

**Advantages and disadvantages of Bilingualism.** 2016/7

1. **Last century**, (C19) work suggested that bilinguals were less intelligent. [The tests were extremely biased in terms of culture]. But, the work took no account of factors such as city/village, and exposure to language, and, tests were done on children, which ignored their language development, and, tests were often done in L2. If you measure intelligence through L2 the scores can be lower, for two reasons. Firstly, the tests may have a culture bias, and secondly, the tests have an added difficulty level because of the second language.
2. **Communicative advantages include:**
  - a. Relationships, with parents, grandparents, community
  - b. transnational communication. One barrier between nations is language.
  - c. Being able to move between languages and often, between cultures, may lead to greater sensitivity. Because bilinguals are skilled in adjusting to the communicative needs of others, they are often more empathetic, better able to listen. Bilingualism is the first step towards biculturalism.
3. **Cultural advantages include:**
  - a. Two or more worlds of experience. To participate and become involved in a culture requires the language of that culture.
  - b. Potentially greater choice of jobs.
4. **Cognitive advantages.** Recent research has shown that bilinguals can be more creative in thinking, and are better able to for instance **redefine meanings of words**.

Real possible disadvantages tend to be temporary. Identity can be an issue, but need not be, and this can change over time.

5. Some teachers, administrators and politicians look at the bilingual as **two monolinguals in one person**. For example, if English is a bilingual's second language, scores on an English reading or English attainment test will often be compared against monolingual or native English speakers' scores and averages. In the US and the UK, a bilingual's English language competence is often measured against that of a native monolingual English speaker. This derives from a monolingual viewpoint – and with political overtones. It is unfair because bilinguals will typically use their two languages in different situations and with different people. Thus bilinguals may be stronger in each language in different domains.
6. **Consequences.** One expectation from this fractional viewpoint is for bilinguals to show a proficiency comparable to that of a monolingual in both their two languages.
  - a. If that proficiency does not exist in both languages, especially in the majority language, then bilinguals may be **denigrated and classified as inferior**.
  - b. In the United States, for example, children of immigrant families, or of other language minority families, have been officially federally categorized as LEP (Limited English Proficient).
  - c. In countries such as the United States and England, the dominant view of the world is monolingual (Brutt-Griffler & Varghese, 2004). Although between a half and

## *Advantages and disadvantages 2*

two-thirds of the world's population is bilingual to some degree, the monolingual is often seen as 'normal' in these two countries, and the bilingual as an oddity or as inferior (see Ellis (2006) for a discussion of monolingualism). This 'inferior' viewpoint, for example that bilinguals have two half-developed languages, is encapsulated in the debate about 'semilingualism'.

- d. In northern Europe, bilinguals who appear to exhibit a lack of proficiency in both languages may be described as 'semilingual'.
- e. In Africa, India, Scandinavia and parts of Asia, for example, bilingualism is often seen as the norm,

### **7. Semilinguals**

- a. Bilinguals tend to be dominant in one of their languages in all or some of their language abilities. This may vary with context and may change over time with geographical or social mobility. For others, the dominance may be relatively stable across time and place.
- b. For the present, a group has been proposed, one that is distinct from balanced and dominant bilinguals. Sometimes referred to negatively as semilinguals or double semilinguals, **the group is regarded as not having 'sufficient' competence in either language.** This section will suggest that such a label is more politically motivated than accurate or commonplace.
- c. Deficiencies in bilinguals when compared with monolinguals on the following dimensions:
  - displaying a small vocabulary +
  - incorrect grammar,
  - consciously thinking about language production,
  - stilted and uncreative with each language,
  - finding it difficult to think and express emotions in either language.

### **8. Major problems with the concept of semilingualism**

- a. Negative, especially of immigrants
- b. Why are languages under-developed? Is it a language problem, or political, economic etc?
- c. Most bilinguals have functional competence depending on context
- d. Language tests may specialise on school language and school expectations.
- e. Comparing with monolinguals is probably unfair. Difference does not mean deficiency.

View two language users as embryonic or developing bilinguals.

### **9. The holistic view: multicompetences**

- a. Any assessment of a bilingual's language proficiency should ideally move away from traditional language tests (with their emphasis on form and correctness) to an evaluation of the bilingual's general communicative competence. This appraisal would be **based on a totality of the bilingual's language usage in all domains, whether this involves the choice of one language in a particular domain, or a mixing of the two languages.**
- b. NB, Baker neglects to distinguish between NS tests and NNS tests. It is possible that a bilingual needs the NS tests in both languages.

### *Advantages and disadvantages 3*

- 1) Expatriate (Expat) children sent to local schools, will do the same tests as locals, and will test for L2 as an L1, and paradoxically will do badly on L2 tests designed as L2.
- 2)
- c. Communicative competence in one of a bilingual's two languages may be stronger in some domains than in others. This is natural and to be expected. Any assessment of a bilingual's competence in two languages needs to be sensitive to such differences of when, where and with whom bilinguals use either of their languages. Time to penalise monolinguals?? See my provocations on my website.

#### **10. Models**

- a. Various ones have been proposed
- b. I prefer the CEFR. More well know, detailed, and used in Tunisia. It enables comparison with other languages.
- c. In order to represent language as a dynamic process, the components must be regarded as interactive with each other.
  - 1) eg, good pronunciation improves reading
  - 2) eg writing practice and concentration on accuracy can improve speaking
  - 3) eg from phonetics, we know that morphology and phonetics have a two way relationship, both influence each other.

Other courses will show you how the emphasis has changed, from linguistic, to communicative, to interactional competence.