

# Research into multilingualism

Multilingualism research is rather recent, yet already rich because it touches on the multiple and varied aspects of this term which refers to diverse phenomena that are linked to each other but are distinct because they occur on three broad levels, i.e., individual, social and institutional, and their sublevels,

“Individual multilingualism” refers to the ability of a person to use more than two languages rather fluently—though most persons are not equally proficient in the languages they use in their private, academic and professional lives. Individual multilingualism involves people who are able to make themselves understood in more than two languages, whether they are teenagers or adults who have learnt two or more foreign languages in addition to their mother tongue—in which case they are referred to as polyglots. They could also be children who have bilingual parents or family who speak two different languages and they grow up learning both home languages, plus the language of the community. They can also be youngsters from immigrant families who speak their home language when they are with their family, use the official language at school, and are also learning an additional foreign language there. “Societal multilingualism” signifies the linguistic diversity that can be found in a country, a region or a particular community. Societal (or social) multilingualism refers to countries or communities where languages have different functions and often a different status. It also refers to a civil society that is linguistically diverse. The social and political relations between groups largely determine how individual bilingualism and/or multilingualism is perceived and treated within the society—if it is viewed as a resource, problem, or as a part of the civil and human rights of individuals or groups. Finally, there is ‘institutional multilingualism’ referring to national or supranational establishments, organizations or educational institutions that operate in different languages.

Multilingualism and bilingualism are natural phenomena which have existed for centuries in every part of the world where people and languages came in contact with one another. Europe, before and after Medieval times, was no exception. However, the construct of the nation state in Europe (the principle of 'one language, one state, one people') brought with it Europe's struggle with multilingualism and the pursuit of linguistic (and cultural) homogeneity, which was a European doctrine in the last two centuries when multilingualism came to be viewed as an undesirable abnormality. In the context of globalization, we have been witnessing new needs for multilingual practices, for economic reasons and more. We see the language practices of young people in cities all over the world, as they create meanings with their different linguistic repertoires. We see the young and those around them using an array of linguistic resources to construct and negotiate their social worlds today. The dominant European language ideology, its complex relationship with ethnicity, territorial and social unity are surely being questioned in view of “new multilingualisms” which are emerging among people, in the city landscape, across countries and businesses. In Europe, the monolingualisms of the recent historical past are questioned for political, economic and instrumental reasons. As of 2002 especially, the EU has been promoting favourable attitudes to multilingualism and language learning “for a prosperous and stable Europe”, with an internationally competitive economy, education and employment.

Multilingualism has ideological, political and economic dimensions, as well as several institutional and scientific aspects. No single scientific field has the privilege of being the most appropriate for the study of multilingualism since sociology, psychology, the neurosciences, education, pedagogy and other fields of study have been contributing significantly to our understanding of multilingualism and there is no single method of research which is especially suitable to the nature of the phenomenon.

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*April 2018*