

Reading 1

Chin, N. B. & Wigglesworth, G. *Bilingualism: an advanced resource book*.
London: Routledge, 2007.

Unit A1

Describing bilingualism

What is bilingualism?

What level of competence must you achieve in both languages to qualify as a bilingual?

How do different experiences in acquiring bilingualism affect the degree of bilingualism?

Can there be a single definition of bilingualism?

An often-quoted answer to the question 'What is bilingualism?' is Baetens Beardsmore's comment that 'bilingualism as a term has open-ended semantics' (1982: 1). In other words, the term 'bilingualism' may mean different things to different people as there is no one definition of bilingualism. For the average speaker, bilingualism can be loosely defined as the use of two languages or the native-like control of two languages. The first definition highlights the use of two languages as a key criterion, which may well include speakers who only have rudimentary formulaic expressions, e.g. *greetings*, in the second language. In stark contrast, the second definition imposes a stringent requirement in terms of language proficiency. As is evident, each definition represents a position at different ends of the proficiency continuum even though, in reality, most bilinguals probably fall somewhere in the middle of this continuum. Moreover, often what we read in the literature about how bilinguals should be defined are views of experts which may not reflect the views of speakers themselves.

Though the discussion of how bilingualism should be defined has often centred on the issue of language competence, this focus overlooks other socio-cultural and cognitive factors which are just as relevant when discussing the performance of bilinguals. Hence, the aim of this first unit is to show that bilinguals are part of a wider socio-cultural milieu, and any description of bilingualism needs to account for how bilinguals utilize and interact with the resources in the community. We will show that the impact of social, psychological and cultural variables on the bilingual individual is ultimately central to the experience of being bilingual, and that an understanding of these factors underpins all questions raised in this area of study.

This unit will not attempt to provide an exhaustive definition of bilingualism, as this is widely covered elsewhere (see, for example, Hornby 1979; Skutnabb-Kangas

1981; Baetens Beardsmore 1982; Romaine 1995; Hoffmann 1991; Baker 2006). Instead, the aim is to equip readers with the necessary skills and insight to assess and interpret research drawn from bilingual populations. In order to achieve this, we will first examine how the bilingual experience has been chronicled and examined by various researchers. We will also look at how some factors may exert an influence over our perceptions of bilinguals and how they function. In the course of the discussion, key issues surrounding the description of bilingualism will be highlighted with a view to providing some guidelines which will be useful in engaging with debate and research into bilingualism.



Task A1.1

Think about yourself or someone you know who is bilingual:

- How did this person become bilingual?
- What is this person's proficiency in both languages?
- When and where does this person use both languages?

Compare your answer with that of another person in your class:

- Can you draw any conclusions about the difficulties which you might encounter if you were asked to provide a single definition of bilingualism?

Consider whether you think someone is bilingual if:

- they have a slight non-native accent in one or both languages;
- they make occasional errors of syntax in one or both languages;
- they do not always know the right words to use in one language;
- they may speak both languages fluently but are culturally at ease only in one language.

The topic of how bilingualism can be defined tends to receive universal attention in studies of bilingualism because an understanding of bilingualism in its social, psychological and cultural contexts is an essential initial step before research in this area can be interpreted. This unit is organized around five main issues which are important variables in relation to bilingualism:

- descriptors which refer to the degree of bilingualism
- descriptors which refer to the context of bilingual language acquisition
- descriptors which refer to age of acquisition
- descriptors which refer to the domain of use
- descriptors which refer to social orientation.

The first set of descriptors refers to the ways in which we may describe bilingual proficiency. Next, we examine the variables which impact on the contexts in which bilingual acquisition can take place. The third point relates to the age at which the languages are acquired and the possible consequences of this on the degree of bilingualism attained. The fourth issue concerns ways in which we can describe the domains of use of both the bilingual's languages – that is, the circumstances in which the languages are used. Finally, we will discuss how the wider social orientation is also relevant to our understanding of how bilinguals function.

DESCRIPTORS WHICH REFER TO THE DEGREE OF BILINGUALISM

At the heart of the description of bilingualism is the issue of degree of bilingualism. Simply put, *degree of bilingualism* refers to the levels of linguistic proficiency a bilingual must achieve in both languages to be considered a bilingual. Is a bilingual someone who functions like two monolinguals? Or is a bilingual someone who needs only minimal proficiency in one or both languages? These are the views of lay people and they echo the views expressed by experts in the fields, such as Bloomfield (1933), Haugen (1953), Mackey (1962) and Weinreich (1953). Like the general public, experts differ among themselves on this issue, and in many ways the disparities between their views have been seminal in spawning an active debate on how bilingualism should be defined. Let's first look at how bilingualism is conceptualized by specialists in the field.

Bloomfield (1933: 55) defined bilingualism as 'native-like control of two languages', while, in contrast, Mackey (1962: 52) defined bilingualism as 'the ability to use more than one language'. In a similar vein to Mackey, Weinreich (1953) defined bilingualism as 'the practice of alternately using two languages' while Haugen (1953: 7) proposed 'the point where a speaker can first produce complete meaningful utterances in the other language' to be a starting point for defining bilingualism. As can be seen, these definitions range from Bloomfield's rigorous expectations of totally balanced bilingualism to Mackey's, and Weinreich's and Haugen's looser requirements of mere ability or the practice of using two languages. Baetens Beardsmore (1982) described these two extremes as minimalist (Mackey, Weinreich) and maximalist (Bloomfield) in approach. Haugen's view could also be considered minimalist, including as it does the qualification that the utterances have to be 'complete' and 'meaningful' – in other words, the definition will admit someone who is fluent enough to order dinner in a restaurant.

On the other hand, the maximalist approach describes the ideal bilingual who will find no match in reality. If we examine the experience of bilinguals around us, we quickly realize that bilinguals do not, and cannot, function like two monolinguals. In fact, their degree of competence in both languages is greatly influenced by the way each language is used, and this differs greatly from individual to individual.

Moreover, how do we decide who is the ideal representative of a native speaker in each language? This point has become increasingly contentious and will be further discussed in Unit A2.

The maximalist approach is equally unsatisfactory because it fails to make a distinction between those who have only minimal communicative ability in a second language and those who use the language actively in their daily lives in a large range of settings. How, then, can we measure degree of bilingualism?

Macnamara (1969) emphasized the need to discuss the degree of bilingualism not as a unitary component but as degree of competence in sub-components. The sub-components are the four macro skills (speaking, writing, reading and listening). In this schema, competence in bilingualism is seen as a continuum with individuals showing varying degrees of competence in each of the macro skills. A discussion of how this competence can be measured, a critical issue in bilingual studies, will be explored in more detail in Unit A2. Meanwhile, it is important to examine bilingual abilities in various skill contexts and to discuss varying degrees of bilingualism rather than trying to pinpoint a specific level of bilingualism that qualifies one as being bilingual.



Task A1.2

Rate the competence of your own language(s) in each of the four macro skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Use a five-point rating scale (1 = weak, 5 = excellent).

- What are some of the factors which impact on your rating?
- For each of the macro skills, consider how your rating may change when you are performing different tasks (e.g. reading a book versus reading a newspaper, ordering at a restaurant or making a presentation to your class).

Several terms such as *balanced bilinguals*, *dominant bilinguals*, *recessive bilinguals* and *semilinguals* have been used to categorize bilinguals according to the perceived degree of proficiency they have in both languages. As these terms are commonly used, we will review them in the next few sections.

Balanced bilinguals

The term *balanced bilingual* was first used by Lambert et al. (1959) in Canada to describe individuals who are fully competent in both languages. In most instances, when the term balanced bilingual is used, it describes those who are thought to have perfect control of both languages in all settings. Though it is possible to come across bilinguals who are highly proficient in both languages, Baetens Beardsmore (1982) argued that balanced bilingualism is close to impossible to achieve, and is therefore

very rare. Even high-level conference interpreters tend to have a preference for one of their languages, and will often specialize in interpreting into their dominant language despite the fact that they are highly fluent in both languages.

Fishman (1972) went further, arguing that bilinguals are rarely equally fluent in both languages in all topics. He argued that sociolinguistic forces demand that bilinguals organize their languages in functionally complementary spheres. For example, a German–French bilingual may be able to speak both languages fluently, but is likely to use German exclusively in certain situations or when discussing specific topics. Fishman emphasized that it is this complementary nature of language functions that assures the continued existence of bilingualism, because any society which produces bilinguals who use both languages with equal competence in all contexts will stop being bilingual, as no society needs two languages to perform the same set of functions. In other words, balanced bilingualism necessarily entails the death of bilingualism.

Dominant bilinguals

The term *dominant bilingual* refers to bilinguals who are dominant in one language. In the context of discussing dominant bilinguals, researchers will often refer to their less dominant language as the *subordinate language*. However, one important criterion to note is that the term ‘dominance’ may not apply to all domains. So, someone who is dominant in French may not exhibit this dominance in all areas. For example, a French–German computer scientist may speak French most of time except when he is discussing computer science-related topics as he did his training in computer science in German. In cases where specialist jargon (medicine, sports) is required, speakers may consciously choose to speak in the language they normally use when discussing these kinds of topics. For example, an Italian–German teacher may be fluent in both Italian and German, but always discusses soccer in Italian as he mainly plays soccer with his Italian-speaking friends and talks ‘soccer’ in Italian and not in German. Similarly, a Chinese engineer who was trained in London may prefer to discuss engineering research in English despite the fact that her mother tongue is Mandarin Chinese.

Passive or recessive bilinguals

The term *passive* or *recessive bilinguals* refers to bilinguals who are gradually losing competence in one language, usually because of disuse. As the term ‘recessive’ seems to have negative connotations, we will use the term ‘passive bilinguals’ to describe this group of bilinguals. For example, a Dutch migrant in Australia may find himself isolated from the Dutch-speaking community as his daily encounters are with English-speaking Australians (see Clyne 1991). Over time, his proficiency level in Dutch may deteriorate owing to the long period of non-use. As we will see in Unit 5, periods of non-use can have various effects on bilingual competence.

In bilingual communities which are undergoing a shift from one language to another (usually from the home language to the dominant language in the society), it is not uncommon to come across bilinguals who can only understand, but cannot speak, the other language. So, in the Australian context, many older Italians still speak Italian, or an Italian dialect, to their children and grandchildren. However, these second- (children) or third- (grandchildren) generation Italians may reply to their parents or grandparents in English. This is because Italian is gradually being replaced by English for the second- and third-generation Italians (Cavallaro 1998; Bettoni 1985) who are living in an English-speaking community, and being educated in English. Thus, this group of children grows up with an increasingly passive understanding of Italian and often does not use the language actively at all. In such contexts, passive bilingualism, the ability to understand but not produce meaningful utterances, is often contrasted with *active bilingualism*, the productive use of both languages.

Semilinguals, or limited bilinguals

The issue of bilinguals who appear to have limited level of proficiency in both first and second language has dominated some discussions on the issue of degree of bilingualism. The term *semilingualism* was first used by Hansegard in 1968 (cited in Baker 2006: 9) to refer to Finnish-minority students in Sweden who lack proficiency in both their languages. Hansegard described semilingualism in terms of deficit in six language competences:

- size of vocabulary
- correctness of language
- unconscious processing of language (automatism)
- language creation (neologization)
- mastery of the functions of language (e.g. emotive, cognitive)
- meanings and imagery.

According to these parameters, a semilingual is both quantitatively and qualitatively deficient in comparison to monolinguals, and semilingualism has been blamed for the low academic achievement of minority children. Over the years, the term has accumulated pejorative connotations, and researchers who invoked the use of this concept have been widely rebutted (cf. Baetens Beardsmore 1982; Edelsky et al. 1983; Genesee 1984; Spolsky 1984; Baker 2006) for ignoring the socio-political concerns implicit in the existence of semilinguals. These authors argued that semilingualism is rooted in an environment which is not conducive to ongoing bilingualism, where the speakers were socially, politically and economically disadvantaged. Therefore, semilingualism is a situation which is engineered by the environment and not a consequence of bilingualism since a monolingual in the same environment would have faced the same degree of struggle in their academic endeavours. Researchers who highlight the correlation of semilingualism to poor academic achievement without carefully separating the symptoms from the cause

only serve to perpetuate the negative stereotype of minority children. Equally critical is how this perception translates into educational policies and curriculum for minority children.

Though the term semilingualism is no longer fashionable, the idea of low-achieving bilinguals who are linguistically competent neither in the first language nor in the second language is still discussed, albeit under a different label. Cummins (1994) acknowledges that labelling someone as a 'semilingual' is highly negative and may be detrimental to children's learning, and proposes an alternative label, 'limited bilingualism', to describe the same condition.

More recently, MacSwan (2000) has criticized further the concept of semilingualism and limited bilingualism. Questioning Cummins's position on defining school-based literacy and academic skills as a component of general language proficiency, MacSwan examined all the evidence put forth for the case of semilingualism and concluded that semilingualism is more a function of socio-economic status (SES) than of language background. In general, MacSwan cautioned against hasty use of labels which do more harm than good for those language learners who are already socially disadvantaged. Baker (2006: 10) sums it up well:

Rather than highlight the apparent 'deficit' in language development, the more positive approach is to emphasize that, when suitable conditions are provided, languages are easily capable of evolution beyond the 'semi' state.

Though SES is not a trait which is inherently linked to bilinguals, the well-documented interaction between ethnicity and SES is something which we cannot ignore. Studies which carefully control the SES variable have shown that minority children of higher SES do well academically with or without education in their mother tongue (Krashen 1996). In contrast, minority children from lower SES compared unfavourably with mainstream children without language support in their mother tongue. Overall, researchers have shown that the strongest predictor of academic achievement is the number of years of education that the children have received in their first language (see, for example, Krashen 1996; Thomas and Collier 1997). We will return to the issue of how bilinguals are educated in Unit A6 but, in the meantime, it is important to note that external pressures like SES have a significant bearing on the performance and perception of bilinguals. It is for this reason that some bilingual researchers such as Hakuta (1987) carefully control the SES variable in their research on bilinguals. Conversely, in Unit A4, we see that poorly defined bilingual samples led Welsh-English bilinguals from a lower SES to be compared unfavourably to English monolinguals from a higher SES in Saer (1923), a paper which was influential in the thinking on bilinguals for many decades. The unfortunate outcome of such comparisons is that policy-makers often rely on such findings to rationalize programmes which put minority children at a disadvantage.

**Task A1.3**

- Think of bilinguals you know in your community. Are they balanced or dominant or passive? If you have put them in one of the above categories, think about whether this is the case in all domains of activity. What are some of the reasons which influenced your decisions? What are some problems you encountered during your decision-making process?

DESCRIPTORS WHICH REFER TO THE CONTEXT OF BILINGUAL LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Although bilinguals share the common experience of using more than one language in their lives, the ways in which they acquire their languages vary. Put any number of bilinguals together and the chances are there will not be a perfect match in any of their bilingual experiences. Some will have acquired both languages at home, some through school or university, others through their working environment, or through travel to, or residence in, a foreign country. Within each of these domains (home, school or university, work), there will be further differences. In the home domain, there are a multitude of factors which may impact on the degree of bilingualism which is acquired, including the age at which the language is acquired, the way in which the language is used, to whom the language is used and the frequency with which the language is used. In school and work contexts, similar variables will apply. As can be seen, once the various factors are combined, the permutations are open-ended. In discussing or studying bilinguals, we need to assume that no bilinguals have the same experience even though their profiles may be similar. In this section, we will look at some common parameters used to differentiate the contexts in which bilinguals acquire their languages.

In your readings, you may come across researchers who make the distinctions between *primary contexts* and *secondary contexts*. When used, primary contexts refer to situations where a child acquires both languages in a naturalistic setting without any structured instruction, while secondary contexts refer to the situation when a child acquires one of the languages in a structured setting, usually school. This creates a clear division where one language is acquired in a naturalistic setting and the other is acquired in a formal setting, usually a classroom. This distinction is sometimes referred to as *natural bilingualism* versus *school bilingualism* (Skutnabb-Kangas 1981).

Children who acquire both languages in a primary context acquire the languages as a result of natural input in the environment. This input is usually provided by caregivers, often the parents and/or siblings, when the child is an infant, but as the child enters early childhood, the input can also come from other sources, such as the extended family and the wider community. As we will see in Unit A3, there are many detailed reports on children being raised in bilingual situations like this – often where one parent speaks one language and the other speaks another.

Within the primary context, a further distinction is made between *naturalistic fused* and *naturalistic separate*. In a *naturalistic fused setting*, there is no separation of context for both languages, and the child is exposed to both languages in the same context. So, for example, a Mandarin–English bilingual child may receive input in both languages from each parent, siblings or peers. In such situations, both languages are used by the same speaker. In contrast, a bilingual in a *naturalistic separate* context may hear and use Mandarin only with one parent and English with the other parent. In this context, one language is associated with a specific parent. This latter model is commonly referred to as the one-parent, one-language model. Apart from parents, it is also common for the separation to be made according to other interlocutors such as siblings, peers and grandparents. So, in Singapore, a trilingual child may speak Mandarin to the parents, English to the siblings and Hokkien to the grandparents. More rarely, the physical environment is different, as in the case reported by Ginsberg (1996), where the child spoke to the parents in Spanish exclusively in the home, but in English outside the home; this system of separation was rigidly maintained throughout the child's life. In this case, the child learned to use the physical environment as a cue to switch between the two languages with the same interlocutors.

It is often assumed that language input in the pre-school years takes place in a naturalistic environment. While this is true for most bilinguals, for a large proportion of bilingual children in Asia, for example Singapore, Malaysia and Hong Kong, structured language-focused teaching may begin when the child is as young as two. In Singapore, a child may speak both Mandarin Chinese and English without any formal teaching at birth, but once they start attending childcare, which can be as early as two years of age, it is common for childcare centres to provide structured teaching in both languages. So, in such cases, the distinction between primary and secondary contexts may not be as clear-cut as in other settings.

The issue of primary and secondary contexts is important especially in the study of the language development in bilinguals as there is some debate about whether one context is more beneficial in promoting the desired outcome in the language development of bilinguals. In Unit A3, we will explore the impact of these differences on the language development of bilinguals.

Task A1.4

- Do you think we can make a clear distinction between primary and secondary contexts? Can you think of situations when this distinction will be difficult to make? Why do you think researchers make a distinction between these two contexts? (Think about how the two contexts can influence learning behaviour and language use.)

Another distinction made is the difference between *elective bilinguals* and *circumstantial bilinguals*, a distinction proposed by Valdes and Figueroa (1994). Though

these terms are not widely used, we feel that they provide a very useful distinction when we are considering different bilingual populations. Essentially, the distinguishing feature is one of volition or choice as some bilinguals actively choose to be bilingual but some just find themselves in a situation where they have no choice but to be bilingual. Elective bilinguals are bilinguals who have some element of choice about learning a second language. This may include children who choose to acquire an additional language in a school setting or someone who learns a new language because their partner speaks a different language. Circumstantial bilinguals, on the other hand, are groups who have no choice when it comes to learning a second language. This may include indigenous groups which have been colonized or groups whose first language is different from the dominant and more prestigious language of the surrounding community. The concept of elective bilinguals and circumstantial bilinguals is particularly critical in the contexts of how bilinguals are measured and therefore is a distinction which we will return to in more detail in Unit A2.

DESCRIPTORS WHICH REFER TO AGE OF ACQUISITION

Age has often been raised as an important descriptor for bilingualism because of the robust research on the relationship between age and language proficiency at various linguistic levels (e.g. Johnson and Newport 1989; Long 1990). Although exceptions and counterarguments have been reported (see Birdsong 1992; Bialystok 1997a; Clark 2003), the bulk of the evidence points towards the advantage of early acquisition for ultimate language attainment. While this is true in general, it appears to be especially the case for phonology, where reports have shown that children who acquired the second language before six years of age were able to achieve native-like competence. On the other hand, mature learners were able to acquire the target language at a much faster rate (Long 1990).

Hence, critical to any discussion of bilingualism is the issue of age as there appears to be what we might call a sensitive age for language learning, which ceases around puberty. The sensitive age is a reformulation of Lennenberg's (1967) critical period hypothesis, which argues that we have a superior language learning capacity early in life which will disappear or decline with maturation. However, the evidence is not totally conclusive as other researchers (see, for example, Birdsong 1992) have shown that native-like acquisition is possible in speakers who were exposed to French after fifteen years of age. In a later study, Birdsong and Molis (2001) found that four of their participants who arrived in the United States after the age of seventeen were indistinguishable in their performance when compared to native speakers. Therefore, the exact age in which the sensitive period operates is controversial, with Birdsong (2005) arguing that there is no clear cut-off point in terms of age at which native-like proficiency cannot be attained.

Age is considered an important factor because there is a strong association between age of acquisition and ultimate attainment of proficiency. Generally, supporters of

the sensitive age hypothesis (e.g. Newport 1990) argue that younger children can apply heuristic strategies which are more efficient than adult learners'. However, other researchers (e.g. Bialystok 1997a; Clark 2003) have cautioned that we should not look only at neurological factors when analysing language learning outcomes. In adult learners, other factors such as aptitude, attitude, identity and motivation can significantly affect the learning outcome. Attitudes and motivation, in particular, have been found to impact strongly on the final achievement of the learners' proficiency level (e.g. Gardner 2001; Dörnyei and Clément 2001; Masgoret and Gardner 2003). Apart from attitude, contextual factors such as exposure are also important. In Birdsong and Molis (2001), the amount of English used by their participants at the time of study was a strong indicator of their performance in English.

Another factor we need to bear in mind is that many of the findings in support of the sensitive period hinge on the fact that we have a stable notion of what is a native speaker. In the studies mentioned above, participants were often asked to assess the *nativeness* of a learner's speech or a sample of a learner's writing. With many languages, the issue of what constitutes *native-speakerness* has become more complex with increasing globalization. Many researchers (e.g. Kachru 1987) discuss the difficulties of identifying who native speakers are with the creation of local identities and increasing diversity.

As pointed out by Davies (1991a), the issue of native-speakerness is entwined with identification and social affiliation. Therefore, commonly held assumptions about native speakers have been increasingly challenged at various levels.

Task A1.5



- Think about your competence in the four macro skills (speaking, writing, listening, reading) of your native language. Are you equally competent in all four skills? Are there some aspects of writing (e.g. academic writing) which you think may not be as strong as your spoken skills? What would be considered to be 'native-like' proficiency for a learner of English? Generally, what levels of competence do you expect native speakers to have?
- It may be useful to consider how you rule someone out as a native speaker. What standards or norms do you use in your assessment? (Which group of native speakers do you have in mind?) Consider the case of someone who is brought up in India and who speaks English as a first language. Would this person be considered a native speaker of English?

Against this backdrop, as we can see, age is a key consideration when discussing or assessing bilinguals and the usual distinction made is between *early bilinguals* and *late bilinguals*. Early bilinguals are those who are exposed to both languages before adolescence and late bilinguals are those who acquire the second language after adolescence. Some researchers also make the distinction between infant bilingualism

and early bilingualism (e.g. McLaughlin 1984, 1985), though this distinction is not commonly used.

Apart from its relevance to researchers, the issue of age is important as it can be used to rationalize educational policies and curriculum planning, an issue which we will return to in Unit A6. For example, administrators often ask the questions 'At what age should we introduce the learning of a new language?' or 'Is it futile to introduce language learning at secondary levels?' In addition, understanding how the age factor affects bilinguals may help us to frame expectations of language-learning outcomes in more realistic terms.

DESCRIPTORS WHICH REFER TO DOMAIN OF USE

In answer to the question 'Are you a bilingual?' a bilingual might commonly respond, 'Yes, I speak Greek at home and with my relatives but I generally use English the rest of the time'. Implicit in this response is the notion that languages assume different roles in different settings. This demarcation of functions, more commonly known as *domains*, is central to any discussion of bilingualism. The term 'domain' was first used by Fishman (1972) to describe how speakers compartmentalize their language use. Very simply, domains refer to the different spheres of influence in speakers' lives and for language; Fishman identified family, friendship, religion, education and employment as the main domains. These domains often determine the variety of language as well as the style of language use. However, topic is another factor which can often override the influence of domain. Hoffmann (1991) summarized the most critical domains as the person, place and topic. However, as we will see in Unit B1, these three broad domains can be further refined to capture language behaviour and use accurately.

It is a well-documented sociolinguistic phenomenon that *interlocutors*, or the persons we are speaking to or communicating with, will affect not only our stylistic choice of language but also our language options. Most of the time, bilinguals have a 'special' language relationship with people in their immediate circle. With some people, they predominantly use Language A and with others they may use Language B. For example, one Lebanese-English bilingual may always speak Lebanese to family members and relatives but use English with anyone outside the circle. Another bilingual may use only Lebanese with older relatives and English with younger relatives. However, this same bilingual will use Lebanese with older Lebanese-speaking strangers. A language relationship tends to evolve quite naturally, and often, once a language pattern is set, it is usually not easy to alter this pattern.

Place or location can also have a strong impact on language choice. Most multilingual communities have a default language which is used at work, and this home-work dichotomy is a very common one. For example, though most speakers in Singapore are bilingual, the default language for the professional workplace and school is

English and, hence, English is currently the lingua franca in these two domains in Singapore. However, sometimes the *interlocutor*, or person, effect may intersect with the *location* or *place* effect to temporarily disrupt the pervasive use of English. So, although the language commonly in use in the public service sector is English, the service staff serving an elderly Malay woman may switch to Malay if they can speak Malay and their client is unable to speak English.

Apart from work, the physical location itself may give rise to the use of different languages. In Singapore, the language used in Orchard Road, the ritzy side of town frequented by tourists, is often English while the default language for the 'heartland' (residential areas for the majority of Singaporeans) is often Mandarin among the Chinese-speaking majority (which comprises 75 per cent of the population). In the city centre, shop assistants and receptionists will often initiate conversation in English, possibly because the ability to speak English is one of the requisite criteria to work in these establishments. However, in the suburbs, store holders may be middle-aged or elderly Singaporeans who were born before bilingualism in English became the norm. Hence, the situation in the suburbs is highly constrained by the language repertoire of the interlocutors, and a shopkeeper in this context may speak Mandarin or Hokkien to a Chinese customer and English to a Malay or Indian customer. If English is not an available option for the shopkeeper, *patois Melayu* (pidgin Malay) is often used (Li and Milroy 2003).

Topic is another key factor that affects language choice. For many bilinguals, one language receives more structured instruction than the other. For example, a Turkish–English migrant in Australia may speak Turkish with family members all the time while in the home, but have a larger vocabulary and greater expressiveness in English because of the extended time spent studying English in school and university. The increased exposure to English in both written and spoken contexts means that English can be used for a bigger array of topics both technical and non-technical. However, when it comes to discussing topics such as cooking or gardening, the same Turkish–English bilinguals may be more at home using Turkish as conversations about such topics are usually in Turkish. This type of topic specialization when it comes to language choice is, again, extremely common for bilinguals.

Task A1.6



- Consider the case of a Korean–English bilingual living in London. If the normal language for interaction at home is Korean, what are some factors which may influence the family members to switch to the use of English within the home context?

DESCRIPTIONS WHICH REFER TO SOCIAL ORIENTATION

The attitudes of bilinguals to their bilingual status, as well as the attitudes of the wider community, are also factors which contribute to our understanding of bilingualism. The relationship between attitude, identity, motivation and individual bilingualism will be discussed in detail in Unit A7. In this section, our focus is on how influences within the society can impact on how bilinguals perceive themselves and how bilinguals are perceived.

To understand this fully, we first have to make a distinction between bilinguals in a bilingual or monolingual context and bilinguals in a multilingual context. We also need to recognize the difference between bilingual contexts which receive high levels of infrastructure and administrative support in terms of funding and recognition, and bilingual contexts which receive minimal support of this kind.

Many bilinguals live in places where the home language is different from the language spoken outside the home, and this is common in countries such as the United States, Australia and Britain. In this context, bilingual children generally receive little or no school support for their home language and, more often than not, going to school entails learning the language of the wider community. In Australia, bilingual children do receive some official support for their home language as up to 47 languages are accredited for the end of high school examination and they can receive instruction in a government School of Languages on Saturdays (Clyne 2005). However, in reality the logistic difficulty of incorporating the home languages in the school curriculum of these minority children means that, on an individual level, language maintenance is relegated to something that is pursued outside the school contexts. In the literature, this situation is often perceived as one of *subtractive bilingualism* as learning a new language may mean losing competence in the first language (Lambert 1974). In other instances, subtractive bilingualism has been narrowly defined as the replacement of the first language by the second language (Cummins 1976: 20). Cummins further argued that many bilinguals in subtractive bilingual learning situations may not develop native-like competence in either of their two languages. However, many bilinguals are able to 'successfully' replace their first language and become highly proficient in the newly adopted language. Though this is achieved at the expense of the mother tongue, the success of such bilinguals is clear evidence that subtractive bilingualism does not necessarily result in limited bilingualism (see Krashen 1996; Thomas and Collier 1997).

In view of the negative connotations attached to subtractive bilingualism, a more neutral term like '*differential bilingualism*' may be more appropriate for this phenomenon. Instead of a simple replacement of L1 by L2, differential bilingualism highlights the differential development of the bilingual's first and second language. Without academic support or instructional input, it is natural to expect that the first language cannot develop at the same rate and have the same range of functions as the second language. In many contexts, differential bilingualism

also refers to a situation where the two languages spoken by the bilinguals are of unequal status.

In multilingual contexts, as opposed to bilingual contexts, there is the potential for problems of a different nature. Many multilingual communities (e.g. Singapore, Malaysia, Switzerland, Belgium, Canada) have policies which explicitly endorse the use of more than one language in official domains – the most critical being the school. In places like Switzerland and Belgium, multilingualism is based on territorial considerations and this can create conflict. However, the constitution protects the rights of individuals to learn their mother tongue on top of other official languages in the country. In such contexts, the languages spoken by bilinguals are usually visible in the educational domain, though visibility in social domains may be correlated with the status of the language within the community. For example, although Tamil is an official language in Singapore and receives equal support and funding in the school system, its visibility in terms of use and relevance socially is much lower than that of Mandarin. This could be because of the smaller demographic concentration as Tamil speakers make up only 6 per cent of the population. When languages enjoy official patronage, there is an implicit political will to ensure language maintenance in such situations, and there is usually very high instrumental motivation to maintain high degrees of bilingualism as learning an additional language provides a skill which enhances the individual's opportunities in life. This conducive language environment is referred to as *additive* bilingualism where learning a new language is seen as a form of enrichment or an asset widely desired by the community.

Some multilingual societies are so diversified that often certain languages, usually the vernaculars (languages used in informal settings), are sacrificed as bilingual policies promote languages which are not the mother tongue of the speakers. For example, in Tanzania, Swahili and English are official languages despite the fact that the indigenous population may speak a different vernacular (Mkilifi 1978). Similarly in Singapore, Mandarin is taught in schools despite the fact that the home language of many Chinese Singaporeans may be a vernacular such as Hokkien, Teochew or Cantonese. In India, where English and Hindi are both official languages of the central government, English is still the preferred language in the South. This situation presents a more complex picture as, at one level, the official languages are developed in an additive environment but the vernaculars do not receive any official recognition. In Singapore this has led to the gradual disappearance of such vernaculars in Chinese homes (Ng, in press).

Task A1.7



- Bilingual children growing up in a monolingual English context often find their home language oddly irrelevant in their lives outside the home. If you were working in the town council of a community with a high percentage of Spanish–English bilinguals, what are some strategies that you could implement

within the community to make Spanish more visible and therefore more relevant to the bilingual children's lives?

Summary

We have discussed five variables:

- degree of competence
- context
- age
- domain
- social orientation.

Although these are crucial departure points when thinking about bilingualism, there are many more factors which can influence the bilingual experience. These include self-identity, attitude towards the community, demographic factors and hypothetical mental organization of the two languages. As we work through the literature on bilingualism, we will no doubt come across more variables which will allow us to see bilingualism in a new light. However, we believe that these five variables serve as the basic starting points to frame our enquiries about bilingualism and bilingual research.

We hope that our discussion of these variables has served to show that bilingualism is not a concrete entity that can be quantified or dissected. Though trying to pin down what constitutes bilingualism is a slippery task, this does not mean that the phenomenon defies categorization. We have tried to show that, in place of trying to arrive at a definition of what is bilingualism, it is more productive to describe bilinguals according to the descriptors discussed in this unit. These descriptors help us understand the phenomenon we work with and guide us to frame our queries in the right contexts. Most importantly, it helps us avoid drawing erroneous conclusions that have been based on mistaken premises. The descriptors will help us develop profiles of individual bilinguals as well as the bilingual communities we work in, and this is the critical first step in any bilingualism research.

In subsequent units we will return repeatedly to the issues raised in this unit. These descriptors not only help us understand the phenomenon of bilingualism, but are also at the core of studies of bilingualism.

In Unit B1, we briefly consider a short extract from Hoffmann (1991) describing the variability in the conditions under which people become bilingual. The second extract is from a seminal paper by Mackey (1962) which details the complexities of describing bilingualism.