A Conceptual Approach to Language Contact: Bilingualism

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Abstract: In studies of language contacts, the bilingualism represents a challenge to explore different relations established between social and linguistic aspects. In this paper, we will give a bit of background to the case of social and individual bilingualism, making an attempt to observe some of the linguistic consequences caused by this phenomenon. Bilingualism is tightly linked to identity, including ethnicity, behaviour, attitudes. We have all witnessed different situations of language contacts, a defining feature of this process being the lexical borrowing, whose implications lead to lexical changes.

Keywords: language evolution, social bilingualism, individual bilingualism, identity, lexical borrowing, additive bilingualism, subtractive bilingualism.

1. Language contact

It is a trivial truth that language contact involves changes not only in language system, but also in the cultural area, leading to bilingualism. Languages on this planet cannot avoid a constant interaction between them, especially when in a society are spoken different languages.

Natural evolution of the world involves scientific innovations, whose implications, at the level of vocabulary, provides internal and external language changes. It is fairly clear that, as the development of society is directly connected to the innovation of vocabulary, the language evolution appears as a consequence of lexical creativity. Current interest in bilingualism research has increased our knowledge – both empirical and theoretical – although the anticipation of influences between languages remains an unresolved issue. Language contact occurs when speakers using different languages interact, resulting consequences for the structure of the language. We find language contact everywhere and anytime. Situation of language contact can be observed for thousands of years; there is a very small possibility for a language to exist in isolation from other languages.

Bilingualism does not necessary require fluency from speakers implied in contact languages, but a minimum of knowledge is wanted for a positive result of communication. A point of considerable interest is the common type of influence, the borrowing of words, which indicates a specific result of language contact.

1.1. Social and individual bilingualism

René Appel and Pieter Muysken distinguished two main types of bilingualism: social and individual. Generally speaking, the social bilingualism can be identified within societies that make use of two or more languages. In other words, most of societies are bilingual, but, as far as the social elements of language contact situations are implied, three forms of social bilingualism can be determined. The first form relates the situation when two languages are used by two different groups and each group is monolingual, the communication being provided by a limited number of bilingual persons. The second type refers to a society where all individuals are bilingual, while the last form of social bilingualism describes a situation when a group is monolingual and the other is bilingual.

Another setting for language contact involves the individual bilingualism; roughly, this type of bilingualism claims the alternative practice of two languages. But, this general view is in many ways unsatisfactory, because a second language acquisition is reflected in linguistic divisions (fluency, flexibility). Therefore, the question is one of the degree of bilingualism, including the use of language in terms of proficiency in productive (speaking, writing) as well as receptive tasks (listening, reading). According to Bloomfield, an individual is bilingual when he possesses a control of two or more language in


\[2\] Ibid.
the same way he uses his native language. The opposite, Meenamara’s view of individual bilingualism is based on the alternative use of two languages, referring to the general dimension of a language.

Language evolution through bilingualism is closely related to the development of vocabulary, the expression of semantic and functional parameters, phonology, morphology, as well as the other elements that involves the architecture of the language. Since the social factors play a major role inside the linguistic contacts between groups, we should emphasize the impact of the migration on the language transformations. This is one of the reasons that led to the creation of international important research centres for the study of bilingualism, in an attempt to a careful observation of the bilingual behaviour.

### 1.2. Language and identity

If we would take the process of bilingualism to imply only the communication purposes, this phenomenon would have to be viewed as an instrument serving the sudden needs. Undoubtedly, the cultural values are transmitted from one language to another, the group feelings influences the conditions of directing information, the problem of cultural identity drawing a clear line between social groups. What this means is that we have no chance to discover the deep of the concerned issue, unless taking into account the importance of identity, and everything related to the social level: ‘As far as the social parameters of language contact situations are concerned, it has been observed that the number of speakers in the respective linguistic groups, the relative social status of the groups involved as well as the relative prestige of the language to a great extent determine the linguistic outcome of language contact. In addition, it matters a lot how long two communities with different languages stay in contact and, above all, how intense the social and linguistic contact between groups is’.

A group identity is defined by differences between groups, including linguistic aspects. An ethnic group, also called an ethnolinguistic group, is a community that is different from other by style, identity, language. It has long been recognized that there is a close relation between language and ethnicity, and to support this statement, we will discuss the three dimensions of ethnicity, which belong to Fishman.

The most important dimension is considered to be the paternity, which appears to express the relation of continuity, representing the acquisition taken from predecessors. Patrimony is the dimension that includes behaviour, music, clothes, and occupations etc., transmitted from earlier generation. The third dimension called phenomenology deals with attitudes of people regarding their ethnicity, the meaning that people assign to paternity.

All three dimensions are based on the idea that communities have a special connection to things they have inherited, this proves that language is the symbol of ethnicity, as Fishman sustains: ‘Language is the record of paternity, the expression of patrimony and the carrier of phenomenology. Any vehicle carrying such a precious freight must come to be viewed as equally precious, as part of the freight, indeed as precious in and on itself’.

Language becomes more important when is interpreted as a binder between different cultural groups, when speakers must be able to establish correspondences in the contact languages. It is assumed that transfer of elements from one group to another depends on the flexibility of language. Moreover, the notion of ’identity’ may be extended so as to express an interaction between groups. In *Language Contact and Bilingualism*, the authors, René Appel and Pieter Muysken, describe an interesting situation about the variety of language inside an ethnic group of Italian Americans. They (members of the group) use English language, but, alternatively, they speak with their Italian intonation, using some of their cultural terms like ‘mozzarella’.

As a conclusion to the discussion of language and identity, we may observe that the relation between them involves components like: ethnicity, behaviour, rituals. These elements find their expression in language, and illustrate forms of attitudes, values, which determine distinction between social groups. The identity imposed by language emphasizes a general truth: identities and languages are not monolithic items.

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3 This sintagma was first introduces by Louis Hjelmslev and later used by other linguists.
6 Idem, p. 25.
3. Lexical borrowing: a consequence of bilingualism

It is hard to believe that there is any language which has not borrowed words from another. **Lexical borrowing** is a linguistic phenomenon identified in most of languages, a process of transferring linguistic signs; it refers to those specific case where a structural unit of a language is inserted to name a linguistic reality which does not exist in the recipient language.

Lexical borrowing is an innovative act, generates creative units according to different situations, as follows:
- sociolinguistic situations between speakers of the recipient and donor language;
- possibility of replacing a native word by a more expressive new one, from another language;
- the need of new semantic distinction;
- the existence of an intensive form of bilingualism, when one language donates and the other receives elements.

Modifications through language contacts experience the transfer of linguistic material in terms of: combinations of sound, meaning, syntactic relations. Languages in contact influence each other through direct mechanism of borrowing, the interaction providing **loanwords**. Language systems contain a number of independent elements (the lexicon, the phonologically component), so when a language borrows a word does not necessary mean that implies the sound of it. There is no doubt that the loanword is phonologically adopted, but it could be adopted according to the system of the recipient language.

Different social and cultural contexts determine many possibilities of lexical borrowing, a frequently reason for this process being considered the fact that speakers perceive elements that they feel are missing in their language. These changes are clearly marked by creations of new structures on the model of donor language. In most languages, lexical borrowing is very successful, although the **intensity of contact** cannot be perceived very precise, for reasons that are considering the attitudes, degree of fluency or even the proportion of feature adopted from some other language.

A problem that needs to be touched upon briefly is that of **human expression** in language, a proof that there are no limits to the possibility of linguistic innovation. Significantly, the image of bilingualism devotes attention to relationship between individual values through language attitude and institutional support that reveals motivation of borrowing.

On this basis, we will discuss Matras’s view on borrowing, referring to two types of factors implied, **factors that facilitate borrowing and factors that motivate borrowing**. The facilitation of borrowing identifies referential autonomy, semantic discreteness that determinates the accessibility of a specific structure, a morpho-syntactic independence of the recipient language. The implication of **motivation in lexical borrowing** is pointed out by the author as follows: ‘One such motivation is the wish to replicate the specific contextual associations triggered by the donor-language word-form. This applies to linguistic matter which typically represents domains of activity that are negotiated primarily in the donator language, whether abstract reasoning, technical work, or institutional activities or various kinds. A different kind of motivation affects grammatical operations that are responsible for language processing in discourse’.

In addition, it is claimed that both mentioned motivations are facilitated by language external factors, mostly by attitudes of speakers in donar and recipient languages.

4. The effects of bilingualism

The effects of language contact have been mostly attributed to the imposition of the donor language or the need to create new structures for an interethnic communication. This ability of the speaker serves to the adoption of grammatical markers, the enrichment of morphology. Still, the outcomes of language contact should be distinguished by two types of effects: **positive and negative**. Among positive aspects, we mention: the widening of cultural horizon and the increasing of possibilities of communication, while the negative dimension of bilingualism provides conflict situations, especially when ethnic minority groups are forced to abandon their language under social pressures. The picture of positive and negative aspects of bilingualism could be completed by two socially types of bilingualism, identified by René Appel and Pieter Muysken, **additive and subtractive bilingualism**. Ideas of additive bilingualism debates the situation when an individual has skills for a second language, and

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8 Ibidem.
his native language is not in danger of being replaced thanks to its prestige. The opposite, subtractive bilingualism is a consequence of using a non prestigious language in a community where ethnic minorities need to use the language imposed by political and economic background. No one will deny that the presence of loanwords (as we saw above) established the fact that there was a contact language, this result of borrowing also constituting an effect of bilingualism.

For the sake of completeness, we need to take a look at the effects on personality development concerning bilingualism, as this phenomenon is expected to produce a conflict of values identities because individuals involved belong to two different languages. In conditions of negative social aspects, groups of bilinguals may have to deal with emotional problems, because of the accumulative pressure of a dominant society. Groups with sociopsychological problems caused by social and cultural conflicts need to adopt the cultural values of the dominant community, often losing their mother tongue, in order to find better educational opportunities or better jobs. As a support for this statement, we have the following quote: 'People view multilingualism (bilingualism, trilingualism are forms of multilingualism) in different and often conflicting ways: it is a mark of high education and great prestige, it is a social or even a psychological handicap, it is a political liability, it is a necessity for daily living, it is an unremarkable fact of life, it is a vital part of a person’s ethnic identity'. Relations between language and culture inevitably lead to interferences between values and wies, as each language is associated with a society and its cultural social life. This is justified by the fact that language is closely related to ways of thinking. Another important aspect of the language contact situations is that of using English at an international level; exists a growing interest for the study of this language, whose implications targets an international communication across different nationalities: 'The current and growing status of English as a necessary part of higher education throughout the world ensures that English will be in contact with most of the world’s languages for the foreseeable future. This could change if social conditions change to reduce drastically the influence of English-speaking countries on the world scene, but for the time being, at least, English is spreading not only in public domains but also in private lives around the world'.

Groups whose language is not a prestigious one seem to be aware of this aspect, forming, most of the time, negative attitudes concerning their language. Also, they can experience inappropriate feelings about their language from different reasons, especially because of their attitude of pride. When more than one language is possible to be used, the decision of choosing a specific language could be crucial for the group interpersonal relations, the situational factors implied having important implications.

The interrelation between language and identity of social groups finds its expression in attitudes (also effects of bilingualism) towards sociological groups, language, speakers of the language, as we see represented in Fig. 1., a schema taken from Language Contact and Bilingualism.

Figure 1. Schema representing the formation of attitudes.

5. Final considerations

Language plays a central role in human behaviour and culture, containing a complex system that implies multiple mechanisms. Our approach may have shown that there appears to be a major aspect resulted after contact of languages: bilingualism, whose main two discussed forms, social and individual, involves issues like: identity, culture, attitudes, lexical borrowing. To gain inside into the language problems, such as bilingualism, we need to explore the connections between social, psychological and linguistic aspects of language. This brief study of bilingualism has enriched our perception of language contact, in terms of diversity, enlarging our knowledge of lexical change arised from transferring linguistic signs at the level of linguistic systems. In most cases, the linguistic behaviour and attitude towards languages inside a bilingual society involve social norms and different values. Distinguishing between social and individual bilingualism is in many ways important, because it shows their
Language contact gives us the possibility to express our thoughts and to communicate in different culture, but also to observe social concerns and developments in language. There is an implicit assumption that the possibilities of setting a language contact are undefined, we cannot determine exactly, in every case, the circumstances of this phenomenon. Moreover, the possibility of predicting a language contact situations remains unsolved. Clearly, the language contact appears to be influenced by social factors and levels of language involved. Following the ideas that two types of effects are produced inside of bilingual societies, positive and negative, we emphasized the implications of the foreign element transferred from the first language (called donor) to the second one (named recipient).

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