

# Bilingualism: Some major distinctions

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## Introduction

Defining exactly which language user is or is not bilingual is essentially elusive and ultimately impossible. Is the ownership of two languages so simple as having two wheels of a bicycle or two eyes of a binocular? Is someone bilingual if he is more fluent in one language and less fluent in the other? An individual may regularly use two languages, but his competence in one particular language may be limited. Alternatively, a person may be able to speak two languages, but tends to speak only one language in practice. Another person may use one language for conversation and the other for reading and writing. Thus the **essential distinction is between language ability and language use**. This is also referred to as the difference **between degree and function**. The ongoing research in ELT shows that **there** is a need to make initial distinction between bilingualism as an individual characteristic and bilingualism in a social group, community, region or country. In other words, the distinction lies between bilingualism as an individual possession and that as a group possession: **individual bilingualism and societal bilingualism**. However, bilingualism at the individual level is half the story. The other essential half is to analyze how groups of language speakers behave and change according to various contexts. Bilinguals do not exist as separated islands. In fact, the bilingual population of the world is growing as international travel, communication, mass media, emigration and planetary economy are creating the global village.

## How Are the Bilinguals classified?

Bilinguals are classified on the basis of :

- a. Age (simultaneous/sequential/late)
- b. Ability (incipient/receptive/productive)
- c. Balance between two languages in terms of use
- d. Language Development (ascendant: the second language is developing; recessive: the first language is declining)
- e. Contexts of language use (home/work/public gathering/school/college).

Valdes and Figueroa (1994) have added the sixth dimension: circumstantial and elective bilinguals. Circumstantial bilinguals learn another language in order to survive in a new environment (e.g. immigrant). Consequently, their first language tends to be replaced by their second language. Their first language becomes insufficient to meet the educational, political, employment, commercial, and above all, communicative needs of the society in which they are relocated. Elective bilingualism is a matter of choice. This is a characteristic of the individuals who choose to learn a language formally in a classroom situation. They do add a second language without losing their first language.

## Language Ability

Language Ability is often used as an umbrella term. For some researchers, language ability is a general, latent disposition, a determinant of eventual language success. For others, language ability is used as an outcome, similar but less specific than language skills, indicating the current or existing language level. Again, language ability is distinct from language achievement.

There are four basic language abilities: listening, speaking, reading and writing. These abilities fit into two dimensions: receptive and productive: oracy and literacy. Let us consider the following table :

**TABLE – I**

<b>SKILLS</b>	<b>ORACY</b>	<b>LITERACY</b>
<b>Receptive</b>	<b>Listening</b>	<b>Reading</b>
<b>Productive</b>	<b>Speaking</b>	<b>Writing</b>

These four basic language abilities do not exist in **black and white terms**. Between the two extremes, there exists a wide variety of colours. For instance, Reading can range from simple and basic to fluent and accomplished. Moreover, an individual may listen and comprehend in one context (e.g. shopping mall) but not in another context (e.g. academic lecture). In fact, there are skills within the skills. These are traditionally listed as pronunciation, extent of vocabulary, grammar, usage and style. Similarly, speaking and reading abilities can be subdivided into open-ended, microscopic segments. However, there are times when a user neither speaks, nor reads, nor writes and nor even listens; still he uses a language. This refers to thinking, to be more specific, inner thinking. As Skutnabb-Kangas (1981) proposed, the language used for inner thinking can be considered the **fifth dimension of language ability**. This has further been termed as inner speech and placed under the umbrella term “speaking. Cummins J (1984b) expresses this notion as **academic competence** in a language. In other words, this is the ability to use one or both the languages for reasoning and reflection, outside academics as well as inside.

**Bilingualism: Minimal, Maximal, Balanced**

What has emerged so far is that a person’s ability in two languages is multidimensional and thus will tend to evade any simple categorization. Therefore, deciding who is or is not bilingual is much difficult. Moreover, simple categorization is arbitrary. It requires a value judgement about the minimal competence needed for achieving a label of bilingual. Therefore, a classic definition of bilingualism : the native-like control of two or more languages (Bloomfield, 1933) appears to be intrinsically arbitrary, ambiguous, too extreme and maximalist in nature. Thus it offers little help and is difficult to defend. The questions that arise are :

- a. What do we exactly mean by language control?
- b. Who forms the native reference group?

At the other hand, we have the minimalist definition of bilingualism: Diebold’s (1964) concept of incipient bilingualism. Incipient bilingualism allows the language users with minimal competence in a second language to squeeze into the bilingual category. For instance, e can refer to people with some greetings or phrases in the second language. The most pertinent question here is: Is there a middle-ground in-between maximal and minimal definitions? The danger lies in making arbitrary cut-off points about marking bilinguals in terms of language competence. One option is to shift from the elaborate, multi-coloured canvas of language proficiency levels to a stable portrait of the everyday use of two languages by individuals. Creating a multi-dimensional structure of bilingual proficiency may make for sensitivity and precision. A word of caution: the danger of being too exclusive cannot be overcome by being too inclusive. This will be like trawling with too wide a fishing net in order to catch too many varieties at a time. Consequently, the discussion on bilingualism may turn ambiguous, imprecise, insensitive and restrictive.

In the domain of ESL teaching, some focus is always given on one particular group of bilinguals whose competences in two languages (mother tongue and the second language) are well developed. The persons

who are approximately equally fluent in two languages across various contexts are termed as equilinguals, ambilinguals or balanced bilinguals. **Balanced bilingualism** is sometimes considered a utopian or an idealized concept. Fishman (1971) argued that rarely anyone would be equally competent in two languages across all situations. Most bilinguals tend to use their two languages for different purposes, in different contexts and with different people. Moreover, the balance may exist at low level of competence in both languages. Importantly, the implicit idea of balanced bilingualism has often been of reasonable competence in both languages. Therefore, a child who can understand the delivery of his school curriculum in either language and participate in classroom activities in either language is a true example of balanced bilingual.

### **Semilinguals exhibit low profile**

In terms of language ability, bilinguals sometimes tend to be dominant in one of their two languages. For some bilinguals, dominance may change over time with geographical or social mobility. For others, it may be relatively stable across time and space. Research on bilingualism shows the emergence of one more group, the group that is distinct from balanced and dominant bilinguals. Termed as Semilinguals, the group is regarded as not having reasonable competence in either language. Semilingualism is described in terms of deficiencies when compared with monolinguals in terms of language competence. A semilingual is considered to exhibit low profile in both their languages. He displays poor vocabulary and incorrect grammar, needs to think consciously about language production, is stilted and uncreative with each language and finds it difficult to think and express emotions in either.

The notion of Semilingualism has received much criticism (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1981;Mac San, 2000). Six major problems have been identified:

- i. It has been viewed as a negative label that invokes expectations of underachievement that may evoke self-fulfilling prophecy.
- ii. If languages are relatively undeveloped, the origin may not lie in bilingualism, but in the user's socio-economic-academic conditions evoking that underdevelopment. Since it locates the origin of underdevelopment in the internal, individual possession of bilingualism rather than in external, societal factors coexisting with bilingualism, it should be viewed as a political or social rather than linguistic concept.
- iii. In case of majority of bilinguals, the use of language is context-specific. It is quite likely that a particular user may be competent in some contexts, but not in others.
- iv. The language proficiency tests may be insensitive to the qualitative aspects of language. A small unrepresentative sample of a person's daily language behaviour may be measured. In this case, the deficiencies will be an artifact of narrow academic tests.
- v. There is a controversy regarding the extent of Semilingualism. How many language users fit into a semilingual category is a real issue. Establishing a cut-off point for who is or who is not semilingual will be arbitrary and value-laden. There is a lack of sound objective evidence on such a categorization.
- vi. That bilinguals are compared with their matched monolinguals is not fair. It is important to know whether a bilingual is qualitatively and quantitatively different from his matched monolingual in his use of two languages.

No doubt, there are language abilities on which people do differ. But socio-economic-academic factors may be the causes of those differences. Instead of highlighting the apparent deficits in an individual's language competence, the approach should be to emphasize that language competence can be developed to a desired level, provided language learning/acquisition conditioned are improved. When a language deficit is identified, there is an immediate need to locate the dominating factors culminating in a deficit.

## Functional Bilingualism

Language is a living organism and cannot be divorced from the real-life contexts where it is used. The socio-political-academic environment where an individual's two languages function is crucial to understanding bilingual usage. An individual's use of his bilingual ability is commonly termed as functional bilingualism. It moves into language production across the gamut of everyday activities. It concerns when, where and with whom people use their two languages (Fishman, 1965). The following table shows different language targets (language users) and the language domains (contexts) where functional bilingualism occurs in different role-relationships:

**TABLE - II**

<b>Language Targets</b>	<b>Language Domains</b>
Nuclear/extended family	shopping, visual & auditory media
Colleagues	printed media
Friends	cinema, disco, theatre, concert
Professionals	IT (computers, advanced technology)
Office workers	business communication (Telephonic, face-to-face, written)

Baker (1985) suggests that a distinction needs to be made between **functional bilingualism and language background**. Language background is a wider concept than functional bilingualism. It refers to both the participative and the non-participative language experiences. Non-participative language background is an indirect by-stander experience. For example, a child may be asked ,”hat language does your father speak to your grandma when you are at home ? “In this case, the language background is non-participative and indirect for the child.

On the contrary, functional bilingualism is a narrower concept. It concerns direct involvement in a language domain. It is, therefore, restricted to the personal reception and production of language (direct listening, reading, speaking and writing) in various domains. Thus functional bilingualism is often studied as real speech events. Hymes (1972b) suggests that there are eight interrelated categories ,represented by the word SPEAKING:

- S. Setting includes time, place and physical appearance of the extent of a speech event.
- P. Participant Identity: age, gender, ethnicity, social status and relationship between two Participants in a speech event.
- E. End includes the Rationale /purpose of a speech event .
- A. Act sequence refers to the order and organization of a speech event.
- K. Key is the tone and manner in which something is said or written.
- I. Instrumentalities: linguistic code or the language that is used for a speech event or Writing.
- N. Norm or the standard social and cultural rules of the interaction relationship.
- G. Genre or type of event such as religious event, classroom lecture, letter or e-mail Text.

As one or more of the above factors changes, the language in use may change. This refers to the fact that language choice (who will speak what language, when and to whom – Fishman, 1965) is the result of a large and interacting set of factors. Similarly, an individual's own attitudes and preferences influence his/her choice of a language.

In this context, it will be relevant to refer to David Crystal's arguments (2000). Crystal has suggested **five basic arguments** why retaining language diversity is essential:

- a. Language diversity is a natural phenomenon. Where biological diversity and rich ecosystem exist, linguistic and cultural diversity will exist too.
- b. Languages express identity that provides security and status of a shared existence (e.g. social group/community/region).
- c. Languages are repositories of history, providing a link to personalized past, a means to reach the archive of knowledge, ideas and beliefs of the past.
- d. Languages contribute to sum of human knowledge. Inside each language, there is a vision of the past, present and future. When a language dies, die culture, identity and knowledge that have been transmitted from generation to generation through that language.
- e. Languages are interesting in themselves, each of them having different sounds, grammar and vocabulary that reveal something different about linguistic organization and structure. Crystal argues that even an endangered language can revive through proper language planning and language preservation.

Frequently, debates centre on resourcefulness of languages. The question is: **which languages can be considered as resources?** The languages those are both international and valuable in terms of international trade and commerce. A lower status is given to minority languages that are regional and of less perceived value in the international market. For instance, we have a number of mother tongues (except English) namely Hindi, Urdu, Bangla, Assamese, Tamil, Telegu, Gujrati, Marathi and so on. But English education relegates these languages to a lowly position in school curricula across the country. Indeed, the above orientations have differences, but they do share certain common goals: social as well as national integrations, individual empowerment and acquiring fluency in the target language which is important for economic as well as employment opportunities. Between the two, the basic difference is whether monolingualism in minority language or full bilingualism should be encouraged as a means to achieving these ends. Both the orientations recognize that language is not merely a means of communication; it is also connected with socialization into the local and the wider society, a powerful symbol of cultural heritage and identity. But their difference lies in the socialization and identity to be fostered: assimilation or pluralism, integration or separation, monolingualism or bilingualism or multilingualism, monoculturalism or multiculturalism.

Last but not least, the ownership of two languages has increasingly become viewed as an asset as the **communication world** is narrowing. As the quantum of information gets dramatically increased, bilinguals, particularly those with English as one of the two languages have become an important segment of the **employment market**: tourism, airlines, business consultancy, law and teaching to name a few disciplines. Given a competitive edge, bilingualism can, therefore, be more valuable than majority language monolingualism for an increasing number of vocations.

### **Two Orientations: Language as a problem and Language as a Resource**

Discussion on bilingual education or bilingual language use in society often commences with the idea of language as causing various problems. Despite cognitive problems of operating two languages simultaneously, the predicted problems include personality problems such as split identity, cultural dislocation, low self-esteem or a poor self-image. At the social level, the problems include regional disunity or communal disharmony. Thus language is also viewed as a political problem.

A language problem is sometimes perceived as being caused by strong forms of bilingual education. Sometimes it is argued that such education may cause disintegration in society. In fact, the major part of

the language-as-problem orientation is that perpetuating language minorities and language diversity may cause less integration, less cohesiveness, more antagonism and more conflict in a society (Parrillo, 1996). However, the history of war suggests that economic, political or religious differences are prominent. Language is seldom the cause of conflict.

Parrillo's 'language as an obstacle attitude' associates minority languages with problems of poverty, underachievement in academics, minimal social and vocational mobility and with a lack of integration into the majority culture. So the complications related to minority languages are to be solved through assimilation into majority language.

Moreover, the co-existence of two or more languages is rarely a cause of conflict or disunity. Evidences suggest that developing bilingualism and biliteracy within a strong bilingual education situation is academically feasible and can lead to the following consequences:

- a. higher achievement across the curriculum for minority language children
- b. maintaining the first language and the home culture
- c. fostering self-esteem and a more positive attitude towards studies
- d. enabling better usage of human resources in a country's economy
- e. increased social harmony and peace

An alternative orientation to 'language as a problem' is the idea of language as a personal and national resource. Language may be viewed as building bridges across different groups, bridges for cross fertilization amongst different cultures. Second Language study is increasingly viewed as an essential resource for promoting foreign trade and world influence. In today's world, the idea of language as a resource not only refers to the development of a second language amongst monolinguals; it also refers to the preservation of languages other than English. For example, let us consider that a Tamil speaking child gets relocated in Hindi-dominated environment. Consequently, he gets exposed to Hindi at his school. In this case, suppression of minority language can be seen as social as well as cultural wastage. Instead, Tamil should be treated as a natural resource that can be exploited for cultural, emotional and educational development of the child.

Language as a resource orientation includes the assumption that linguistic diversity does not cause separation or less integration in society. Rather it is noticed that national unity and linguistic diversity can peacefully exist. Our country is a signal example in this regard. National unity and linguistic diversity are not necessarily incompatible.

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