

Language contact

As we have seen, bilingualism (and multilingualism in particular) are, therefore, common features of the global linguistic tapestry, monolingual countries and communities being extremely rare. Grosjean (1982), for example, estimates that approximately half the world's population is bilingual. Many communities, due to their geographical location, exist in complete isolation which can, in some cases, safeguard the vitality and continuity of their respective languages, at least for the time being. However, as discussed previously, since it is estimated that there are approximately between 5,000 and 7,000 languages and only approximately 190 nation states, it is obvious that bilingualism or multilingualism is characteristic of most countries; monolingualism being a rarity. Contact between various languages is, therefore, a theoretical inevitability which can have linguistic, sociolinguistic and political ramifications in terms of human behaviour involving such issues as the status of respective languages and their use for different purposes or domains; in a word, their *vitality*. Language contact, therefore, can involve the sociolinguistic study of:

- language maintenance
- language shift
- language death
- language revitalisation.

When various languages come into contact which are not mutually understood across linguistic communities, one or another is often adopted as a 'lingua franca' in order to facilitate communication. For example, Swahili is adopted over a wide area of East Africa where many different languages are spoken, as is ex-colonial French in West Africa. Languages in contact can also develop into "pidgins", mixtures which are not anyone's native language. When learned as a first language, these can develop their own grammar and expand their vocabulary to become a full language known as a 'creole', as in the case of Tok Pisin in Papua New Guinea (Austen, 2008).

The multilingual nature of many geographical contexts is a phenomenon which is not widely appreciated or understood in more linguistically homogeneous countries. This can often breed ethnocentric attitudes towards minority languages which happen to exist alongside a majority official tongue within a sovereign territory. For example, Joan I Mari Bernat (Bodlore-Penlaez, 2011:4) maintains that perception of the European Union (EU) and its diversity varies, many continuing to see it simply as the sum of individual member states:

To be visible in Europe it is necessary to have one's own

state. Without this condition, it is difficult for people to find their place.

However, reflecting the fact that Europe also contains roughly thirty “stateless nations” (Bodlore-Penlaez, 2011), it also has over two hundred languages which are currently practised, although the European Union only acknowledges twenty-four of these. As Bodlore-Penlaez (2011:21) shows, these cover languages of diverse origins:

European Language Groups

Although Europeans speak languages of all origins, the most representative groups are Indo-European languages having common characteristics

- Germanic
- Romance
- Slavic

Other Indo-European groups include

- Celtic languages
- Baltic languages

In addition, other less prevalent groups also exist in Europe such as:

- the Finno-Ugric (e.g., Finnish and Hungarian)
- the Turko-Altaic
- Basque

As will be discussed later in relation to the process of *language shift*, state nations such as Germany, the Netherlands, France, Spain, Italy and the United Kingdom have historically adopted policies of linguistic assimilation and the use of a *single* language to integrate people politically at the expense of indigenous languages. However, under the influence of organisations such as the Council of Europe, legislation has been introduced to protect regional languages, namely:

1. The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (1992)
2. The Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (1995)

In addition to the above, individual state laws may also acknowledge the existence of national minorities and the multilingual nature of their respective societies.

1. The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (1992)

As Bodlore-Penlaez (2011:21) points out, this was the first real European attempt to protect the multilingualism of member states, providing a variety of strategies that signatories undertake to protect and promote regional languages by choosing at least thirty-five areas of action crucial to language survival. These domains include;

- education
- justice
- public services
- media
- cultural activities
- economic and social life

Norway, Finland, Hungary and the Netherlands were the first to apply the charter between 1993 and 1996 having previously taken minorities into account in their existing legislation. Many states have since signed and ratified this document which is valid only after ratification.

2. Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (1995)

This is a document containing 34 articles defining the rights of minorities in terms of language and participation in public life. However, some member states have chosen not to sign or ratify it, namely France, Turkey and Greece, a situation described by Bodlore-Penlaez (2011:19) as “pathological blindness regarding the question of minorities.” Portugal is another country which has not signed the European Charter but has no recognised minority. However, as Bodlore-Penlaez (2011:7) states:

... the European Council advises at a minimum, respect of minority cultures and linguistics. Protecting diversity allows preservation of the original identity of our continent. To ignore minority peoples is to drive them into decline and to lose a little bit of the soul of our continent. In an ever-increasing globalised world, they represent an indisputable cultural richness.

This comment reflects an ethical as well as an ‘environmental’ aspect of the issue of preserving minority languages which is currently very prevalent, as illustrated in Garcia’s (1992) adoption of the ‘language garden’ analogy (see Language Shift).

Documents related to other international organisations also make reference to the rights of minority groups, including those of the United

Nations (UN), UNESCO and the OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe): for example, the UN Bill of Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious or Linguistic Minorities passed on December 18th, 1992, and the UNESCO Convention for the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (Bodlore-Penlaez (2011:19).

Languages are continually at the mercy of political forces which can result in both positive and negative changes of fortune. Bodlore-Penlaez (2011) refers, for example, to the fact that in Eastern Europe, 15 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the breaking up of the Soviet Union, the split of Czechoslovakia and the conflict in Yugoslavia has led to eleven nations becoming independent, namely: Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Belarussia, Ukrainia, Moldova, Slovakia, Slovenia, Bosnia, Serbia and Croatia.

In addition, autonomy, devolution and decentralisation have also been significant political developments in Western Europe. Southern Catalonia enjoys greater status by means of autonomy; Scottish and Welsh devolution resulted (initially) in a parliament and an assembly respectively with the former currently launching a further campaign for independence; Italy has become a federal state. Such developments usually reflect the desire amongst minorities for greater recognition and the right to self-determination in the face of political hegemony and ethnocentrism.

Bodlore-Penlaez (2011) points out that ‘minority’ is a term which has many connotations ranging from the political to the emotional and which makes it difficult to apply a universal definition in social science. There is no official definition of the word ‘minority’ available, even in international law, and the United Nations and Council of Europe apply the term in different ways. The UN, for example, uses the terms “ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities” whilst the European Council refers to “national minorities.” However, despite the need for a legally-binding definition, the use of the term tends to be based on two fundamental sets of factors:

- Objective characteristics e.g. language, traditions, cultural patriotism
- Subjective characteristics: the will of members to assert themselves and commit themselves to that which makes their identity specific. Minorities, therefore, usually use their individual *languages* as a means of symbolising their particular identities.

It would, therefore, be useful to examine some of the terms adopted under the umbrella term ‘minorities’ as discussed by Bodlore-Penlaez (2011):

National minority: a population living in a minority situation within a state. There are two types:

1. people of eponymous states e.g., the Danish in Germany; the Hungarians in Romania
 2. non-sovereign people who do not have their own state structures i.e. stateless nations such as Brittany, the Basque Country, Friesland.
- The definition of a ‘national minority’ in Recommendation 1201 of the European Council is a group of people who:

- reside in the territory of a state and are citizens
- maintain longstanding and lasting ties with that state
- display distinctive ethnic, cultural, religious or linguistic characteristics
- are sufficiently representative in numbers while being fewer than the rest of the population
- are motivated by a desire to preserve their culture, traditions, religion or language (Bodlore-Penlaez, 2011).

Ethnic Minority

This group includes both:

- national minorities (see 1 above) and
- allogenic minorities i.e., non-indigenous people and foreign communities.

Linguistic minority

This term can include both national and ethnic minorities, but they can be in the majority in parts of the state territory in which they reside e.g., Welsh and Catalan in Britain and Spain respectively. However, sometimes a linguistic minority can speak a mother tongue other than the state majority, but without being classified as national or ethnic majorities; for example, the French population in Switzerland. In discussing the subject of ethnolinguistic vitality, Giles, Bourhis & Taylor (1977) maintain that:

The vitality of an ethnolinguistic group is that which makes a group likely to behave as a distinctive and active collective entity in intergroup situations. From this, it is argued that ethnolinguistic minorities that have little or no group vitality would eventually cease to exist as groups. Conversely, the more vitality a linguistic group has, the more likely it will survive

and thrive as a collective entity in an intergroup context.

However, as Baker (2011: 57) points out, Abrams et al., (2009) distinguish between *objective* and *subjective* representations of ethnolinguistic vitality, the former relating largely to external trappings of vitality but which may or may not make a connection with the more subjective aspects as reflected in attitudes towards language, for example. *Subjective ethnicity*, therefore, seems to encompass both *behavioural* and *mentalist* aspects of attitude, as discussed by Appel & Muysken (1987) (see below).

What causes societal bilingualism?

The existence of two or more languages in contact within a given territory may be due to various historical and/or political factors. Apart from political marriages, the conquering of nations by warfare has been a major contributing factor (as in the case of the Romans and the Mongols) as well as colonisation; for example, the European colonial expansion which in the past resulted in high-status languages co-existing side by side with native languages of conquered peoples in Africa and South America. Such situations sometimes resulted in the creation of new languages which, although similar to those of the colonial conquerors (for example, Spanish, English, Portuguese and French), later developed into a creole, as in the Caribbean.

In more recent times, as Appel & Muysken (1987) point out (**Reading 2**), there has been a *reversal* of historical colonisation with the advent of post-colonial migration from the Third World to industrialised societies, as from parts of India to Britain, thus resulting in a proliferation of bilingual communities. European Union legislation, which has allowed workers from various nations to seek employment in other constituent nations, has also contributed to this linguistic phenomenon.

However, as well as being *international*, migration can also be *intra-national* involving people of different ethnicity *within* a sovereign state. Historically, one can refer, for example, to the huge influx of people seeking work from England into Wales at the beginning of the twentieth century (with a resultant attrition in the *percentage* of Welsh-speakers) as well as further in-migration seen in more recent years.

Appel & Muysken (1987) in **Reading 2** distinguish between three kinds of societal bilingualism:

1. Where two languages co-exist and different groups use different languages, each one being monolingual e.g. colonised countries.
2. Where the whole population is bilingual.

3. Where one group is bilingual and the other monolingual (monoglot).

This is a theoretical framework which, of course, can be more complex in reality in many countries. However, such a typology makes it necessary for us to examine the use of certain terminology adopted in the field of sociolinguistics which is essential to our understanding of societal bilingualism.