

Terminology

A brief word regarding the use of terminology needs to be provided. A wide range of terminology is used in this field of study which, as will be seen, sometimes appears to be used synonymously although there may be certain differences however minor they may seem. Baker (2017: 20) for example, offers definitions to the following terms:

- **Language skills:** those skills which are 'external' in terms of observable performance, specifically with regard to the ability to read, write, speak and show understanding.
- **Language competence:** used in a more general and less specific sense in terms of 'internal' skills not always demonstrated or observed through external performance but, nevertheless, existing and related to some fundamental system, what Baker (2017:20) refers to as "an inner, mental representation of language, something latent rather than overt."
- **Language performance:** the actual external, observable evidence of internal linguistic competence.
- **Language ability / Language proficiency:** often used ambiguously and as synonyms for the above but imply the combination of various processes, including the informal *acquisition* of language plus cognitive/intellectual ability. As Baker (2017:20) states: "For some, language ability is a general, latent disposition, a determinant of eventual language success. For others, it tends to be used as an outcome, similar but less specific than language skills, providing an indication of current language level."
- **Language achievement:** usually used to mean the *level* of ability or proficiency gained in a language, especially with regard to the outcome of formal instruction.

The literature has a plethora of terms relating to bilingualism with various authors having coined synonymous terminology relating to the same criterion, such as the stage at which bilingualism is acquired (e.g. infantile bilingualism or early bilingualism) or levels of proficiency (e.g. receptive bilingualism or passive bilingualism).

However, one can also come across some occasional inconsistency. For example, in Reading 1, Chin & Wigglesworth (2007:7) couple the term 'passive' synonymously with 'recessive' to describe "bilinguals who are gradually losing competence in one language, usually because of disuse." It is clearly advisable that, in the interests of ensuring greater specificity in adopting terminology for a highly complicated field of study, 'recessive' should perhaps be reserved to describe those individuals "who are gradually losing competence in one language, usually because of disuse", whereas 'receptive' should possibly be reserved to describe those (despite similar disuse) who are *not*.

Baetens Beardsmore (1986:16-17) also refers to Grosjean's (1982) adoption of the term 'dormant bilinguals' to describe individuals who are effectively in 'receptive' mode but whose productive skills could, under more conducive conditions, possibly be re-activated. As well as providing a lengthy discussion about 'semilingualism', reference is also made to Dorian's (1982) use of the terms 'low proficiency semi-speakers' and 'near-passive bilinguals' (pp.14-15) as well as

Pohl's (1965) use of 'asymmetrical bilingualism' which Baetens Beardsmore recommends is retained to describe a "situation which at first sight may seem exceptional but in fact is not so rare" (pp.20-21).

Whereas one could not blame a student for seeing this as nothing more than an unnecessary attempt at 'splitting hairs', adopting terminology which covers all linguistic cases reflects the basic problem of trying to encompass a wide range of variables in the interaction between a continuum of linguistic *proficiency* (degree) on the one hand and *use* of language (function) on the other (see below). Such a range of permutations inevitably necessitates the adoption of more specific terminology. A further example of this is the way that Baetens Beardsmore (1986:21) *recommends* that Diebold's (1961) term 'incipient bilingualism' should be used. However, such an attempt at specificity has perhaps not always resulted in consistency of use.

Reading 2, places terminology relating to developmental aspects of second language acquisition or bilingualism within a typological framework which is further categorised under the following sub-headings:

- (i) timing of acquisition of the second language
- (ii) language development and acquisition contexts
- (iii) language proficiency (including relative proficiency in each language)
- (iv) use and frequency of use of each language

It should be noted that Readings 1 and 2 and Baetens Beardsmore (1986), for example, will introduce the student to a wide range of terminology relating to bilingualism which will enable him/ her to become accustomed to and describe a wide range of levels of proficiency and linguistic contexts. Some may have greater relevance to aspects which are studied in subsequent modules, including those dealing with societal bilingualism, cognitive aspects of bilingualism or language acquisition. Nevertheless, the Readings will provide a sound introduction to terminology relating to this wide field of study and to which students should gradually become acquainted. However, this comes with the caveat that the desire amongst academics to aim at more specific description of a wide range of variables (along with what seems to be a certain amount of academic and professional autonomy in coining terms) can sometimes result in inconsistency both in use and meaning (see Bilingual Development below).

For the sake of convenience, we shall use the term 'bilingual' for the time being to encompass aspects of both bilingualism and multilingualism, unless there is a reason for not doing so. We shall assume, therefore, that the term 'bilingual' will also apply to more than two languages unless specified otherwise. To quote Baetens Beardsmore (1986:3) again:

There is no evidence to suggest that the fundamental principles affecting language usage are any different whether two, three or more languages are being used by one and the same speaker, and the major question is whether they differ significantly from cases where only one language is being used.

Defining bilingualism

The definition of bilingualism which might reflect the most prevalent concept amongst the general public is probably that of Mackey (1957: 51) who defined bilingualism in the most nebulous terms:

We shall...consider bilingualism as the alternate use of two or more languages by the same individual.

or that of Weinreich (1953:5), who defined bilingualism as “the practice of alternately using two languages.”

Despite the general over-simplified belief that bilingualism is simply about using two languages, the aim of this unit is to investigate the complexities and intricacies of the term as reflected also by the range of definitions which have been adopted by various academics over the years.

According to Baetens Beardsmore (1986:1):

Bilingualism as a concept has open-ended semantics.
Definitions are numerous and are continually being proffered
without any real sense of progress being felt as the list extends.

The term ‘bilingual’ has been defined in many ways across what may be considered a wide-ranging continuum of linguistic proficiency in two languages, but which can, nevertheless, be categorised as a dichotomy of what Baetens-Beardsmore (1986) has referred to as *minimal* and *maximal* definitions.

Maximal definitions

An often-quoted definition is that of Bloomfield (1933) who defined bilingualism as “the native-like control of two languages” but who also qualified this by adding:

Of course, one cannot define a degree of perfection at which a good foreign speaker becomes a bilingual: the distinction is relative.(1933: 55-56).

This “maximal” approach to defining bilingualism has been replicated by others, such as Oestreicher (1974:9) who, for example, states that bilingualism is ‘...complete mastery of two different languages without interference.’

Christopherson (1948: 4), likewise, defined it as a: “... person who knows two languages with approximately the same degree of perfection as unilingual speakers of those languages.”

Minimal definitions

The “minimal” approach to defining bilingualism is perhaps best reflected in that of Haugen (1953:7) who states that “bilingualism is understood... to begin at the point when the speaker of one language can produce complete meaningful utterances in the other language”. Again suggesting *minimal* levels of required competence, Diebold (1964) refers to ‘incipient bilingualism’ while MacNamara (1969:82) defines the bilingual individual as “a person who, for example, is an educated speaker of English and who can read a little French. This means that bilingualism

is being treated as a continuum, or rather a series of continua, which vary among individuals along a variety of dimensions.”

One can discern obvious issues related to such definitions on both extreme points of the continuum, evoking questions such as, what do ‘complete mastery’ and ‘native-like control’ actually mean? So-called ‘native speakers’ themselves do not provide a *norm* of expected language competence and, as we saw previously, Bloomfield himself observed that it is difficult to establish the degree of perfection it takes for a good foreign language speaker to become bilingual, stating that “the distinction is relative” (1933:56).

However, whether we are dealing with one, two or more languages, it is important in the first instance to consider exactly which *criteria* we adopt to assess linguistic competence. Such considerations lead us immediately to differentiate between two fundamental dimensions, namely:

- Ability or skills
- Use or context

Mackey (1962) refers to these dimensions respectively as:

- Degree
- Function

It is quite possible, of course, for a person to be more ‘competent’ in the use of a language which he/she never uses than another individual who uses it all the time, but with limited ability. This dichotomy (referred to by Baetens Beardsmore (1986:44) as the transformational-generative dichotomy) can, of course, apply equally to a range of competences or skills in other areas, such as the able composer who hardly composes any music as well as others who do not make use of their skills or talents, be they innate or developed. In terms of *assessing* proficiency, of course, this raises fundamental questions in relation to the issue of validity. Nevertheless, in *practical* terms of assessing language ‘competence, we could theoretically place each of these dimensions on a continuum:

- Maximum levels of use with minimum levels of ability
- Minimum levels of use with “maximum” levels of ability

This would enable us further to place both dimensions on a separate axis in order to make comparisons and show how individuals vary across both axes. The practicalities involved, however, are so immense as to make the validity and dependability of such an exercise highly questionable, as we shall see by examining the variables involved when discussing the two dimensions in turn.