

Plurilingualism, Multilingualism, and Lingua Franca English in Today's Globalised World

Barbara Cappuzzo

University of Palermo, Italy

Doi: 10.19044/ijlc.v11no1a1

<http://dx.doi.org/10.19044/ijlc.v11no1a1>

Submitted: 07 January 2024

Copyright 2024 Author(s)

Accepted: 28 February 2024

Under Creative Commons CC-BY 4.0

Published: 31 March 2024

OPEN ACCESS

Abstract

We live in a multilingual world where English serves as the language of international communication. It permeates every sphere of life, from education to trade, from employment to scientific literature. However, parallel to English as the lingua franca of worldwide exchange, several other languages co-exist and overlap in our multilingual and multicultural society. The purpose of this essay is to discuss the central role of plurilingualism as a way to support multilingualism and linguistic diversity but also as a very important means to enhance cognitive abilities, including metalinguistic awareness. It also considers the prominent role of English as the shared language of worldwide interaction. The ultimate aim of this study is to encourage reflection on a new vision of language teaching, which fosters knowledge of languages as a primary source of social and individual benefits, and, at the same time, focuses on lingua franca English for effective communication in the global society.

Keywords: plurilingualism, multilingualism, cognitive abilities, lingua franca English, globalised world

Introduction

Multilingualism and plurilingualism are broad, interconnected and complex topics that can be investigated from different perspectives and approaches (social, cultural, sociolinguistic, educational, economic, etc.). Multilingualism is closely related to globalisation, which, resulting in the spread of English as the language of communication worldwide, has also amplified the value and the importance of preserving linguistic and cultural diversity. Within this context, plurilingualism plays a major role, as competence in more than one language means knowledge of the cultural differences that underlie distinct languages, thus reinforcing and supporting

the existence of different linguistic and cultural identities. This essay intends to highlight plurilingualism as a key means for supporting multilingualism and linguistic diversity, and considers the prominent role of English as the lingua franca of international communication in the era of globalisation. The essay also devotes much space to the beneficial effects of plurilingualism on the development of cognitive abilities – with particular reference to metalinguistic awareness – and explains the positive implications from a sociolinguistic standpoint.

For the purposes of this study, it is considered appropriate to first make a distinction between “multilingualism” and “plurilingualism”, two words that are often used as synonyms, despite their different meanings. In the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment* (CEFR) document, the Council of Europe (2001: 4) discusses the difference between “multilingualism”, defined as “the knowledge of a number of languages or the coexistence of different languages in a given society”, and “plurilingualism”, when “an individual person’s experience of language expands from the language of the home [...] to the languages of other peoples”, so that s/he “does not keep these languages and cultures in strictly separated mental compartments, but rather builds up a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of language contributes and in which languages interrelate and interact”. In the definition of multilingualism cited above, a distinction is made between individual multilingualism (“the knowledge of a number of languages”), therefore people’s ability to speak languages other than their mother tongue, and societal multilingualism (“the coexistence of different languages in a given society”). However, in the descriptions offered by the Council of Europe in another official document, published later, in 2007, no reference to individual multilingualism is made, and the following definitions are provided:

Multilingualism refers to the presence in a geographical area, large or small, of more than one ‘variety of language’ i.e. the mode of speaking of a social group whether it is formally recognised as a language or not; in such an area, individuals may be monolingual, speaking only their own variety.

Plurilingualism refers to the repertoire of varieties of language which many individuals use, and is therefore the opposite of monolingualism; it includes the language variety referred to as ‘mother tongue’ or ‘first language’ and any number of other languages or varieties. Thus, in some multilingual areas some individuals may be monolingual and some may be plurilingual (Council of Europe 2007: 8).

In the present essay, the terms “plurilingualism” and “multilingualism” will be used in the sense provided by the Council of Europe (2007), which basically distinguishes between a dimension where languages coexist side by side separately in a given space (“multilingualism”), and a dimension where

individuals are competent, at different degrees, in more than one language and culture (“plurilingualism”). The fact that an individual can be defined as plurilingual regardless of the degree of linguistic proficiency possessed is indicated by the European Commission as follows:

Plurilingual and pluricultural competence refers to the ability to use languages for the purposes of communication and to take part in intercultural interaction, where a person, viewed as a social agent, has proficiency of varying degrees, in several languages, and experience of several cultures. This is not seen as the superposition or juxtaposition of distinct competences, but rather as the existence of a complex or even composite competence on which the user may draw (Council of Europe, 2001: 168).¹

Plurilingualism and linguistic diversity

Plurilingualism is different from multilingualism but also closely intertwined with it and with linguistic/cultural diversity, as plurilingualism nurtures multilingualism and linguistic/cultural identities. The concept and the importance of *diversity* are emphasised by the Commission of the European Communities (2005), which, regarding multilingualism and European values, states:

The European Union is founded on ‘unity in diversity’: diversity of cultures, customs and beliefs - and of languages. Besides the 20 official languages of the Union, there are 60 or so other indigenous languages and scores of non-indigenous languages spoken by migrant communities. It is this diversity that makes the European Union what it is: not a “melting pot”, in which differences are rendered down, but a common home in which diversity is celebrated, and where our many mother tongues are a source of wealth and a bridge to greater solidarity and mutual understanding. Language is the most direct expression of culture; it is what makes us human and what gives each of us a sense of identity (Commission of the European Communities, 2005, 596 1.1).

“Unity in diversity”, “greater solidarity” and “mutual understanding” are three enormous values that can be achieved through awareness that different linguistic and cultural realities exist. This awareness can be fully obtained by penetrating those realities through knowledge of languages, which reflect the cultures of those who speak them. Multilingualism and diversity are two concepts closely connected with that of cultural and linguistic heritage. Coexistence and diversity of languages and cultures can only occur if linguistic and cultural heritage is preserved. This applies to all languages, especially to minor languages, those most at risk of dying. Bromham *et al.* (2022: 163) report that “of the approximately 7,000 documented languages, nearly half are considered endangered” and that “the loss of global language diversity has been massively accelerated by colonization and globalization.”

¹ For an in-depth analysis of plurilingualism from the perspective of communication effectiveness, see Piccardo and Puzo (2015).

The question of globalisation as the main threat to linguistic diversity and the importance of linguistic identity are also broadly discussed by King (2018: 2), who, regarding the spread of English worldwide, highlights the centrality of a language education policy that next to the prominent role of English as the international lingua franca, also “respects mother tongue heritage.”

Plurilingualism and cognitive abilities

One of the domains where plurilingualism has been most investigated is cognitive linguistics. Here, it has been shown that plurilingualism has beneficial effects on several cognitive abilities (Marian and Shook, 2012; Chung-Fat-Yim *et al.*, 2022; Achaa-Amankwaa *et al.*, 2023). More specifically, plurilingualism seems to positively affect various aspects of cognition, such as memory, attention, problem-solving, creativity, and mental flexibility. The main reason lies in the fact that people who speak more than one language are used to switching between different linguistic codes. This process requires executive functions on the part of the brain, thus strengthening the abilities of planning, organising, and controlling (Gonzalez-Barrero and Nadig, 2019; Iarocci *et al.*, 2017; Ratto *et al.*, 2020; Romero and Uddin, 2021; Sharaan *et al.*, 2021). However, the literature on this topic appears controversial, with some studies claiming sure positive effects on cognitive ability enhancement, and others arguing the need for further investigation, as more evidence is required to confirm the beneficial outcomes of bilingualism/plurilingualism on cognitive performance (see Filippi and Bright, 2023). Confusion and controversial positions on the topic in question are also generated by the lack of a universally accepted definition regarding the concept of bilingualism itself, starting from the distinction between bilingualism and plurilingualism, in that sometimes bilingualism is considered in the strict sense of competence in ‘just two languages’, others in the more general meaning of ‘more than one language’. In the latter case, bilingualism becomes a form of plurilingualism in all respects (see Quay and Montanaro, 2018). Moreover, attitudes about bilingualism (in the sense of just two languages) have changed noticeably over time, going beyond the traditional view that only individuals with equal command of both languages can be considered bilinguals, and supporting instead a more ‘tolerant’ opinion according to which different degrees of proficiency can be accepted for individuals to be defined as bilinguals. In addition, the age of acquisition is another important factor that has been taken into account in the definition of bilingualism, i.e., whether the two languages have been acquired at the same time (simultaneous bilingualism) and during infancy or the second language has been learnt after infancy (sequential bilingualism). Within this framework, the lack of consensus about bilingualism/plurilingualism has led to heterogeneity in the selection criteria concerning the population to be

