



CAROL  
MYERS-SCOTTON

# Multiple Voices

An Introduction to  
Bilingualism

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## *An Introduction to Bilingualism*

Carol Myers-Scotton



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# Preface

This is a book that tries to cover all of the important aspects of bilingualism that university students should know about. This means that the book deals with both what it means to an individual to be bilingual and what it means to a community to include bilinguals. The goal is to write the chapters at a level to make the book appropriate for upper-level undergraduates (in their last two years) or beginning-level Master's degree students.

Most generally, the book is intended as a textbook for courses that are particularly concerned with bilingualism as a socio-political phenomenon in the world. As such, it emphasizes overviews on why people become bilingual; why they maintain their first language or why they shift to a dominant language in the community as their main language; how they use the language varieties in their repertoire in interpersonal interactions; and how language policies in nation states and globalization as a phenomenon affect choices people make to learn certain languages.

However, the book also includes chapters on the more grammatical and cognitive aspects of bilingualism. That is, it deals with outcomes of grammatical combinations of two languages (e.g. codeswitching and convergence), as well as with how bilingualism is a factor promoting the borrowing of words across languages. In addition, there is a chapter on what psycholinguistic studies tell us about how bilingualism seems to be organized in the brain, as well as a chapter largely considering how child bilingualism differs from bilingualism acquired at a later age.

Other topics considered include how cultures differ in their views of appropriate language use. Also, there is a chapter on the ideologies that groups have about the linguistic situation in their community and attitudes that individuals develop about others based on the languages they speak. In addition, there is

discussion of memory in bilinguals and aphasia (language loss) in bilinguals and how recovery differs across individuals. Still other topics considered are types of bilingual education programs and attitudes toward them, as well as explanations that researchers offer for outcomes in second language learning after a young age. Current theories about second language acquisition also are covered.

Instructors may choose to skip the more grammatically and cognitively oriented chapters, depending on the interests and needs of their students. Even without these chapters, the book offers students a very comprehensive view of various aspects of the communities that include bilinguals and the lives of the bilingual individuals themselves.

As the author, my assumption is that students using this book in their course work *need have no background at all in linguistics as a discipline*. But this isn't "bilingualism for dummies", either. Most of the chapters do cover complex issues – because the nature of bilingualism itself and bilingual communities is complex. But anything students need to know about any technical aspects is explained in the book. Further, all technical terms are defined in the text as they are used; there is no need to flip to notes or a glossary to understanding the meaning of what is being conveyed. Also, the many examples help, too.

I have tried to write an overview, but this book is different from many overviews because I have almost always put a good deal of "meat" into the examples so that regularly, an example will go on for an entire paragraph or more. The hope is that this extra detail brings alive to students what life is like for bilinguals and their communities.

So that students get a sense of the lives that bilinguals lead, each chapter opens with a verbal snapshot of a bilingual person. The bilinguals portrayed are not real persons, but they all are based on real persons in the community where they are situated.

Ideally, this book is the main course textbook that should be selected for a course titled "Introduction to Bilingualism". As such, it could serve as the sole text in a semester-long course; for a year-long course, other texts could be added to it to give more detail. It can also be used as a second text or as a supplementary reading for courses that are only partly concerned with such topics as how bilingualism arises, when and where it is maintained or not, who bilinguals are (in terms of their social backgrounds and cognitive makeup), when and why they use their two or more languages, and how bilinguals are treated in official decisions, including those for education.

Thus, this book could be a textbook for a variety of courses in departments of English, any foreign languages, linguistics, communication, and possibly psychology or sociology. Certainly, it would be appropriate for faculties of education because of the bilingual nature of the student bodies everywhere today that their graduates will teach.

# Acknowledgments

This is a big book and it was a long time in the writing. But the journey was made easier by the help of many different individuals, some at my home university (University of South Carolina, *the USC*), but even more from other places around the world. At least five colleagues at other universities read drafts of entire chapters (Jan Bernstein, Judy Kroll, Judy Olinick, Terese Thonus). Many others responded to my requests for help, based on their expertise in various areas, so that I would get right certain details on everything from possible changes in the brains of aphasics, to bilingualism along the German-Danish border, to types of bilingual education programs in Arizona. These individuals include Ad Backus, Dominique Caubet, Michael Clyne, Elin Fredsted, Annick De Houwer, Joan Argenter Giralt, David Green, Jan Jake, Elizabeth Lanza, Joe Lo Bianco, Hyeson Park, Christina Bratt Paulston, Bethyl Pearson, Hal Schiffman, and the late Larry Trask. The following colleagues helped me breathe life into the verbal sketches that head each chapter: Ad Backus, Agnes Bolonyai, Dominique Caubet, Michael Clyne, Giuli Dussias, Sue Jenkins, Elizabeth Lanza, Yaron Matras, Alicia Myhrer, and Zhu Wanjin.

Several reference librarians helped me with one or more difficult references (Gary Geer and Sharon Verba at USC and David Nelson at the University of Pennsylvania). Harold Schiffman's Language Policy List (at the University of Pennsylvania) was an excellent source of current information on many relevant topics; many of the examples throughout the book appear only because I found them on this list. Linguist List provided information, too. Over several years, a number of graduate assistants looked up available materials on various topics and references to go with citations or read chapters; they include Eva Moore, Bevin and Helen Roue, Cherlon Ussery, Zhu Fan, and especially Laurie Sanders. Mila Tasseva at USC continues with good humor to

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# Introduction

## Multiple voices: The word from China

Zhao Min speaks two dialects of Chinese as well as English. He's a commodity trader for a joint venture of the government of the People's Republic of China and an international conglomerate. He comes from Nanjin, China, but divides his time between Beijing and Hong Kong in China, with extended stays in Europe. He studied English as part of his secondary schooling and university education. Today his job demands a good deal of English; he writes emails and has long-distance phone conversations – always in English – with his customers, for whom English is usually a second language, too (e.g. Serbs in former Yugoslavia, now Serbia). When he visits his family in Nanjin, he speaks his home dialect but when he deals with Chinese colleagues, he speaks the standard dialect of the People's Republic of China (formerly called Mandarin, a name some still use, but called Putonghua in the PRC). This is the variety he speaks with his wife, who was raised in Beijing. Zhao Min has little spare time from his job, but when he does, he often watches films and has a huge collection of English-language movies on DVDs.

## 1.1 Introduction

**Bilingualism** is the subject of this book. This is a study of the people who speak more than one language and the social motivations for bilingualism – why people learn a second language and the net result in their lives. It also considers how the fact that speakers are bilingual influences the structure of the languages themselves. In addition, the volume considers how the age at which a speaker learns a second language makes a difference in success as a fluent speaker of that language. Both bilingualism as a feature of individual speakers and bilingualism as a feature of communities or entire nation states are discussed.

Speaking only one language, typically the language you acquired as a first language or mother tongue (generally the language of your home), is called **monolingualism**. **Bilingualism** is the term for speaking one or more languages. Usually the speakers' mother tongue or first language is one of the two languages that make them bilinguals. Bilingualism is used as a cover term for multilingualism, too – speaking more than two languages. Some researchers use the term plurilingualism for speaking more than two languages.

It may come as a surprise to some readers, but more people in the world are bilingual than monolingual – a clear reason why bilingualism is worth studying. When the American comedian, Billy Crystal, introduced the Film Academy Awards ceremony in Hollywood, California in early 2004, he joked, "This ceremony is being broadcast in 57 languages – and that's only in Los Angeles." Yes, there are many bilinguals wherever we look; thus, it makes sense to study the various aspects of bilingualism that this book covers.

Who are the bilinguals? The sketch at the top of this chapter gives you an idea about such persons. You will find similar sketches at the top of all the other chapters, too. These mini-portraits are based on real people although the names are fictitious.

Throughout this book, we will refer to "first languages" and "second languages", assuming that most bilinguals started their speaking years as monolinguals. Of course for persons who acquired two languages simultaneously as young children, "first" and "second" won't work. You will read about some of these early "polyglots" in chapter 11.

Monolingual = a person speaking only one language

Bilingual = a person speaking *at least* two languages

Polyglot = sometimes used for a bilingual, especially one speaking many languages

L1 = first language (what's acquired first as a child)

L2 = any second language (what's acquired later, either as a child or adult)

Linguistic repertoire = the languages a person speaks

## 1.2 Bilinguals and their languages

“Being bilingual” doesn’t imply complete mastery of two languages. Further, speakers are **rarely equally fluent** in two languages. All humans of normal intelligence speak at least one language. As will become clear in this book, as humans, we are innately programmed to acquire a language quite effortlessly as young children when exposed to it. We say that speakers are bilingual when they have also acquired or learned to speak or understand – as a minimum – some phrases that show internal structural relations in a second language. We’ll give you more details later on about what this means. The problem is that there is no accepted formula for exactly what’s necessary for a person to claim to be a bilingual. Usually, being bilingual is associated with being able to *speak* two or more languages, not just being able to read an L2 with a dictionary by your side. But how much “speaking” of an L2 counts as being bilingual? Just being able to produce some formulaic phrases (e.g. greetings and the equivalent of “please” and “thank you”) isn’t enough to label you a bilingual in our view.

One thing we do know: With some exceptions, few bilinguals are as proficient in any second language as they are in their first language. And, if they do speak several second languages, they generally don’t speak all of them equally well. There are two socially based main reasons: (1) Few bilinguals have been equally exposed to all languages in their repertoire and (2) They don’t use them with the same frequency or in the same situations. In chapters 10 and 11, we’ll discuss some findings and views on differences in bilingual proficiency that may have to do with how language is organized in the brain. But for now, rest assured you can take most such claims as “she speaks five languages fluently” with a grain of salt.

## 1.3 Views about bilinguals

As a reader of this book, your perception of bilingualism will depend a great deal on your nationality or where you are living. Those North Americans who are monolingual in English have a hard time comprehending what another language consists of or how people can manage two languages. (For example, I once had an American student whose mother came from Brazil and who spoke Portuguese in addition to English, even though English was the only language she used with her own children. But when the mother spoke to her own brother, she spoke Portuguese. The student called using Portuguese “speaking another language”. That is, the student never referred to Portuguese *as Portuguese*, but only as “another language”, taking a “one size fits all” approach to bilingualism. Apparently, she had never heard anyone speak a second language *other than Portuguese*.)

For many in the United States, **bilingualism used to be exotic**, because the stereotypical bilingual had either a romantic or a threadbare background, or both. That is, typical Americans envisioned the bilinguals they met in this way: Either the bilingual spoke more than one language because he or she was the child of European nobility (read: from Transylvania or some such mysterious locale), or because he or she was the child of refugees (read: from Argentina, Chile, or Russia). More recently, of course, for US residents, bilingualism is associated with migrant or unskilled workers (read: some Spanish speakers) or small businessmen (read: Korean grocer or South Asian motel manager/owner).

Most Canadians used to think of being bilingual as coming from Québec and “speaking French” in addition to English. Today, Canada has surpassed the US as the melting pot of North America and being bilingual there today just as likely means being a new arrival on Canadian shores and speaking anything from Haitian Creole to Hmong to Urdu as a first language.

## 1.4 Learning a second language

Typical Europeans in nations with a firmly established single national language used to think of becoming bilingual as not the by-product of everyday life, but rather a part of formal education (at places such as Oxford, Cambridge, Heidelberg, etc.). That is, for the English to study French or German and for continental Europeans to study at least one other language was part of academic training, whether in secondary school or at the university. At the same time, these Europeans did not expect to hear anything but their own national language spoken on their home turf. Today they overhear conversations in many other languages; for example, Britain has large numbers of immigrants from India, Pakistan, the Caribbean, and Africa, among other outposts. Even *la belle France* (‘the beautiful France’) is a multilingual nation today, with French the sole official language, to be sure, but with large numbers of North Africans who speak Arabic, as well as speakers of Turkish and various African languages, among others. The Germans encouraged *Gastarbeiter* “guest workers” from places like Turkey, who were meant eventually to go home. Just under nine percent of those living in Germany today were born outside Germany, according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. Some details about the current state of bilingualism and patterns of language use in North America and Europe will be explored further in a number of the later chapters.

While educated people in Western Europe and North America often study a second language in school, the rationale has been primarily to learn something about another (generally Western) culture and only secondarily to converse in that language far beyond having the words to order dinner when on vacation in another (Western) nation. True, Europeans have generally taken learning



a second language more seriously than North Americans. Of course a major motivation was that the opportunities to use a second language were nearer at hand for Europeans. But only recently, especially with the establishment of the European Union (formerly the Common Market), have these people had regular opportunities – or the need – to speak a second language.

Certainly, the rise of English as the world's major lingua franca since the end of World War II (especially after the 1950s) has affected in two opposite ways the degree to which people become new bilinguals. Non-native speakers of English, from Capetown, South Africa, to Beijing, China, see the benefits and the need to learn English. In contrast, realizing that the world is learning their language, many native speakers of English are less willing to put effort into learning a second language. There are exceptions, of course; for example, anyone studying for an International MBA (Master of Business Administration) in the United States probably undergoes at least one intensive course in another major international language such as Spanish or Japanese and may also serve an internship using the language. The world status of English will be discussed further in chapter 3 and chapter 12.

A lingua franca = Any language that is used between two people who don't share the same first language. For example, English can be a lingua franca between a native speaker of English and a speaker of any other language. Or, it can be a lingua franca between speakers of any two other languages. Or, any other language can be a lingua franca between speakers of two other languages (e.g. Swahili is often a lingua franca in East Africa in multi-ethnic areas, or Italian may be a lingua franca in the area around the Adriatic Sea).

## 1.5 Where did bilingualism come from?

Why is bilingualism such a part of the human condition? Many of you know the story of Babel. Babel was a city named in the Bible (now thought to be Babylon in Shinar, an ancient country on the lower parts of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers) where the leaders were building a tower intended to reach heaven. The Bible tells us that such a goal smacked too much of pride and so God punished the builders by destroying their unity, giving them different languages. Building stopped when the builders couldn't work together because they couldn't understand each other's languages. Whether this picturesque explanation of the origin of diversity in languages is true doesn't matter because what we do know for certain is that in recorded history, the world has never been without hundreds of languages. The general view is that there are at least 2,000 different languages, maybe many more. And whether Babel was