

Language and social identity

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Introduction: language and the communication of social identity

JOHN J. GUMPERZ AND JENNY COOK-GUMPERZ

In this volume we present a series of case studies exploring situations of intergroup communication in modern industrial society. These studies are instances out of which we seek to develop interpretive sociolinguistic approaches to human interaction which account for the role that communicative phenomena play in the exercise of power and control and in the production and reproduction of social identity. Our basic premise is that social processes are symbolic processes but that symbols have meaning only in relation to the forces which control the utilization and allocation of environmental resources. We customarily take gender, ethnicity, and class as given parameters and boundaries within which we create our own social identities. The study of language as interactional discourse demonstrates that these parameters are not constants that can be taken for granted but are communicatively produced. Therefore to understand issues of identity and how they affect and are affected by social, political, and ethnic divisions we need to gain insights into the communicative processes by which they arise.

However, communication cannot be studied in isolation; it must be analyzed in terms of its effect on people's lives. We must focus on what communication does: how it constrains evaluation and decision making, not merely how it is structured. We therefore begin with materials or texts collected in strategic research sites which exemplify the problems we seek to deal with. Rather than concentrating on ethnography, grammar, semantics, or linguistic variation alone, we want to find ways of analyzing situated talk that brings together social, sociocognitive, and linguistic constructs, and to develop relevant analytic methods that build on the

perspective of sociolinguistic theory outlined in the previous work on discourse strategies (Gumperz 1982). We are attempting to provide for the integration of individual consciousness, face-to-face processes of social activity, and situated group communication processes within contexts selected for their importance in the life space of the people studied.

These goals raise a further basic question. What is it about modern bureaucratic industrial society that increases the importance of communication processes? Perhaps the most important characteristic of the social environments in which we live is their unprecedented cultural and ethnic diversity. Social conflict during the last decades has increasingly come to be characterized as ethnic, class, or religious conflict. But cultural pluralism is not new. Why is it that social distinctions which in other times were taken for granted and accepted as intrinsic to social order have suddenly become points of contention? What distinguishes today's urban situation is that the modes of interaction among subgroups and the ways in which individuals of different backgrounds must relate to each other and to the system by which they are governed have changed. The old forms of plural society in which families lived in island-like communities, surrounded and supported by others of similar ethnic or class background, are no longer typical.

In our daily lives we have become increasingly dependent on public services and on cooperation with others who may not share our culture. Yet unforeseen difficulties tend to arise when individuals of different cultural backgrounds communicate in public speech events such as committee meetings, interviews, employment situations, and similar types of goal-directed verbal interaction. This can be true, even in cases where we find no overt conflict of values and goals. We all know that it is much easier to get things done when participants share the same background. When backgrounds differ, meetings can be plagued by misunderstandings, mutual misrepresentations of events and misevaluations. It seems that, in intergroup encounters, judgments of performance and of ability that on the whole are quite reliable when people share the same background may tend to break down. Interactions that are normally seen as routine often meet with unforeseen problems. Accepted strategies of persuasion and argumentation may no longer be successful. Furthermore, the difficulties occurring in such

situations do not disappear with the increasing intensity of intergroup contact. On the contrary, they seem to increase and often become most acute after the groups involved have been in contact for several years and initial grammatical difficulties have disappeared. When this situation persists over time, what starts as isolated situation-bound communication differences at the individual level may harden into ideological distinctions that then become value laden, so that every time problems of understanding arise they serve to create further differences in the symbolization of identity.

One might argue that some urban residents acquire styles of speaking that serve them well in home and peer group situations but are likely to be misunderstood in intergroup settings, while others of different backgrounds do not have these problems. This would suggest that once linguistic sources of misunderstanding are isolated and situated norms of language usage specified, appropriate behavior can be taught. Yet the issue cannot be as simple as this because talk itself is constitutive of social reality. Where communicative conventions and symbols of social identity differ, the social reality itself becomes subject to question. On the other hand, however, both talk and social reality are part of and serve to maintain an ideology which takes on a historical life of its own. However, this is not a completely deterministic argument. We do not intend to claim that ideology shapes language and that since language shapes social reality there is no way out. Our main goal in this book is to show how ideology enters into face-to-face speaking practices to create an interactional space in which the subconscious and automatic sociolinguistic processes of interpretation and inference can generate a variety of outcomes and make interpretations subject to question. Thus we are not separating meaning and actions in their abstract analytical form, but we are looking at how they are realized in practices and how this process of realization can influence seemingly value-free assessments. To that end we begin with a more detailed discussion of institutional and socioecological forces that affect communication.

The social relevance of communicative processes

Post-industrial society in the urbanized regions of both Western and non-Western countries is characterized by the bureaucratiza-

tion of public institutions and by the increasingly pervasive penetration of these institutions into the day-to-day lives of individuals. These phenomena produce certain characteristics that serve to differentiate present-day communicative environments from those of the past. What we are referring to here is a major historical change in the relationship of the individual to public institutions. This change has created a context where the public life of society members is materially affected by public agencies like educational and industrial institutions, union organizations, social welfare, or health services.

Technological specialization of function complicates life in many ways, but what is of special interest here is the communicative maze society erects as part of the process of producing demonstrably public rationality of decision making. In job selection, for example, replacing a practical demonstration of the applicant's ability to do a particular job are elaborate procedures involving complex verbal tasks. From the filling out of application forms, the career counselling session, the job interview, and the salary negotiation, assumptions about how information is to be conveyed are critical and these are assumptions which may vary widely even within the same socioeconomic group in the same community. Objective tests replace personal discretion. Hence candidates who do well may or may not be as competent to do the job as the non-successful test-taker. Finally, personnel judgments, and many other societal evaluations, are grounded on the individual's ability to talk well and to make a good presentation of him/herself, as well as the ability to pass tests. Many situations may only be entered by way of a written demonstration of verbal and mathematical skills, but, once demonstrated, these written skills must be reinforced orally, in interviews. In other words, what counts is the ability to conform to the principles of rhetoric by which performance is judged in bureaucratic systems.

The role communicative skills play has thus been radically altered in our society. The ability to manage or adapt to diverse communicative situations has become essential and the ability to interact with people with whom one has no personal acquaintance is crucial to acquiring even a small measure of personal and social control. We have to talk in order to establish our rights and entitlements. When we are at work we often rely on interactive and

persuasive skills to get things done. Communicative resources thus form an integral part of an individual's symbolic and social capital, and in our society this form of capital can be every bit as essential as real property resources were once considered to be (Bourdieu 1973).

The conditions we have described have brought about major changes in the nature and significance of ethnic and social boundaries. The term 'ethnicity' has traditionally been used to refer to relationships based on the linkage of similar people, whose social identity was formed by influences from outside the society in which they now live; but increasingly it has come to indicate relationships based on differences distinguishing one, new, indigenous group from another (Glazer and Moynihan 1975). We shall refer to these two concepts as the *old* and the *new* ethnicity, respectively. The old ethnicity was supported both regionally and interpersonally through reinforced social networks which joined people through clusters of occupational, neighborhood, familial, and political ties. People of the same ethnicity often lived near each other and supported each other within their work and their political groups. Marriage and families continued these network linkages. In the large urban centers of the industrial world, the consciousness of immigrant groups' separate historical past was reinforced in the present by physical-geographic, friendship, and occupational ties.

The new ethnicity depends less upon geographic proximity and shared occupations and more upon the highlighting of key differences separating one group from another. Michael Hechter (1978), in developing a general theory of ethnicity that accounts for changes in the modern urban world, has referred to the dual basis of modern urban concepts of ethnicity as (1) *interactive* group formation, whereby one group is distinguished from another by its similarities and overlapping networks; and (2) *reactive* group formation whereby an ethnic group reasserts its historically established distinctions from other groups within a common national polity. The new ethnicity is more a product of the second process, because this ethnic identity is defined more as a need for political and social support in the pursuit of common interest than as regional similarity or sharedness of occupational ties.

Individuals build upon residual elements of shared culture to revive a common sentiment upon which to found ethnically based

interest groups. Ethnic identity thus becomes a means of eliciting political and social support in the pursuit of goals which are defined within the terms of reference established by the society at large. Because of the complex communicative environment in which individuals must exist, the cohesiveness of the new ethnic groups cannot rest on co-residence in geographically bounded or internally homogenous communities. Even established immigrant communities are no longer able to survive in communicatively isolated separate islands. Inner-city ethnic neighborhoods may limit residents' access to public resources, but they no longer insulate.

The old ethnic ties found their linguistic expression in loyalty to a language other than that of the major society. The new ethnic identities rely on linguistic symbols to establish speech conventions that are significantly different. These symbols are much more than mere markers of identity. Increasing participation in public affairs leads to the introduction of terminologies and discourse patterns modelled on those of the community at large which come to exist and be used alongside more established forms. New communicative strategies are created based on the juxtaposition of the two sets of forms which symbolize not only group membership but adherence to a set of values. These communicative conventions are largely independent of the actual language, i.e., they may be used whether the minority or the majority language is spoken. Even where the original native language is lost the new discourse conventions tend to persist and to be taken over into the group's use of the majority language. In fact these conventions come to reflect the identity of the group itself and can act as powerful instruments of persuasion in everyday communicative situations for participants who share its values (Gumperz 1982, chapter 2).

For example, in the United States, American English is the primary language of the indigenous population but this common language hides an underlying diversity in values and discourse conventions. These differences were for a long time dismissed as nonstandard language practices that detracted from the potential effectiveness of the group as communicators, even though the first language of the group was English. But the fact that these linguistic and discourse differences seem to persist in the face of pressure for standardization has forced a reevaluation of their social and communicative significance.

The discussion of sex differences in language in Chapter 11 provides some initial insights into the question of how social processes function to create new linguistic symbols. Maltz and Borker show that participation in different small group structures gives rise to different discourse conventions even where individuals are reared in the same or similar family environments. Like the ethnic distinctions discussed in other chapters, these conventions can cause misunderstandings and lead to perpetuation of social distance. Gender distinctions thus have at least some, though of course not all, the characteristics of ethnic distinctions: Tannen's work in Chapter 12 suggests that the signalling of ethnic identity in modern society can be seen as part of the broader problem of social identity.

It is in these ways that we can see how the social and political conditions of modern life favor the creation of new linguistic symbols which can serve as the rallying point for interest group sharing. This reliance on in-group symbols, however, conflicts with the equally strong need for control of the rhetorical strategies of the bureaucratically accepted modes of communication. The bureaucratic system can thus be seen as a major structural source of the communicative complexity we have been discussing. Bureaucracy relies on the existence of what are seen as uniform meritocratic criteria of evaluation to control access to scarce resources. Meritocratic standards must be independent of the evaluator's individual preference. In theory at least, they must stand above ethnic and cultural variation. Such standards must ultimately be defensible in a public arena where courts and public hearings are the final arbiters of legitimacy.

Without an increasingly ethnically diverse population, bureaucracy might be far less of an issue than it is. A common ethnicity that includes a common communicative history would insure the transmission of strategies of negotiation which would be shared by most. But pluralism complicates the problem immeasurably.

The key point of our argument in this book is that social identity and ethnicity are in large part established and maintained through language. Yet it is because of the historical character of the process through which groups are formed and the symbols of identity created that we have the particular characteristics of the ways of speaking that we will be analyzing. This argument therefore serves

to attenuate the explanatory relationship between language, ideology, and speaking practices. Only by understanding the specific historical roots of language divergence can we adequately account for the specific character of the communicative practices and monitor ongoing processes of social change.

The data for the analyses in this book consist of verbal interaction sequences where speakers of differing social and ethnic backgrounds unconsciously employ distinct language usage and rhetorical strategies. Where this occurs, differences in the interpretation of such strategies can be seen to affect the outcome of an encounter. Although professional personnel, local government officials, and especially minority group members active in community work in metropolitan areas tend to be aware of such communication difficulties, subtle cues are involved which are not easy to perceive in the course of the interaction itself where there is pressure to get things done. Even an odd word or turn of phrase, or a misunderstood tone of voice, can seriously affect trust among participants. But to isolate clear instances of how this happens is difficult. Some people have strategies for successfully overcoming these difficulties, or can adapt to the differences, or some members of ethnic minority groups do not speak their own variety of English and therefore can switch to the majority variety because this does not symbolize ethnic differences per se. However, many individuals from both the majority and the minority ethnic groups do not cope well in stressful situations of interethnic communication and then, as they do not recognize the reasons, have various ways of blaming each other. Since we are dealing with transitory oral phenomena, causes are hard to determine. Only through a social and linguistic theory which locates these phenomena in historical and contemporary space can we learn to know where to look.

The empirical basis: creating situations and texts

The first step in attacking these problems, which by their very nature are difficult to document and to analyze in detail, is to gain qualitative insights. Our analysis therefore seeks to emphasize interpretive methods of in-depth study, rather than relying on survey techniques to enumerate behaviors or compiling self-reports. What we need to do is find typical instances of key situations or

speech events which are critical given our analysis of the social and ethnographic background.

In terms familiar from recent work in ethnography of communication, we would argue that the developments of our recent past, perhaps as recent a past as the last few decades, have created, or at least brought to central importance, new *kinds* of speech events. Some of these new events are (1) interviews (job, counselling, psychiatric, governmental), (2) committee negotiations, (3) courtroom interrogations and formal hearings, (4) public debates and discussions.

While different in detail, such events share certain important features. Although on the surface an air of equality, mutuality, and cordiality prevails, participant roles, i.e., the right to speak and the obligation to answer, are predetermined, or at least strictly constrained. In interviews the interviewer chooses questions, initiates topics of discussions, and evaluates responses. The interviewees respond, i.e., they answer. Often they are expected to volunteer information but what it is they can say is strictly constrained by expectations which are rarely made explicit. When they venture into the interviewers' territory, interviewers may comment: "*I'm interviewing you* , not vice versa." In committee meetings and to some extent in debates and discussions, tacitly understood rules of preference, unspoken conventions as to what counts as valid and what information may or may not be introduced prevail. The participant structure of such events thus reflects a real power asymmetry underneath the surface equality, a serious problem when the lesser communicator does not know the rules. The issue is compounded by the fact that what is evaluated appears to be neutral. Evaluators tend to concentrate on presentation of facts and information, or problem solving and reasoning abilities, so that underlying sources of ambiguity are not ordinarily discovered.

Although evaluation may ultimately be subjective, whatever judgments are made must be made relative to explicit meritocratic and demonstrably objective standards of ability and achievement where decisions are appealable. Hence standards must, in theory at least, be publicly available. Judgments must be defensible in the public arena. But since appeals require rhetorical sophistication, including acquaintance with often unstated assumptions specific to the dominant culture or to the organization doing the judging, the

weaker participant, who lacks the requisite verbal knowledge, is always at a disadvantage.

The initial task in the analysis is basically an ethnographic one of collecting actual instances of interactive situations containing all the internal evidence to document outcomes. Recordings of public meetings or on-the-spot public broadcasts provide a good first source of materials. Since it is often impossible to collect the background information necessary for further stages of analysis, field work is also required.

Yet ethnographic work in modern urban settings involves a great deal of time. Individuals involved in interethnic relations are often quite ready to be interviewed and to talk about communication problems. However, the structural conditions of the situations we need to explore make it impossible for them to be too closely involved in the research without changing the very nature of the social context. And besides, interviews alone, apart from the information they yield about attitudes, cannot provide the data we need.

In order to understand and evaluate a situation from a member's perspective, the researchers need to be fully involved in the everyday affairs of the organization. They need to know what participants' aims and expectations are in addition to observing what happens. Ethnographers of communication have the difficult task of experiencing in order to uncover the practical strategies of others while at the same time becoming so involved that they themselves become one of the main focuses of their own inquiries. What involvement does is create the practical knowledge which enables us to know which situations are best exemplars of the practices we need to analyze. But the ethnographers' presence in the situation is not necessarily a sufficient trigger to lead to the critical situations that reveal the relevant social and environmental forces coming together at the same time.

One successful strategy in fact is illustrated by Jupp, Roberts, and Cook-Gumperz (this volume, Chapter 13) who rely on direct involvement with persons in an institution whose workings they have become familiar with over time, and on enlisting the cooperation of participants who have become convinced that they can gain by insights into their own selection and evaluation processes. Given this type of cooperation, it is usually relatively easy to obtain

suitable material recorded in situ for analysis. Where, for ethical reasons, direct recording is not possible, actual situations can be recreated through play to gain an insight into the subconscious communicative phenomena. Experience with a wide range of natural situations can serve as the basis for recreating socially realistic experimental conditions where individuals are asked to reenact events such as job interviews with which they have become familiar in everyday life. If these naturalistic situations are skillfully constructed and not too carefully predetermined, rhetorical strategies will emerge automatically without conscious planning, as such strategies are so deeply embedded in the participants' practices. Since it is these rhetorical devices that we want to analyze, eliciting such constructed texts does not necessarily entail a loss of validity.

Our goal in presenting the case studies is to show how information on intergroup communication problems can be collected and to illustrate a promising means of analyzing what are real social problems. Studies in this book, therefore, are guided by an orientation and a theoretical approach to issues in the everyday social world which are defined as problems by participants themselves.

The analysis of cultural expectations

The speech situations that we deal with in the following chapters, though diverse, share common characteristics. They are goal oriented in the sense that each aims to *get* something done, i.e., to reach an agreement, to evaluate abilities, or to get advice. These goals are a defining characteristic of the situation in question. The fact that these overall goals exist and are shared by the participants provides us with a participants' viewpoint for judging when something goes wrong. Thus as a first step in the analysis, by simply looking at the content of what transpires, it is possible to judge to what extent communication has succeeded or failed.

No two events of course are perfectly comparable. One way of dealing with this is to abstract from time bound sequences to certain recurring activities and communicative tasks, such as: (1) narrating, (2) explaining, (3) arguing, (4) emphasizing, (5) instructing, (6) directing.

'Communicative task' is an abstract semantic concept defined in terms of semantic ties among component utterances. Inferences

about what these ties are underlie interpretations of what is going on, what is intended, and what is being accomplished (Gumperz 1982, chapter 7). The list of tasks we have given is in large part universal in that all natural activities can be seen as consisting of these tasks or various combinations thereof. By identifying these tasks, we reach a level of abstraction which, like the linguists' abstraction to grammar, is independent of content and of particular situations.

Although the pragmatic conditions of communicative tasks are theoretically taken to be universal, the realizations of these tasks as social practices are culturally variable. This variation can be analyzed from several different perspectives, all of which of course co-occur in the actual practices.

- (1) Different cultural assumptions about the situation and about appropriate behavior and intentions within it.
- (2) Different ways of structuring information or an argument in a conversation.
- (3) Different ways of speaking: the use of a different set of unconscious linguistic conventions (such as tone of voice) to emphasize, to signal logical connections and to indicate the significance of what is being said in terms of overall meaning and attitudes.

By "different cultural assumptions" we refer to the fact that, even though people in situations such as we study agree on the overall purpose of the interaction, there are often radical differences as to what expectations and rights are involved at any one time. This is perhaps most vividly illustrated in Chapter 4 by Young where differences in the politeness norms which govern what information is emphasized and what is left tacit may result in miscommunications. Chapter 9 by Cook-Gumperz and Gumperz on committee negotiations shows how different cultural assumptions about what is required in making a convincing argument in a bureaucratic context, or even differences about what counts as evidence, can lead to misunderstanding. Heller (Chapter 7) demonstrates that sociopolitical change and especially shifts in power relationships can cause basic shifts in language usage norms so that, in spite of clear efforts at being polite and accommodating, some individuals are unable to overcome interpersonal distance.

The second perspective, “ways of structuring,” relates to issues traditionally covered in rhetorical analysis and deals with such phenomena as sequencing of arguments and with decisions about what needs to be stated and what must be conveyed indirectly. Both Mishra and Young (Chapters 3 and 4) demonstrate systematic differences between Asians and Westerners in the structuring of information in such common tasks as giving explanations or directions. Mishra goes on to show how often unnoticed rhythmic and other discourse cues serve to control this structuring process. Tannen (Chapter 12) focuses on problems of interpretation of intent which result when two individuals have different ideas of how much directness is appropriate in a particular situation. Bennett (Chapter 6) demonstrates the power of yes–no questions in channelling interpretation.

By “ways of speaking” we refer to the actual linguistic cues used through which information relevant to the other two perspectives is signalled. This level includes grammar and lexicon as well as prosody, pausing, idioms, and other formulaic utterances. Our basic assumption is that in conversation we simultaneously interpret and communicate at several levels of generality, i.e., we simultaneously signal both content and about content. The linguistic signalling mechanisms involved here, particularly the interplay between such discourse cues as prosody, code switching, and formulaic speech, on the one hand, and syntax and semantics, on the other, are explained in some detail in Chapter 2. The application of the method is illustrated through several brief examples. Chapters 3 by Mishra and 5 by Hansell and Seabrook Ajirotutu both illustrate how some of these cues work, and provide startling evidence that what is involved here are differences in perception of what constitute communicatively significant cues. In interactions among lower-class blacks and middle-class whites who believe they understand each other such minor cuing differences can be compounded into widely divergent inferential chains.

What these studies show is that the linguistic conventions signalling communicative tasks, particularly the interplay of contextualizing and content signs, are much more sensitive to the ethnic and class backgrounds of the participants than one might expect. Speakers may have similar life styles, speak closely related dialects of the same language, and yet regularly fail to communicate.

More importantly, the nature of the interactive situations that our society mandates, and the evaluative criteria employed, stand in direct conflict with the subtleties of conversational interpretation and the inability of people to be aware of the fact that, as Bennett shows in Chapter 6, speakers who produce grammatical sentences in English can nevertheless show systematic differences in rhetorical strategies.

Sociolinguistic methods in the study of face-to-face interaction

It has often been assumed that ethnically different speakers are not able to handle the formal criteria for giving information or producing contextually relevant talk in situations with which they have little direct experience, such as job interviews, public debates, or discussions. Much of the discussion has proceeded as if speaking appropriately required the learning of a different script, and a different set of semantic and lexical options. The real problem is that whatever the situation, whether a formal interview or an informal meeting, the need in all communication for all people who are relative strangers to each other is to achieve a *communicative flexibility*, an ability to adapt strategies to the audience and to the signs, both direct and indirect, so that the participants are able to monitor and understand at least some of each other's meaning. Meaning in any face-to-face encounter is always negotiable; it is discovering *the grounds* for negotiation that requires the participants' skills. Many of the meanings and understandings, at the level of ongoing processes of interpretation of speaker's intent, depend upon culturally specific conventions, so that much of the meaning in any encounter is indirect and implicit. The ability to expose enough of the implicit meaning to make for a satisfactory encounter between strangers or culturally different speakers requires communicative flexibility.

Some initial insights into how we can study the achievement of communicative flexibility come from work on nonverbal communication. Through frame-by-frame microanalysis of film it can be shown that communication depends upon usually unnoticed behavioral cues and postures which have interactional, i.e., social, significance. Birdwhistell (1970) and Hall (1959) have demonstrated that (1) taken-for-granted and subconsciously given nonverbal signs play an integral part in signalling of attitudes and intent in

nonverbal communication, and (2) misunderstandings can arise in cross-cultural communication when the relevant signalling conventions differ. Considerable systematic analysis in this area has concentrated on isolating the actual physical behaviors that could potentially play a communicative role. A distinction was made between three basic kinds of signals: (1) microsignals, such as eye blinks or the contraction of facial muscles, which often go unnoticed, (2) proxemic signals such as gaze direction, posture, and body orientation, and (3) complexes of signs that carry meanings in isolation, emblems such as winking, handshakes, and nods (Ekman and Friesen 1969). A second research approach has explored the role that these often subconscious signals play in conversational coordination (Kendon 1970). It has been demonstrated that all natural conversations are characterized by interspeaker coordination of signals. There is further evidence that nonverbal signs are rhythmically coordinated with verbal signs, both at the micro level of syllables and at the macro level of utterances (Condon and Ogsten 1969).

The usefulness of this nonverbal work is that it suggests behavioral ways of studying what Goffman (1961) calls conversational involvement and what we refer to as communicative flexibility. It enables us to tell, by looking only at actual performance features and without knowing the content, whether two speakers are actively communicating.

Erickson in his studies of counselling sessions (Erickson and Schultz 1982) has demonstrated that (a) the ability to establish rhythmic coordination of nonverbal signals was partially a function of participants' ethnic background, and (b) interviews characterized by rhythmic coordination were most successful in terms of the information interviewees received from the session. Even where sentence level meaning and grammar are shared therefore, failure to communicate is not just a matter of individual ability or willingness to make the effort. Apart from grammar proper there seems to be a second, equally automatic, level of interactive signs and conventions which must be shared if communication is to take place.

Little in linguistic research on syntax, grammar, or discourse deals explicitly with the question of what these discourse signals are and how they are acquired. Although psycholinguists and applied linguists concerned with problems of bilingualism have done