

Degree/ Ability:

The ability to use a language encompasses a range of different skills. Generally, these are usually divided into two categories:

Oracy: the ability to speak and understand

Literacy: the ability to read and write.

However, each of these can be further divided into:

- Productive Skills: Speaking and Writing
- Receptive Skills: Listening and Reading

thus producing different categories:

Language skills		
	Oracy	Literacy
Receptive Skills	Listening/ Understanding	Reading
Productive skills	Speaking	Writing

Baetens Beardsmore (1986:19-20, Table 1) shows how different levels of proficiency across the four basic skills combine to create a wide range of possible permutations in linguistic ability *overall*.

An interesting consideration is whether or not thinking is a further skill, (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1981), what Cummins (1984a) has referred to as “cognitive competence in language.” One can also argue, of course, whether or not a person actually *thinks* in a language or whether thinking is a non-language process. Does a new-born baby not think? Does subsequent language acquisition, therefore, affect the actual cognitive *process*?

Comparing the four basic skills across two languages can produce an array of competences and divergent levels, what Baker (2017:7) refers to as “skills within skills”, stating:

The four basic language abilities do not exist in black and white terms. Between black and white are not only many shades of grey; there also exist a wide range of colours.

A pupil may be able to understand spoken English and Welsh, speak English fluently but Welsh only haltingly, read in Welsh with a reading age of six and in English with a reading age of eight, write poorly in English and not at all in Welsh. Is that pupil bilingual? (Baker,1988:2)

Assessing linguistic competence with reference to only the four basic skills, therefore, oversimplifies the issue considerably. We can further apply *sub-dimensions* which are an integral part of the process. However, there is disagreement and debate regarding the type and number of sub-skills which relate

to language proficiency. Whereas Oller & Perkins (1980) have argued that there is a global factor of language proficiency (Baker, 2011:12), Hernandez-Chavez et al. (1978) maintain that there are 64 components. Mackey (1968: 557), however, refers to the following:

- Vocabulary
- Grammar
- Meaning / Semantics
- Pronunciation / phonology
- Style

Placing the four basic skills and their sub-dimensions on a matrix allows us to compare levels of bilingual competence across two languages (i.e. the *respective* levels within languages A and B as shown by Mackey (1968)), thereby enabling us to show that there is no correlation necessarily between the sub-dimensions in one language and the other.

Sub-dimensions of language skills (Mackey, 1968)

Sub-dimensions	Skills			
	Listening	Reading	Speaking	Writing
Phonology				
A				
B				
Grammar				
A				
B				
Vocabulary				
A				
B				
Semantics				
A				
B				
Style				
A				
B				

In accordance with the definition provided by Macnamara (1969:82), therefore, such an analysis of skills reinforces the point that bilingualism should be seen as “a continuum, or rather a series of continua which vary among individuals along a variety of dimensions.”

Language abilities such as speaking and writing can, therefore, be further subdivided increasingly into microscopic parts. Romaine (1995:15), however, draws our attention to the fact that, even though in purely *linguistic* terms, tests enable bilingual proficiency to be assessed with a greater degree of precision, ‘this has been accomplished at the expense of the more qualitative differences in language proficiency which are harder to measure.’

In dealing with the *measurement* of bilingualism at a later stage, therefore, we shall see that more sophisticated models of assessing bilingualism have been adopted which incorporate additional aspects of bilingual proficiency, such as Communicative Competence. Such a development acknowledges the fact that effective communication encompasses not only purely *linguistic* factors but also sociolinguistic and socio-cultural components involved in language use and function.

Function / Use

Hoffmann (1991) states that insufficient regard is paid to *usage* in most descriptions of bilingualism which focus on the relative proficiency in each language. Oksaar (1983:19) suggests the need to encompass *usage* as well as ability (that is, *function* as well as *degree*) as valid criteria, thus defining bilingualism as “the ability of a person to use here and now two or more languages as a means of communication in most situations and to switch from one language to the other if necessary.” Mackey (1970:554) states that:

...bilingualism is not a phenomenon of language; it is a characteristic of its use. It is not a feature of the code but of the message.
It does not belong to the domain of *langue* but of *parole*.

This, therefore, raises issues of individuals’ language *usage* and the social contexts or *domains* for which different languages are adopted for communication purposes, what Baetens Beardsmore (1986: 8) refers to as “functional specialization”. Edwards (2006:8) states that “at least for the purpose of defining bilingualism in any generally applicable fashion - most modern treatments acknowledge that any meaningful discussion must be attempted within a specific context, and for specific purposes.”

In Reading 1 (pp.165-166), Cummins (2000) refers to an “interactionist perspective” on language ability:

Current theoretical approaches to the construct of language have shifted from viewing proficiency as a trait that individuals possess in varying degrees to seeing it as inseparable from the contexts in which it will be manifested. Thus, Bachman and Palmer (1996) use the term ‘ability-task’ to refer to the unit of ability and task

(context) characteristics. Chapelle (1998: 44) similarly notes that a construct such as 'vocabulary size' "cannot be defined in an absolute sense but instead is a meaningful construct only with reference to a particular context."

The term 'domain' was first used by Fishman (1972) to indicate how speakers differentiate their use of language functionally, referring to family, friendship, religion, education and employment as the main domains.

Baker (2017) shows that, in order to understand how languages are used, one must consider the social context in which they function since bilinguals will choose a language on the basis of the domain (context) and to whom they are speaking (targets). He also distinguishes between *functional bilingualism* and *language background*. Unlike the latter, which can include non-participative (by-stander) linguistic experiences as well as participative experiences, functional bilingualism involves the personal use of productive and receptive language skills and five components:

Who is the speaker?

Who is the listener?

What is the situation or context?

What is the topic of the conversation?

What is the purpose?

Fishman (1965) refers to the multiplicity of factors involved in the bilingual speaker's use of language as "who will speak what language, when and to whom." Often-quoted research by Fishman, Cooper & Ma (1971) illustrates this aspect very clearly. The study showed how the use of Spanish and English were adopted for different domains amongst bilinguals in the Puerto Rican neighbourhood of Jersey City, New Jersey, including the home, school, church and working place. Whereas the language adopted at home and in church was predominantly Spanish with both languages being used at school, in work and other bureaucratic domains communication was English.

According to Grosjean (1982: 235), due to functional differentiation, "balanced bilinguals, those who are equally fluent in both languages, are probably the exception and not the norm. A bilingual develops the four basic skills in each language ... to the levels required by the environment, and it is rare that an identical level is needed for each skill."

The effect of various variables on the individual's adoption of different languages for different contexts or domains can be seen, for example, with regard to the use of specialized terminology. The tendency, for instance, to adopt different languages (as opposed to *both* languages) for teaching different subjects in school (i.e. domains of learning) would generally lead to greater confidence and proficiency in one language more than the other. It is for this reason that Baetens Beardsmore (1986:7) draws our attention to the maximalist definition propounded by Halliday, McKintosh & Streven (1970) who use the term *ambilingualism* "to describe the person who is capable of functioning equally well in either of his languages in all domains of activity and without any traces of one language in his use of the other." Baetens Beardsmore (1986:7) refers to such a 'balanced bilingual' as "*a rare if not non-existent species*" and questions how one can be a

balanced bilingual across all functions without having led a double life “in which all of his activities in one language have been or could be replicated in the other.”

Baetens Beardsmore (1986) emphasises that *ambilingualism* should not be confused with *equilingualism*, despite possible points of similarity. Equilingualism, also referred to as *balanced bilingualism*, is used to describe levels of proficiency where both languages are considered to be roughly equal, and generally in broad terms match the levels of monoglot speakers of those languages. Nevertheless, compared with those monoglots, equilinguals would show signs of *interference* of one language on the other (see below). However, as Baetens Beardsmore (1986:9) suggests, “it might be...that monoglot terms of reference are irrelevant in the examination of the bilingual ability of an individual who functions equally well in two languages in a given society.” This should also be considered in the light of Grosjean’s (1982) view that a bilingual is more than simply the combination of two monolinguals. Furthermore, whereas from a purely *linguistic* standpoint, the ambilingual (if at all he or she exists) is of no real investigative interest, the equilingual and the *non-fluent bilingual* (the latter being arguably representative of the majority of cases) “represents a more useful case for investigation in both sociological and linguistic terms.” (Baetens Beardsmore, 1986).

Fishman et al. (1971); state:

Bilinguals who are equally fluent in both languages (as measured by their facility and correctness overall) are rarely equally fluent in both languages about *all possible topics* ; this phenomenon is invariably a reflection of the fact that the societal allocation of functions is normally imbalanced and in complimentary distribution rather than redundant.

The use of language within groups or society is an area of study which will be the focus of module ECDA-7011, including the topic of diglossia and the existence of ‘high’ and ‘low’ languages within a social context. Nevertheless, it should be appreciated that it is impossible to analyse the main factors which relate to individual bilingualism without considering the social or societal context in which individuals exists. Whereas such societal aspects will be elaborated upon in the next module, it should suffice for the time being to point out that individuals are often conditioned (or forced) to conform to external pressures to adopt one language rather than the other for certain purposes. Such a choice may reflect, for example, an individual’s comparative weakness or strength in one language or the adoption of linguistic practices within society generally.

Skutnabb-Kangas (1981:30-31) indicates how it is likely that functional differentiation between languages in society would also ultimately result in attrition at the *individual* level: “since one would be able to use only one of the languages in certain domains, the ability to use the other language in those domains would decline, or perhaps never be ‘fully acquired’.”

Edwards (1994:102-3) argues that the use of both languages for a particular domain is ultimately unsustainable and compares the situation with what he refers to as ‘Gresham’s Law’ where the existence of two useable currencies in the market

will eventually give way to only one if it proves to be more profitable or beneficial to the user.

Fishman (1972) however, argues that any tendency amongst individuals to allocate language use to various domains, such as religious contexts for example, ensures or can assist the continuing vitality of those languages. He argues that it is unusual for bilinguals to be equally fluent in all domains of use and that they usually allocate different languages to different functions. Like Edwards (1994: 102-3), he maintains that any society using both languages with equal confidence in all domains would cease ultimately to be bilingual and that such 'balanced' bilingualism could lead eventually to the death of a language.

Either way, it is often the case that lack of use across all domains leads inevitably to a gradual weakening of language skills in other areas of activity as well as an increasing reduction in usage across *existing* domains, thus resulting in further attrition.

The above discussion reflects the complexity of the interaction of variables in the interface between individual and societal bilingualism and the influence and effect of each on the other. Baker (2017: 65) refers to 'additive' and 'subtractive' bilingual contexts. These are terms which Lambert (1974) originally adopted in relation to the *individual*, 'additive' being used in terms of the positive cognitive outcomes from being bilingual or the perception of being bilingual, whereas 'subtractive' bilingualism referred to negative effects. However, as will be examined in module ECDA-7011, both terms were later adopted by Landry, Allard & Th  berge (1991) in relation to a *societal* context and any positive or negative perceptions or attitudes towards bilingualism.

One can see the relevance of these concepts to *domains of language use* since existing domains are more susceptible to further attrition in any subtractive contexts of majority-minority languages, possibly resulting eventually in language death. In such contexts, individuals are often reluctant to pursue competence in *both* languages (especially the minority language) if they are not certain that there will be a need. Additive contexts, however, are more likely to be conducive to wider domains of language use, further accompanied by greater motivation amongst individuals to use both languages, thus maintaining bilingual proficiency.