

Bilingual and trilingual competence: Problems of description and differentiation

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Abstract

Research into child bilingualism over the last twenty years has yielded a considerable amount of data and opened possible new ways for its description as well as theoretical approaches. Most studies have been concerned with bilingualism. Trilingualism has received much less specific attention. Sometimes authors acknowledge the existence of trilingualism with additions such as “two or more languages”, but only rarely have attempts been made to contrast the phenomena of bilingualism and trilingualism. The aim of this paper is to investigate linguistic competence in trilingual children in terms of how it manifests itself and how it can be explained. The paper will examine certain aspects of this issue which are related to the establishment and manifestation of bilingual and trilingual competence, such as language awareness, language choice and language mixing. It will also consider some strategies of language use such as code-switching and translation on the one hand, and certain learning strategies on the other.

Key words: child bilingualism, trilingualism, child trilingualism, linguistic competence.

Resumo

A investigación do bilingüismo infantil nos últimos vinte anos produciu unha considerable cantidade de datos e abriu posibles novas vías tanto para a súa descrición como para as achegas teóricas. A maior parte dos estudos ocupáronse do bilingüismo. O trilingüismo recibiu unha atención moito menos específica. En ocasións os autores recoñecen a existencia do trilingüismo con engadidos do tipo “dúas linguas (ou máis)”, pero poucos foron os intentos por contrastar os fenómenos do bilingüismo e do trilingüismo. O obxectivo deste estudio é investigar a competencia lingüística en nenos trilingües en función de cómo se manifesta e de cómo pode ser explicada. O estudio examina certos aspectos desta cuestión que están relacionados co establecemento e a manifestación da competencia bilingüe e trilingüe, como son a conciencia lingüística, a elección de lingua e a mestura de códigos. Tamén se consideran algunhas estratexias de uso lingüístico como a alternancia de códigos e o calco por unha banda, e certas estratexias de aprendizaxe pola outra.

Palabras clave: bilingüismo infantil, trilingüismo, trilingüismo infantil, competencia lingüística.

1. Introduction

An invitation to speak at a meeting with the title *First International Symposium on Bilingualism* is bound to encourage one to step back from one's special area of interest and take stock of advances achieved so far and point towards questions which still remain unanswered. Research methodologies are becoming more refined and we can now count on a

considerable amount of reliable data on child bilingualism collected through observational and experimental work. This has provided us with insights into a variety of issues relating to bilingual acquisition and use. At the same time it has opened new avenues for research, such as code-switching and bilingual processing, to name just two.

Most studies have been concerned with bilingualism in the sense that the researchers looked at phenomena involving two languages. Earlier definitions of *bilingualism* tended to refer explicitly to two languages. *Trilingualism* has received much less specific attention, but sometimes it is suggested that what is said about bilingualism is equally applicable to “two or more languages”, i.e. to more than two languages. This belief seems not to have been challenged, and the few studies that did involve subjects who were acquiring more than two languages have worked within the theoretical framework of bilingualism with regard to the collection of data as well as its analysis.

Scholars looking at issues dealing, for example, with language contact, language planning or bilingual education, have at times preferred to employ the term *multilingualism* so as to distinguish clearly the macrolinguistic from the microlinguistic level of investigation. Moreover, the term multilingualism encompasses the idea that not only is more than one language involved, but also any number of linguistic varieties may be present in the particular sociolinguistic situation under consideration.

As research has moved on we have seen an increase in the use of the term multilingualism in psycholinguistic studies of second and third language acquisition and bilingualism. For instance, Cenoz & Genesee (1998) describe multilingualism as the final result of the process of acquisition of several non-native languages, thereby clearly making it an attribute of the individual. *Trilingualism* is obviously placed somewhere between bilingualism and multilingualism, but one should not assume it to be simply an extension of bilingualism. It probably shares features with both, while at the same time retaining characteristics of its own.

Present knowledge about *bilingual competence* has been derived from insights gained from investigations into a number of different fields, such as bilingual language acquisition and language processing, comparisons of the language output of monolinguals and bilinguals, and attempts to explain the relationship that is known to exist between the bilingual's two codes as manifested in phenomena like code-switching. There is considerable agreement about similarities and differences between monolingual and bilingual language acquisition and development. Similarly, many share the opinion that there are certain differences between the resulting linguistic competence. Grosjean's holistic view of bilingualism (Grosjean, 1985 and 1992) espouses the idea that the bilingual speaker should not be considered as the aggregate of two complete (or perhaps incomplete) monolinguals, but as someone “with a unique and specific linguistic configuration” (Grosjean, 1985: 470). This view has found widespread acceptance.

Second language acquisition research has produced the concept of *multicompetence*, which Cook defines as “the compound state of a mind with two grammars” (Cook, 1992: 557-8; Cook, 1993). Cook's work arose out of technical questions that he had asked within Universal Grammar theory, but he presents the evidence for multicompetence from a range of areas. The difference between monocompetence and multicompetence is not only one of degree, he argues, but also one of kind as multicompetent speakers have a different knowledge of their languages than do monolinguals.

For this paper, in addition to looking at the above-mentioned sources, I have also re-examined some investigations that discuss factors which have a bearing on bilingual competence, particularly metalinguistic and attitudinal factors, which I felt might prove relevant for trilingual competence as well. It is my aim to consider linguistic competence in trilingual children in terms of how it manifests itself and how it can be explained. It is generally accepted that certain qualitative as well as quantitative differences exist between the linguistic competence of monolingual and bilingual children –and also, one may assume, between either of these on one hand and trilingual children on the other. In the absence of a sizeable corpus of data from trilingual children’s language and language use, a comparison of bilingual and trilingual competence can only produce some general results. I therefore acknowledge from the outset that it will not be possible in this contribution to go beyond a preliminary characterization of the respective competences in relation to one another. It is suggested here that we may find relatively few differences in kind, and that certain social, cultural and, above all, psychological and personality-related factors may assume disproportionately high significance in influencing trilingual competence.

I think that it is useful to distinguish three different groups of individuals according to the circumstances and social context under which they become trilingual: (i) trilingual children who are brought up with two home languages which are different from the one spoken in the wider community, or children who grow up in a bilingual community and whose home language is different from the community languages; (ii) third language learners, i.e. those who acquire a third language in the school context; (iii) young people growing up in a trilingual or multilingual community, and adult bilinguals who become trilingual through immigration.

Needless to say, there will be many individuals who straddle these categories. Psychological and personality-related factors may assume greater importance in the first group, at least during certain periods of their lives; and motivational and attitudinal factors may play a more predictable role in the case of the second and third groups. In my work I have been concerned mainly with trilinguals of the first group.

2. Studies of trilingualism

Relatively few studies of linguistic aspects of trilingualism exist so far. We are, however, beginning to see more collaborative research projects which examine groups of trilinguals rather than just individual cases so that we can now distinguish three broad types of studies into trilingualism.

2.1. Trilingual language acquisition in children

Firstly, there are case studies of children who have become trilingual because they grew up in an environment where, between home and community, three languages were used. They tend to be relatively short reports on how the children of a particular family became trilingual (for instance, Elwert, 1973; Oksaar, 1977; Harding & Riley, 1986; Arnberg, 1987; Helot, 1988; Hoffmann, 1985, 1991, 1992), and they may include some comments about difficulties encountered or future prospects for maintaining the three languages.

These case studies differ quite considerably with regard to their subjects, languages and methodologies. But it is possible to extract some general features. For example, in most cases the subject had two first languages which he or she acquired from the parents, and then

the third language, that of the community, was added while the child was still quite young. In all cases different languages were associated with different persons and/or situations which the subjects identified using the correct language to address their interlocutors. Also, it seems to be the case that in most cases the three languages were not of equal importance to the individual; often, one tended to become the least used one, in contrast with the other two. “Extroverts”, that is, children of an outgoing and gregarious nature and a love of talking, coped particularly well. However, judgments were made when the children concerned were still quite young and their language development incomplete. We need not only more systematic and rigorous research into this field, but also long-term accounts which follow children well into their teens when their languages have become established but their use, preference and subsequent competence may be influenced by affective variables. Whereas all these case studies contain examples of the three languages used by the children under consideration, they include virtually no trilingual linguistic data, i.e. instances of speech showing elements of three languages in the same utterance.

2.2. Trilingualism through schooling

The second type of research into trilingualism looks at bilingual children’s acquisition of the third language through schooling. Studies of this kind have been carried out with linguistic minority children in various parts of the world, including Spain. Several researchers have posed, in various forms, the same question: does bilingualism favour the acquisition of a third language? It is suggested that bilinguals may indeed have certain advantages with respect to general language proficiency and therefore be able to acquire a third language more easily than a monolingual learns a second language. A related question asks about the nature of the difference between second and third language acquisition. Other researchers have enquired into the optimum age for introducing the third language and the most suitable methodologies (e.g. Cenoz & Lindsay, 1996, and Valencia & Cenoz, 1992, in the Basque Country).

Research of the kind mentioned here does not focus directly on the linguistic competence of trilingual children. It does, however, draw our attention to a number of variables which come into play, and it provides an indication that there are various factors which could be decisive for trilingual competence at different times or ages.

When discussing the age factor in language learning it is not possible to discern clear cut-off points between the child and the older trilingual, or between a natural trilingual and one who is a later learner. Many questions remain unanswered, such as for instance: How should we view the child who acquires three languages to an age-adequate degree of competence and then picks up literacy and other learnt language skills in one, two or all of his/her languages to either an equal or unequal extent? When does the subject become a learner? Which are the variables that determine the further development –or attrition– of his languages? Which of the variables will be the more important ones, the attitudinal and personality-related ones, or those associated with (or deriving from) formal learning experience? I believe that ultimately the multiple variables cannot be disentangled, just as the above-mentioned distinctions (between types of subjects) ultimately remain theoretical constructs.

2.3. “Some of the things trilinguals do”

This is the title of Clyne’s (1997) report of an on-going large-scale project about language processing in trilinguals in Australia, and it represents research on the third type of trilinguals. It involves adults who have a bilingual family background or come from a bilingual environment, and who acquired English after emigrating to Australia. The author is concerned with subjects representing three different sets of language combinations: two of these include groups of languages which are, relatively speaking, more closely related (Dutch-German-English and Italian-Spanish-English), and the third combination consists of a set of languages which are less directly related (Hungarian-German-English). These three sets of languages have varying degrees of distance from English and from one another. But in all cases English is the general *lingua franca*, the language of overarching importance, whereas one, or both, of the subjects’ other language(s) is associated with their cultural identity. Clyne examines the interlingual strategies employed by his trilingual subjects, and he notices that some of these strategies are similar to those which have been identified by second language acquisition researchers working on positive and negative transfer, for example the identification by the learner of contrasts and interlingual correspondences. Clyne speaks about the trilingual’s “multilateral competence” and finds evidence for it in various aspects of trilingual behaviour, namely: (i) conversion rules which are applied between closely related languages; (ii) interlingual identification based on correspondences between two of the trilinguals’ languages; and (iii) code-switching in which English transfers or bilingual compromise forms trigger switches between two other languages.

Clyne reports that most of his 15 Dutch-German trilinguals and all of the 15 Italian-Spanish trilinguals said that they employed one language as support when using another. He sees the abandonment of the support relationship as an indication of automatization of competence in that language (Clyne, 1997: 103). In his discussion of strategies used by trilinguals he begins by considering conversion rules operating from the support language to the target language. As evidence that such conversion rules do normally operate he quotes instances of output which show a failure of conversion, and he also mentions cases where speakers monitor their output, for example by differentiating forms and structures so as to distinguish them as much as possible from each other. Many of these examples demonstrate how attempted conversion rules result in compromise forms. Much of Clyne’s evidence for multilateral competence (a term for which no definition is offered) comes from derivational morphology, particularly where Dutch and German are used. There are also some examples involving lexis and phonology in the case of Spanish and Italian, as well as other instances showing how the same form is shared by both languages.

Clyne’s section on code-switching contains illustrations of intrasentential switching between two languages, and also cases of trilingual switching. In this context he points towards the special role of English in Australia, where this language acts not only as a bridge between English and other languages but also between pairs of languages. A “trilingual sentence” may come about when the speaker starts an utterance in one language, and then inserts an English item which then triggers a switch to the third language. In other words, the English item causes the speaker to lose linguistic orientation, and the wrong switch-back is then effected. Most of the data discussed is from the Dutch-German-English and Italian-Spanish-English trilinguals. However, Clyne found that English lexical items transferred into German or Hungarian did not trigger switches between these two languages. His explanation is that the English items were fully integrated morphologically, thus making them sufficiently distinct to the speaker. A further interesting insight that he offers is that

trilinguals show a “tendency towards triple interlingual identification” (Clyne, 1997: 110), i.e. the tendency to transfer to the third language a linguistic feature that is shared by the two languages they know. Clyne cites examples from several aspects of language and across all the languages he looked at. The three linguistic phenomena on which he focused lead him to conclude that bilinguals and trilinguals use the same kinds of mechanisms and processes, but that these are more complex when three languages are involved. Clyne is primarily concerned with what trilinguals do, i.e. with trilingual processing. The explanations he offers for his data in terms of multilateral competence suggests that there are underlying mechanisms which could be seen as being part of trilingual competence.

3. Bilingual and trilingual competence

Various models of the structure of language competence have been developed, trying to link the linguistic view of language with a communicative one, and also attempting to explain how linguistic skills and knowledge are integrated and put into use (e.g. Canale & Swain, 1980; Bachman, 1990).

In the presentation of his bilingual, or holistic, view of bilingualism Grosjean (1985; 1992) insists that the bilingual’s competence should not be measured and evaluated in terms of monolingual language competence. The competence of the bilingual makes use of his or her two languages depending on the requirements of the situation. As we know, these will be determined by, for instance, the topic or place or interlocutor, and may be mediated by social or psychological variables such as perceived social appropriateness to use Language A rather than Language B, the wish to include or exclude someone in the conversation, the desire to dominate a linguistically weaker interlocutor or to defer to him/her etc. Bilinguals may use both their languages simultaneously in the form of frequent switching or borrowing. Therefore the language competence of the bilingual speaker must be assessed in terms of his or her total language repertoire, and not in relation to individual languages only. I suggest that, broadly speaking, this view can be extended to trilinguals as well.

Trilingual language competence can thus be said to contain the linguistic aspects, i.e. vocabulary and grammar, from the three language systems, and the pragmatic component, consisting of sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic competences pertaining to the languages involved, as well as competences which enable the speaker to function in bilingual or trilingual contexts.

It is this aspect of competence which points towards important differences between monolinguals on the one hand and bilinguals and trilinguals on the other. For bilinguals or trilinguals it is normal to move between different languages, switching, mixing and borrowing as they do so. Yet when they are asked to judge their own competence, they tend to ignore this ability and instead they focus on linguistic aspects, criticising their own grammatical or lexical shortcomings in one or two or all of their languages applying, it seems, monolingual standards. This perceived inadequacy may lead them to develop strategies to avoid using their weaker language or reduce their use to a limited range of domains. Similarly, powerful psychological forces, such as rejection of a particular speaker or culture, or problems of finding one’s own identity, may cause a speaker to abandon one or more of his or her languages.

The fact that bilingual and trilingual speakers make linguistic adjustments according to new situations, environments and perceptions does not mean that their overall communicative competence will be affected. Rather, a redistribution of functions assigned to

each of their languages and changes in the proficiency in one or two of their languages may be the result of increased or decreased use of the language(s) concerned. There are many reports of active bilinguals and trilinguals becoming passive ones, or vice versa, particularly among individuals at either end of the age range. Yet in spite of these changes they still remain fully competent speaker-hearers within their linguistic environment.

A related area of differences between monolingual and bilingual or trilingual competence concerns the structure and organization of the trilinguals' competence with regard to their "speech modes". Grosjean (1992) proposes that we should see the bilingual's speech modes in terms of end points on a scale. In this view, a bilingual may move from a monolingual speech mode when talking to a monolingual speaker, where he uses one language only while the other remains deactivated, and then change along the continuum to the bilingual speech mode, where he makes use of both his languages when speaking to another bilingual, in the form of frequent switching and borrowing.

The idea of languages being activated and deactivated throws up a number of intriguing questions –for which no satisfactory answers have yet been found. There is, first, the fundamental issue of what mechanisms, if any, enable the individual to switch languages, both with regard to perception and production. More specifically, one might ask: To what degree is one of the bilingual's languages deactivated when he is in a monolingual mode? And vice versa, to what extent, and in what relation to each other, are both languages activated when he is in a bilingual mode?

By extension, we can transfer the notion of speech modes to include trilinguals. Their three speech modes, monolingual, bilingual and trilingual, would then, at least in theory, have 7 different constellations (as compared with the monolingual's 1 and the bilingual's 4): the monolingual modes of languages A, B and C, the bilingual modes A + B, A + C and B + C, and one trilingual mode involving all three languages A + B + C. None of the studies I have looked at mentions the use of seven different speech modes. I rather suspect that trilinguals rarely make use of all 7. In my own observations, which involved two non-community languages, German and Spanish, and the community language English, the two trilingual children were observed to use either one of their three languages, or they used English plus one of the other languages. Apart from some cases of borrowing there were no examples of the three languages being used in the same utterance, and only very early data taken at the time when the community language had not yet been fully established showed mixing of the two home languages, Spanish and German.

4. Trilingualism and language processing

So far I have looked at the components of trilingual competence. I would now like to look briefly at the underlying mechanisms.

It is obvious that trilingualism involves considerable linguistic complexity, not only as a result of the number of different linguistic systems, but also in terms of how they are processed. In this respect, too, I believe that the fundamental distinction is between monolinguals and bilinguals, and that this is mainly a qualitative one. But I would be hesitant to say that the difference between bilinguals and trilinguals is just a quantitative one.

Explanations of language processing in bilinguals have been put forward by several researchers (e.g. Paradis, 1985; Peregman, 1989), both as compared with monolingual processing and with reference to various bilingual speech phenomena such as mixing, responding in a different language from the language of the interlocutor, and spontaneous

translation. Both Paradis (1985) and Perelman (1989) see language processing as taking place on different levels: a prelinguistic conceptual level which reflects properties of the human mind and is common to both of the bilingual's languages because it is independent of language, and then the functionally different semantic-lexical level where "units of meaning in each language combine conceptual features in different ways" (Paradis, 1985: 9). Perelman (1989) outlines a neurolinguistic model for language processing in bilinguals and then accounts for mixing in terms of the framework of this model. The model assumes a hierarchy of processing, at the top of which there is the conceptual level with shared processing of language-independent information. Below that, there are various linguistic strata—the semantic-lexical, the syntactic, the phonological and the phonetic-articulatory levels—Perelman assumes that in monolinguals, where the conceptual system feeds into only one linguistic system, the processing routines from the conceptual down to the phonological forms have become automatized. In contrast, the conceptual system in bilinguals has two options with regard to lexical-semantic processing, and it can be encoded in two different linguistic systems. Perelman's suggestion is that the processing routines are less automatic for the bilingual, and that the distinction between levels of representation will be more marked. The model is evidently meant to apply to multilingual as well as bilingual processing, as Perelman stipulates (1989: 233) that *multiple* languages are unified in a single system at the prelinguistic conceptual level, that they are strongly linked at the semantic-lexical one, and that the links are progressively weaker as processing moves from the lexical-semantic to the articulatory-phonetic rank. Evidence for this are observations that language mixing occurs more frequently at the lexical-semantic than at the phonetic-articulatory level where, Perelman argues, the links between the systems are weakest. It is not quite clear, however, to what extent she considers bilingualism and multilingualism to be the same thing. She refers in her concluding remarks to the fact that some authors do not make a distinction between bilinguals and polyglots; and she says that only more empirical research will shed light on the question of whether there is a distinction at all to be made with respect to psycholinguistic and/or neurolinguistic processing, and whether it would be of relevance.

Another area where we may look for differences between monolinguals, bilinguals and trilinguals concerns metalinguistic awareness. Bialystok (1991) points out that there exists some confusion about the term, as it is interchangeably used to refer to: (a) tasks, such as making a judgment on well-formedness or making repairs; (b) skills, for instance the learners' ability to focus on language forms; and (c) levels of awareness, such as when a learner is aware of the forms and functions of language being manipulated. Bialystok develops a conception of metalinguistic awareness that involves all three aspects, and she then applies this metalinguistic conception to the establishment of a model of language development in bilingual children. This focus implies that the model attempts to account for change. Language processing is described in terms of two components: the component which enables mental representations to become more explicit and structured she calls "analysis of linguistic knowledge"; and the second component is responsible for "control of linguistic processing" (Bialystok, 1991: 116). The author looked at the ability of monolinguals and bilinguals to solve problems in three different language domains, and she found significant differences in each case. For instance, in the discussion of experiments involving oral language use she concluded that bilingual children have heightened metalinguistic awareness because they routinely pay attention to language form (i.e. which language is spoken) in order to make decisions on their own language choice. This means that additional demands are placed on their control abilities, in comparison with the demands made of monolingual children. With regard to trilinguals, we may assume that here, too, the experience of three

different languages results in enhanced awareness of the analysis and control components of processing. On the basis of her own evidence and that of others, Bialystok convincingly argues that bilingual children ultimately and inevitably process language differently from monolingual children (1991: 139). Clearly, more empirical work is needed before we can tell for sure what happens in respect of trilingual children. Work done on bilingual language processing represents a suitable starting point for such an undertaking.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to look at trilingual competence with a view to comparing it with bilingual competence, and to try to ascertain whether any of the differences can be explained in quantitative or qualitative terms. I have looked for possible evidence from various areas of research: firstly, three different kinds of case studies involving trilingual acquisition and use; secondly, explanations of language competence in bilinguals; and thirdly, some discussions of bilingual language processing and metalinguistic awareness.

The case studies involving primary and secondary trilinguals lead one to assume that in terms of acquisition and language use trilinguals function in similar ways to bilinguals, except for differences which can be attributed to an increased linguistic load in trilinguals. With respect to the trilinguals' communicative competence, roughly the same could be said, particularly if the focus is on the linguistic component; but when the pragmatic component is included one begins to realise that the strategies a trilingual may adopt become quite complex. If, in addition to communicative competence, one considers the mechanisms and processes which seem to be involved in the selection of the appropriate language, and also language mixing, switching and borrowing –either consciously or unconsciously–, then it becomes clear that a comparison between bilinguals and trilinguals may show up some evidence of qualitative differences. The case studies which are available can contribute to our understanding of certain aspects of multilingualism, but at present we lack a sufficient number, as well as greater variety, of such studies, and the linguistic data which they could provide. The fact that, to my knowledge, there is virtually no empirical research on language processing in trilinguals is also a serious shortcoming. Similarly, studies which focus on the effect of socio-cultural and affective variables that may make an impact on trilinguals at different times and in various ways would be welcome, as they could show to what extent (if at all) they impinge on trilingual competence. So we must conclude that much of what is known about the nature of individual multilingualism is still conjecture. Since trilingualism is likely to gain greater prominence in future, one can only hope that this state of affairs will not continue for much longer.

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