1

Premises of multi-competence

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This chapter introduces the concept of linguistic multi-competence and sets the scene for the rest of the book. It looks first at issues of definition and then at three premises that have become part and parcel of multi-competence. The aim is to examine the ideas underlying multi-competence rather than to present new views of multi-competence or to summarise existing research, to be tackled in Chapter 2.

1.1 Monolingual and bilingual perspective

There are two alternative ways of looking at people who speak more than one language. On the one hand there is the *monolingual perspective* that sees second language (L2) users from the point of view of the monolingual first language (L1) user. In this case the second language is added on to the speaker's first language, something extra; the L2 user's proficiency in the second language is measured against the sole language of the monolingual; ideally the L2 user would speak the second language just like a native speaker. The research questions and methodology in classical second language acquisition (SLA) research are mostly concerned with this monolingual perspective and try to account for L2 users' lack of success in learning how to speak like a monolingual L1 user.

On the other hand there is the *bilingual perspective* that sees L2 users from the point of view of the person who speaks two or more languages. From this angle, the other languages are part of the L2 user's total language system, each language potentially differing from that of someone who speaks it as a monolingual. It is beside the point whether the L2 user's final ability is identical to that of a monolingual native speaker. Bilingualism and multilingualism research have mostly asked questions

about how L2 users use the other languages and how the languages con-
nect in multilingual communities, not about how L2 users compare with
monolingual individuals and communities.

One interpretation of the bilingual perspective is captured by the
notion of multi-competence, glossed here as 'the overall system of a
mind or a community that uses more than one language'. Multi-
competence thus covers the knowledge and use of two or more lan-
guages by the same individual or the same community. At some level,
all the languages form part of one overall system, with complex and
shifting relationships between them, affecting the first language as
well as the others.

1.2 Defining multi-competence

Let us start with the conceptual history of multi-competence. Franceschini
(2011) interprets the history with a slightly different focus, largely as a
development from a psychological generative tradition to a dynamic socio-
linguistics of multilingualism.

(i) 'the compound state of a mind with two grammars'

The term 'multi-competence' was first used in an SLA context to mean
'the compound state of a mind with two grammars' (Cook 1991), partly
to complement the term 'interlanguage', which refers solely to the L2
component in the bilingual mind, ignoring the L1 component. Multi-
competence saw second language acquisition as involving the whole
mind of the L2 user, not just the second language; multi-competence
included all language-related aspects of the mind. The word *grammar* in
the original definition was intended in the Chomskyan sense of knowl-
edge of language – 'we call the theory of the state attained its [the language
faculty's] *grammar*' (Chomsky and Lasnik 1993). That is to say, grammar
includes all aspects of linguistic knowledge such as vocabulary and pho-
nology, not just syntax alone. However, this Chomskyan sense of
grammar turned out to be misleading as it led some researchers into
thinking that multi-competence was only about syntax rather than the
totality of language knowledge.

(ii) 'the knowledge of more than one language in the same mind or the same community'

The definition of multi-competence was later modified to 'the knowledge
of more than one language in the same mind' (Cook 2003) and, more
recently, to 'the knowledge of more than one language in the same mind
or the same community' (Cook 2012). These changes affected the original
definition by:

– making clear that multi-competence is not confined to syntax but includes the lexicon, phonology etc.
– going beyond the second language to other languages the L2 user may know – the relationship between three or more languages is equally a matter of multi-competence
– extending the concept beyond the psychological construct of the mind of the individual to the sociological construct of the 'multi-competence of the community' (Brutt-Griffler 2002), treating the diverse languages of the community as a coherent whole rather than separately.

This 2012 definition (ii) is the one that most of the contributors in this volume refer to, apart from Hall (Chapter 9) who uses the 1991 definition (i).

(iii) 'the overall system of a mind or a community that uses more than one language'

Yet the change from 'the compound state' in definition (i) to 'the knowledge of more than one language' in definition (ii) has the unintended consequence of implying a static view of language as knowledge rather than a social definition of language or a multifaceted view of language and language use. On reflection, a preferable working definition is 'the overall system of a mind or a community that uses more than one language'. This changes 'knowledge' to the more neutral 'system', does not confine multi-competence to language alone, brings in language use and implies that language is not separate from the rest of the mind. This definition is not fully acceptable to all the contributors to this volume and it still leaves the concepts of 'system' and 'community' open to interpretation.

As the multi-competence approach developed and broadened, it became evident that it was more a perspective from which to view the acquisition and use of multiple languages than a theory or a model. Multi-competence is a way of looking at things from another angle rather than of exploring the implications and contradictions within the same perspective, 'revolutionary' rather than 'normal' science (Kuhn 1962). The monolingual perspective yields SLA research questions and methods that are inextricably linked to monolingual native speakers; the multi-competence perspective relates its questions and methods to L2 users. Thus many classic 'normal' issues are neither here nor there for multi-competence research. The failure of L2 users to speak like natives, the inability of L2 users who start learning at an older age to sound like natives, the L2 user's lack of elements of Universal Grammar possessed by natives – none of these are meaningful from a multi-competence perspective. The monolingual perspective in essence restricts the field of SLA research to enumerating the similarities and dissimilarities between L2 users and native speakers. If L2 users are independent persons in their own right rather than

the shadows of native speakers, the comparison between L2 users and monolingual native speakers is about as revealing as, say, discussing how apples resemble pears, of little interest for those concerned with the distinctive qualities of apples.

1.3 The second language user

The other term that seemed to go naturally with multi-competence was *L2 user*, meaning 'people who know and use a second language at any level' (Cook 2012), rather than *L2 learner* or *bilingual*. It seemed better to treat people as users of a language whatever their level rather than as learners who would never be complete: 'SLA researchers often portray development as a transitional state that is (or should be) ever changing towards the target' (Ortega 2009, p. 140). It would be insulting to call Björn Ulvaeus of Abba, Joseph Conrad the novelist or Aung San Suu Kyi the politician L2 learners of English when they are capable of using their second language to function in their respective ways at a level beyond the dreams of most monolingual native speakers. Calling people *L2 learners* confirms their subordinate status as learners for the rest of their days.

The term *L2 learners* can then be reserved for people who are learning another language but are not using it, in other words those whose sole purpose is learning the language, say Chinese children learning English in Shanghai. Of course some L2 learners go on to become L2 users in later life and some L2 learners use the language for real-world functions in the classroom when they step outside, like Chinese students in Newcastle upon Tyne. In other words a particular individual may be an L2 learner or an L2 user at different times in their life or indeed at different times of day. Classroom L2 learners at best are deferred L2 users. In practice this virtually restricts *L2 learner* to students or pupils since people acquiring another language outside education will almost always be using the second language. And this necessarily raises the issue, not to be developed here, of whether there are in effect two branches of SLA research, one concerned with 'natural' acquisition and use, the other with teacher-induced learning in classrooms, and so results from one branch do not necessarily apply to the other.

In some ways the distinction between *user* and *learner* overlaps with the traditional, slightly confusing, distinction in language teaching between *second* language learners using a language for everyday living in a country where it is the main community language, and *foreign* language learners who are not learning a language for immediate use in a country where it is spoken (Klein 1986). One problem with this distinction is the conflation of function and location (Cook 2010): students at English-medium universities in Saudi Arabia or the Netherlands may be using English as a second language; overseas students at UK language schools

may be learning English only to have a qualification to show back home; waiters use Spanish as a lingua franca in London (Block 2007), giving it a second language function in an English-speaking country.

There were also reasons for minimising the use of the term *bilingual*. Most people tend to assume that *bilingual* conveys Bloomfield's maximal meaning of 'native-like control of two languages' (Bloomfield 1933), rather than Haugen's minimal meaning of 'the point where a speaker can first produce complete meaningful utterances in the other language' (Haugen 1953). Multi-competence did not assume that L2 users were at a high level in the second language, particularly when, like Bloomfield, this is defined in terms of likeness to native speakers. Multi-competence concerns the mind of any user of a second language at any level of achievement. There may well be a maximal level for the L2 user, sometimes called 'the successful L2 user'. But until a norm is set for L2 use that does not refer to the native speaker, we don't know what this might be. And it might indeed vary considerably between the different users and uses of the second language. Additionally *bilingual* conveys the notion that two languages are involved when there may be an indefinite number. The term *multilingual* is perhaps closest in connotation to *L2 user*, not excluding more than two languages and not hinting that language proficiency has to be high.

Moving from the monolingual perspective that a human being knows one language to the multi-competence perspective that all human beings potentially, and some actually, know more than one language changes the view of the whole landscape. Thus SLA theories as diverse as generative grammar and usage-based acquisition can be conceived from both monolingual and bilingual perspectives, as we see in the rest of this book. On the one hand, say, ideas of innateness are seen from the angle that it is normal to know more than one language (Cook 2009a). On the other hand, usage needs to start from the total language input, not just that in one language but in both languages, hinting that knowing and using only one language is a form of deprivation, not so much linguistic deprivation which fails to provide a child with crucial aspects of one language but language deprivation which deprives them of a whole second language. Multi-competence is not confined to psychological theories of the mind but applies also to the networks of connectionist models, to generative theories of language knowledge and to sociological models of social interaction and practice: it is the perspective from which the languages in the mind are viewed that matters, regardless of the theory involved.

Multi-competence alters the way in which people view the acquisition and use of multiple languages, rather like the shift from seeing Short Term Memory as boxes to seeing it as depth of processing (Craik and Lockhart 1972), which essentially restated how the very same facts about human memory were viewed. In part it leads to research with specifically multi-competence aims, in part to reinterpreting existing research that

can be compatible with multi-competence, in part to a critique of SLA research that is uninterpretable from a multi-competence perspective.

A logical problem arising out of this, addressed in Cook (2010), is the meaning of *second language* and *L2* (and indeed of *language*, to be discussed below). *Second language* and *L2* are not equivalent in meaning despite most researchers' habit of reading *L2* aloud as *second language*. The word *second* is ordinal counting for sequence – *King Edward II* came after *King Edward I* – or for quality – a *second-class degree* is less valued than a *first-class degree*. The number *2* on the other hand is cardinal counting of quantity – *two drinks, two Houses of Parliament*. The meaning of *L2/second* in SLA research could be any of these; Hammerberg (2010, p. 93) describes 'the linear model' of counting languages involving ordinal counting in which a second language comes chronologically after a first and a third language after that: 'Joseph Conrad's first language was Polish, second language French, third language English.'

Undoubtedly some of the overtones of the 'quality' ordinal meaning carry across to SLA research; *second* is by and large not a good thing to be – *second-hand, second-rate, second-in-command*.

> Although the now discredited notions such as native speaker or mother tongue speaker require us to identify ourselves according to our parental language or language of infancy, even the alternatives such as L1 and L2 force us to identify a single language as receiving primacy in terms of our time of acquisition or level of competence.   *(Canagarajah 2007, p. 16)*

The letters of the alphabet are used in a similar ordinal fashion for defining priority in putting airplane passengers into boarding Groups A, B or C or marking essays as A, B . . . F, and so on.

In cardinal counting the meaning is more neutral: how many languages you know – 'Joseph Conrad spoke three languages, Polish, French and English' – rather than the order or priority between them, in linguistic terms a synchronic state rather than a diachronic process. Similarly, thinking 'cardinally', the alphabet has 26 equal letters, that happen to occur in an arbitrary order. Hammerberg's (2010) alternative terminology of primary, secondary and tertiary languages still carries the ordinal overtones of primary being superior and essential. Dewaele (Chapter 19, this volume) uses the more neutral term *LX* to refer to any language beyond the first.

The academic discussion of first and second languages is also muddied by the different ways in which countries define their first languages. In Singapore schools for instance the first language is English; Chinese, Bahasa Malaysia and Tamil, the mother tongues of most inhabitants, are regarded as second languages. Another problem is where counting stops – L3, L4, Ln. Most SLA books claim *second* subsumes later languages, whether 'second (third, etc) languages and dialects' (Doughty and Long 2003, p. 3) or 'the third or fourth language' (Lightbown and Spada 2006, p. 204). This simplification assumes that multi-competence with three or

more languages is just a more complex version of that with two languages rather than something qualitatively different, strongly denied by those interested in trilingualism and multilingualism who stress 'the unique properties that differentiate L2 from L3/Ln' (Cabrelli Amaro, Flynn and Rothman 2012, p. 3).

1.4 Three premises of multi-competence

A way of drawing out the implications of the multi-competence position for second language acquisition is to derive three premises from the developing stream of multi-competence-related work. They can be seen as threads running through the following chapters, which the contributors are free to accept or reject.

The historical development of the concept of multi-competence has perhaps been more a matter of teasing out and clarifying the implications of the original proposal rather than of changing direction. The rest of this chapter deals with three premises that seem to underlie multi-competence. It was only at the beginning of the twenty-first century that people began to use multi-competence to explore the research questions to be discussed in Chapter 2, as it fitted in with the zeitgeist about the role of the native speaker and with developing ideas about multilingualism.

Premise 1 Multi-competence concerns the total system for all languages (L1, L2, Ln) in a single mind or community and their inter-relationships

Despite the many books on bilingualism whose covers feature two heads (Skutnabb-Kangas 1981; Romaine 1994; Pavlenko 2005; among others), bilinguals do only have one.[1] At the highest level of all, the languages must be an inter-connected whole within a single mind, an eco-system of mutual interdependence. At the same general level, a multi-lingual community is an interconnected network of different languages: in London in 2011, 6.5 per cent of the population spoke Polish, Panjabi, Urdu, Bengali and Gujarati (Office for National Statistics 2012), not to mention the other 300 odd languages in the community (Baker and Eversley 2000); in Vancouver in 2011, 57.7 per cent of the population spoke an immigrant language at home (Statistics Canada 2012). The question is not how linguistic enclaves function in isolation from each other but how the whole city functions through multiple languages. To take an example of street signs, it is not which language is used in which signs that matters so much as how the street signs make up a total multi-competent system (Cook 2013).

The description of L2 users and communities has thus in principle to account for all the languages they use, both their first language and any others, as part of one complex system. Isolating L2 syntax from L1 syntax

in the L2 user's mind is a simplification for convenience of research. The reality is the overall system that unites the first language and the other language or languages of multi-competence. SLA research that ignores the first language element is blind to the one inescapable feature of the L2 user's mind that distinguishes it from that of a monolingual – the first language system. It is yin without yang. As Stern (1992, p. 282) puts it, 'whether we like it or not, the new language is learnt on the basis of a previous language'. Unless the presence of the first language is acknowledged, second language acquisition research inevitably becomes a footnote to first language acquisition.

It is an empirical question how and at what level the languages of multi-competence separate in the mind or indeed whether it is meaningful to attempt to separate them at all, as de Bot suggests in Chapter 6. Cook (2009a) argues for an overall unified grammar in the mind as the basis of Universal Grammar theory. The reverse question is whether languages can be kept separate in the mind: can one be turned off while the other is being used? Lambert posed the question in terms of gating:

> How is it that the bilingual is able to 'gate out' or set aside a whole integrated linguistic system while functioning with a second one and a moment later, if the situation calls for it, switch the process, activating the previous inactive system and setting aside the previous active one?
>
> *(Lambert 1990, pp. 203–204)*

An alternative is that, rather than one language being activated, the other language is turned off, as in the Inhibitory Control Model (Green 1998), leading to the emphasis on executive control in contemporary bilingualism research (Bialystok 2009).

Turning to some evidence, if L2 users are shown pictures of objects named in one language, their eyes are attracted by objects that have similar names in the other language: they never switch off either language entirely (Spivey and Marian 1999, 2003). Both phonological systems are activated when producing cognates (Hermans et al. 2011; Friesen and Jared 2011). Monolingual native speakers do not have this complex interwoven system, except in as much as it parallels the use of two dialects by the same person or the developmental transition from one grammar to another – universal bilingualism in the terms of Roeper (1999) or *Mehrsprachigkeit* in those of Wandruszka (1971).

We will not review here other evidence for the inter-relationships between languages in multi-competence, which will come out in many guises in the following chapters. The integration continuum model used in Cook (2003) was drawn as an aid for visualising the diversity and complexity of the relationships between the languages, going along a continuum from total separation through different levels of interconnection to total integration (see Figure 1.1).
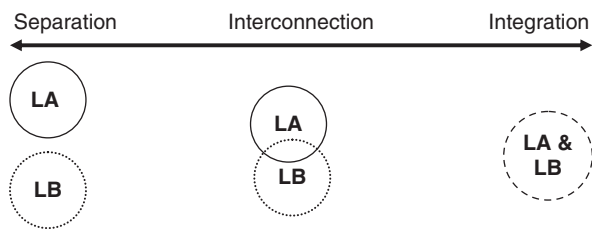
Figure 1.1 The integration continuum of possible relationships in multi-competence (Cook 2003, p. 9)

At the separation pole of the continuum, the languages are completely independent of each other, like Weinreich's coordinate bilinguals (Weinreich 1953); at the integration pole, they are totally integrated with each other; in between come many possible degrees of interconnection. The two poles are ideals that could never actually exist; all L2 users are somewhere on the continuum in between. And of course different aspects of language may be located at different points of the continuum; the lexicon may be well integrated, as we have seen, syntax perhaps less so. The continuum is not static but dynamic, moving constantly as the influence of particular languages waxes and wanes, variously through attrition and transfer between some or all of the languages in multi-competence, and through activation of language mode in speech. But the direction of movement may be in either direction; an L2 user's multi-competence may separate the languages more over time or integrate them more.

This implies then that individuals vary greatly in the relationships between the languages of their multi-competence, depending on many factors. To progress, SLA research needs to get away from generalisations that apply to all L2 users. Rather than a single common system for L2 users, there may be many possible systems, unlike the relatively uniformity of monolinguals. Putting learner groups to one side, Cook (2009b) defined five groups of L2 users:

– 'people using an L2 globally for a wide range of functions',
– 'people using an L2 internationally for specific functions',
– 'people using an L2 within a larger community',
– 'people historically from a particular community (re-) acquiring its language as an L2',
– 'people using an L2 with spouses, siblings or friends'.

Such a scheme begins to cover the varieties of L2 users and uses. In particular it distinguishes between research with L2 learners and with L2 users; L2 learners in classrooms are subject to a different set of influences and language input from L2 users, inevitably reflecting decisions made by language teachers and educational systems about teaching goals, methods and techniques; they are more the product of their circumstances than specimens of 'pure' language learning.

Multi-competence has affinities with other views within SLA research that treat the languages of the L2 user within a single over-arching system. For example, Dynamic Systems Theory (DST) captures the flexibility and interconnectedness of language systems that are never static over both short and long periods of time; any description is a single frame taken from a continuous movie, as described by de Bot in Chapter 6 (this volume).

Recently the idea of Dominant Language Constellation (DLC) has been proposed by Aronin (2006, p. 145) (see Chapter 7): 'the group of the most important languages for a particular individual, enabling as a whole unit, the person to act in a multilingual environment and to meet all his/her needs'. This conceptualises the relationship between the languages of multi-competence in the individual and in the community as a constellation of inner circle languages, orbited by the languages of the linguistics repertoire, surrounded by an Oort cloud of languages the person is merely aware of to some degree. In practical terms the number of languages in a DLC seem to be about three, with the others coming into play in particular circumstances. DLC is one useful way of looking at multilingualism from a multi-competence perspective.

The concept of transfer, alias cross-linguistic influence, also takes on a different meaning in multi-competence (Cook, to appear): the L1 part of the system may influence the L2 part, the L2 may influence the L1, the L3 may influence the L2, and so on for all the relationships detailed in Jarvis and Pavlenko (2009). Attrition of the first language too comes to have a different meaning (Schmid 2011); rather than the metaphor of the first language being lost or ground down, multi-competence balances itself in a kind of eco-system: one language's gain is another language's loss. Multi-competence is not a frozen state but a continuous interaction between the different languages in the community and the individual.

The consequences of Premise 1 extend beyond the areas of bilingualism and SLA research to all of linguistics. For example, historically the norms for native speakers have often been established from L2 users, whether Voice Onset Time for Japanese based on Japanese in the USA, as pointed out by Kato (2004), Hopi grammar established from a native speaker living in New York (Whorf 1940/1956), or Greek path preference based on Greeks living in the USA (Papafragou et al. 2008). The language informants called on by linguists or the participants in experiments may respond differently from monolingual native speakers because of the influence of their other languages. People who know more than one language are suspect informants on their first language: 'the judgments about English of Bloomfield, Halliday or Chomsky are not trustworthy, except where they are supported by evidence from "pure" monolinguals' (Cook 2002a, p. 23), by virtue of the influence of the second language that each of these linguists knows. For these reasons, multi-competence research has often dealt with speakers with minimal or maximal knowledge and use of another language, not with polarised