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Bilingualism: Pains and Pleasures

The problem of bilingualism knows no temporal and spatial boundaries. European records show that bilingualism existed as far back as 400 B.C. In fact, Sumerian coniferous scripts of two to three thousand years B.C. recorded attempts of children trying to translate between languages. In China, when Confucius travelled from state to state trying to convince the kings of his political ideology, as the records goes, he used an "official language"; this implied that there was more than one language in concurrent use in the ancient China some two and a half thousand years ago.

The problem of bilingualism is not one that is particular to present-day Singapore. As a matter of fact, research on the Canadian problem of French-English bilingualism has been an inspiration to researchers of bilingualism all over the world. In more recent years, the establishment of the European Economic Community with its political and economic needs has given rise to the bilingualism problem which Europeans did not have to contend with in the past. The problem seems to be even more acute in the northern region of Europe where the languages are not the 'mainstream' ones. A very vivid instance of bilingualism, or more accurately multilingualism, is exemplified by the situation found in the USSR where there are no less than 130 different languages; literary works are published in 78 languages; plays are performed in 42 languages; learned journals are printed in 46 languages and school textbooks in 56 languages; and, radio stations broadcast in 67 different languages. Obviously, this is no simple problem in

any sense of the word.

Thus, when we look beyond our shores, from past to present, bilingualism is not new at all and is definitely not our monopoly.

Bilingualism and Thinking

Does learning two languages concurrently affect a person's thinking? This is not only an academically interesting question; it has implications for school learning and, later on, work life as well.

The close relation between language and thinking can be understood with a few examples. For instance, in English, the colours of the rainbow are described conventionally as red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet. Yet, in the Shona

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language of Rhodesia there are only four colour names for the rainbow. There is only one word for *snow* in English, but the Eskimos refer to different states of snow by no less than six names, for falling snow, frozen snow, melting snow, etc. What is called by one Chinese word, *loutuo* (骆驼 camel), is represented by a very large vocabulary in Arabian to differentiate the rather subtle differences among camels of different breeds.

Closer home, the English words *uncle* and *aunt* do not take into account linearity in family relationships. However, in the Chinese language, it takes five different Chinese characters to make clear the distance and seniority in family relations:

bo 伯 for paternal uncle who is older than father; *shu* 叔 for paternal uncle who is younger than father; *jiu* 舅 for maternal uncle, both older or younger than mother; *gu* 姑 for paternal aunt, irrespective of seniority; and, *yi* 姨 for maternal aunt, again, irrespective of seniority. Likewise, the word *cousin* covers what in Chinese is of eight different relationships when linearity, seniority, and gender are all taken account of.

These instances suggest that things (here, concepts) may be quite different in different languages and that the differences may well reflect the cultural differences and, perhaps, economic and other practical reasons.

The relation between language and thinking has also been studied empirically. Experiments show that the emotional responses elicited in the bilingual person by the same word presented in two languages are not

necessarily the same. For example, words referring to concrete objects, such as *table* and its French equivalent, means the same *emotionally* to English-French bilinguals. Abstract words such as *democracy* and its French equivalent, however, induce different emotional responses in the bilinguals. Similarly, in the local scene, *hate* is used rather freely with much weaker emotional tone than its Chinese equivalent *恨*. Another good example is the word *dear* which suggests nothing more than friendly fondness in English; but to address or be addressed by its Chinese equivalent (*qinaide* 亲爱的) implies an intense emotional attachment which is normally reserved for a loving couple.

An American study shows clearly how language influences thinking. A group of French-Arabian bilingual university students were asked to answer the question, "What would you do if your wife disagrees with you?" In French, a typical answer was, "I shall try my best to understand her." In Arabian, when answering the same question six weeks later, a typical answer was, "I will divorce her." This suggests that when thinking in a particular language, people tend to bring into their frame of mind the cultural aspects of that language. Similar

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results were found in Australian studies of Australian and Chinese students in universities. These students were asked to write about how they would persuade their unmotivated brothers to study hard. Australian students tended to point out personal benefits that might accrue to the brothers and used a more persuasive tone. On the other hand, the Chinese students mentioned more frequently the importance of studying hard so as to contribute to the well-being of the society and the nation; they were more direct and invoked more imperatives.

Is it then beneficial to master two languages? In a Canadian study, the students involved were interviewed after they had taken the tests and were asked which language (English or French) they had used throughout the testing. Some students reported that they switched from one language to the other when a question got tough. Other students did not realize they had switched languages after reading the questions, until they were probed by the researchers. It seems that mastering two languages equipped the students not only with bilingual abilities but also a more flexible and versatile thinking process. In fact, such code-switching is not an uncommon linguistic fact in any bilingual or multilingual community. Purists may throw up their arms and sociolinguists may smilingly accept it; and, the debate goes on.

Mutual Influence Between Languages

Is learning another language detrimental to the one learned earlier? In local terms, will learning, say, Chinese (or English) adversely affect the learning of English (or Chinese)? People do not seem to agree on this point and what does research say? Before trying to answer this question, another question has to be asked: Are we talking about a particular child in a specific and, perhaps, atypical situation or a large group of children under 'normal' circumstances?

First of all, we ought to accept the fact that there is no such thing as a 'perfect' language; it is an abstraction that exists in the mind of the academic linguist studying a 'typical' language user who does not exist. Even if we were to spend all our time

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learning only just one language, not all of us will reach the hypothetical level of perfection. What of learning two languages? On the other hand, there are people who easily master not even two but six or seven languages; such are exceptional, of course.

As a matter of fact, research evidence shows that a great proportion of the mistakes children make when learning two languages are not caused by the commonly accused culprit of *inter-lingual interference*; many of the so-called errors arise from the children's attempt to apply what they have learned in the first-learned language. For instance, having learned that one adds '-ed' to a verb when referring to a past event, applying this rule to the word *go* (where the rule is not applicable, for reasons unknown to the children and, of course, the adults around them) gives rise to the erroneous *goed*. It is through making such errors that the children come to learn about the arbitrary exceptions and gradually 'perfect' his English. Such 'errors'

have nothing to do with any other language the children are learning concurrently. More specifically, studies involving children in bilingual programmes, of English and other European or non-European languages, show that errors that can be legitimately classified as due to inter-lingual interference constitute around five percent of all the errors the children made. In other words, inter-lingual interference might have been a scapegoat carrying the can for errors arising from other sources and conditions; or at least, the importance of such interference has been unduly exaggerated.

Should learning two languages concurrently cause inter-lingual interference, then one would expect a person who is proficient in one language to be weak in another. In statistical terms this means that a *negative correlation* between levels of proficiency in the two languages should be found among a large groups of children learning two languages at the same time. On this, what does research say?

Studies in this regard by and large involved American and Canadian students, especially undergraduates, and show that the two languages are complementary rather than antagonistic. Having mastered one language enhances the ability to learn another and hence makes the learning of another language easier. (No one will disagree that being able to drive a Ford Laser makes driving an Alpha Romeo easier, with some adjustments when compared with learning to drive the very first car.) Of course, such beneficial *positive transfer* depends to some extent on the relation (or distance) between the two languages. As gathered from results of empirical research, the amount of 'overlap' between English and other languages are: 29-42% with Swedish, 46% with French, 47% with an African language, and 21% with Spanish.

A much neglected point needs be mentioned, here. In practically all such studies, the two language tests have different content. For instance, a description of an accident may be used in one language test while the test of the other language may be about a day by the seaside. Thus, the two language tests assess students on

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their relevant knowledge in addition to testing them on languages. This results in an underestimated relation between the two sets of language scores and leads (or, misleads) to the impression that languages are unrelated. A local research shows that when tests of English and Chinese used the same content for writing the questions and thus kept content of the language tests constant, there is a rather high overlap of no less than 80% between the two sets of scores obtained from the same children. What this suggests is that, under normal circumstances, learning one language should help the learning of the other. This also suggests that deep down in the minds of the bilinguals, there is a common core of knowledge which can be coded and expressed by using two languages interchangeably.

Bilingual Pains

Like many things in life, mastering two languages begins with some bitter experiences but ends with sweet fruits. Talking from personal experience, I was very interested in Western classical music in the fifties and most of the books on it were in English. To learn more about music, I had to read books in English. One problem was that there were so many unfamiliar words on every page, sometimes twenty or more. The only solution was to look up a English-

Chinese dictionary. This laborious process, as expected, slowed down the reading speed and took away much of the pleasure. However, reading for a second time was more rewarding. In the sixties, when I became a lecturer at the then Teachers' Training College, I was faced with a similar problem because most of the materials I needed were available only in English. In hindsight, I was glad that my interest in music and my job as a lecturer provided me with the necessary motivation to become bilingual. As the days passed by, what was a toil in the beginning became a habit and reading in English has since become second nature to me. Of course, there is a long way from looking up words in the dictionary to thinking in English.

Not long ago, I asked a group of teachers and other professionals about how they felt about becoming bilinguals -- the painful side of it. Here are some of their replies:

Learning new words

Unable to read newspapers

Can't speak Mandarin during work

Mixing up words in two languages

Being 'half half' in both languages

When learning, is afraid of being laughed at

Because of bi-culture, has communication problems

Called upon to serve as an interpreter

Being criticised in another language, yet the other person thought I didn't understand the language

Much of these pains or displeasure are temporary, superficial, and transitory. However, the difficulty in communication due to bi-culturalism is worthy of further thoughts. When adults learn another language, they may have to go through a stage of *anomie*, a feeling of normlessness, a sense of being neither fish nor fowl, or simply an emotional state of 'does not belong'. In an American experiment, a group of undergraduates learning French were forbidden to speak in English during the experimental period. As they advanced in mastering French, they increasingly felt lost and ambiguous as if they did not know where they were heading for, psychologically. This feeling, however, did not last long. Again, speaking from personal experience, I

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had similar feelings when moving between my Chinese-educated and English-educated colleagues years back. When I was in the company of Chinese-educated colleagues, I not infrequently found discordance in the ways we saw things. Likewise, with my English-educated fellow-lecturers, I sensed the difference in our thinking, too. How my colleagues really thought, I did not know; but, the *anomic* feeling was very real to me, then.

Thus, moving between people of different cultural backgrounds, one can experience a psychological normlessness which makes one feel out of place or misfitting, however shortlived this may be. This is by no means a comfortable emotional state,

as people need people. One possible solution is to seek the company of people with like experience, the bilinguals, and thus reduce the psychological ambiguity.

Bilingual Pleasures

What then are the pleasures of being a bilingual? Again, I asked some teachers. Here are some of what they shared with me:

- Learn about another culture*
- Make more friends*
- Able to enjoy more TV programmes*
- Able to talk to more people*
- Read newspapers in two languages*
- Gain more knowledge*
- Make another person feel at ease*
- Able to speak different languages according to the situations*
- Feel proud of knowing own language*
- Appreciate another culture*
- Able to communicate with people of different cultural backgrounds*
- When a problem cannot be solved in one cultural perspective, use the other one*

In another enquiry, I asked a group of adults who were learning Mandarin for either professional or personal reasons, what pleasure they got from learning another language. These are what they said:

- Able to speak another language*
- It helps in work and social life*
- Feel proud of being able to learn it*
- Understand another culture, appreciate its roots*
- When marketing, able to use the proper names and do not have to gesture*
- Can express myself and be understood*
- It lets me understand another cultural perspective*
- Able to switch between languages*
- It expands my thinking*

As gathered from these, the pleasures of becoming bilingual are plenty: enriching knowledge, enhancing cultural awareness, increasing enjoyment, promoting communication, improving thinking skills, facilitating social and work life, and strengthening self-respect. All

this is aptly summed up in what a great Greek philosopher said, more than two thousand years ago:

Learning one more language is opening another window on your house and it gives you another beautiful scenery to admire at.

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