of the aforementioned bilingualism project the tangible results are far from those that were announced and promised. Thirdly, I am still not convinced that having better language (teachers) speakers, without the necessary changes in study plans (number of class hours per week, number of students per class, bilingualism-directed teaching, introduction of a FL-based general curriculum, implementation of new technology for communication and

information, etc.) would result in the expected success. In this regard, universities should start the training of language teachers to make them specialists in bilingual programs. This, of course, would demand a steady and costly investment, and would only be the very beginning strategy to establish a bilingual education endeavor.

Another issue which deserves special attention has to do with the evaluation of bilingualism and bilingual education programs. This means that the purposes and objectives of such plans must be particularly clear and attainable so that when the time for assessment and evaluation procedures comes (evaluation of on-going plans as well as results of the plans), the educational institution and the evaluation staff have the necessary foundations of judgment and the required tools. The evaluation should include elements to measure not only the use of the TL -linguistic competence, communicative competence, pragmatic competence and social competence, but also the effects of the bilingual program's implementation process on individuals and on the communities.

8. CONCLUSION

What really matters is that within our current world, where distance is dramatically reduced if not eliminated, the introduction of bilingual and multilingual communities is an asset for most societies. Nevertheless, the design and implementation of such communities must be a question of informed decisions drawn from several and diversified sources. It is true that education is dependent upon political determination, but it is not less true that linguistic, cultural, and social factors must be carefully intertwined, designed, tested and incorporated. This means that language teachers and the scholars' communities, who are perhaps the most authorized people because of their expertise and experience in the field of language teaching, have a major role to play.

I am convinced that it is through serious and supported research projects carried out throughout the country that encompass, catalogue and analyze the diversity of our society, that a project and a process for establishing bilingual education models may attain the desired and proclaimed success. In this regard, a number of undertakings have been being developed in some regions —especially in some major cities of the country. However, it seems to me that despite the fact that the goals of the Bilingualism National Plan (a State proposal for Colombia mainly aimed at public institutions) are quite clear: to have a bilingual literate society by the year 2019 (defined as eleventh graders who will achieve B1, university students B2, and university language students C1, language levels adapted from the Common European Framework [Garzón & Miranda, 2009, p. 115]), the procedures are somehow blurred and a definite bilingual state policy has not been set – for research, implementation and evaluation that guarantees the reach of that ambitious but needed goal.

Finally, the road is long, intricate and sometimes treacherous, but is likely the compulsory route we must take. What we cannot forget is that all language planning, policy and implementation has to do not only with language but mainly with people.

1. Ecuador (1980), Bolivia (1994), Brazil, Peru(1972), Argentina (1993) have defined, if not complete language policies, at least some regulations regarding the learning of foreign/ second languages included in their education laws.
2. The results of the application of the QPT test showed that most of the tested teachers are under the desired proficiency level (out of 11.064 evaluated teachers just the 10% would have reached B2 level or higher, [Garzón & Miranda, 2009, p. 112]).

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272

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