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1 Bilingualism in Early Childhood

Disentangling Myths and Facts

1.1 Myths or Facts?

Monolingualism is curable – El monolingüismo es una enfermedad curable – Le monolinguisme, ça se guérit – Monolinguismus ist heilbar! A provocative and defiant statement, sprayed as graffiti on walls or flaunted on T-shirts, primarily in parts of the world where languages are spoken that are not recognized as official languages or are not languages of instruction in the educational systems of their speakers' countries. The claim is not only that learning more than one language is possible and indeed recommendable. It rather suggests that failing to do so results, due to one's own fault, in an impoverished state of one's mental capacities, because we all have the ability to become bilinguals.

But is this assumption correct? Is it a fact or a myth? The fact is that, worldwide, monolingualism is indeed not the norm, if defined in terms of number of speakers. There exist some 200 states (193 member states of the United Nations, and SWIFT, the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication, connects 214 states and territories), but more than 7000 languages are spoken in the world, more precisely 7099, according to Ethnologue (2017), the reference work that catalogues all known living languages. Consequently, many states must be multilingual, even if there are only some 20 with more than one official language – India alone has 19 official languages and South Africa 11. Admittedly, the fact that two or more languages are spoken in a country does not necessarily mean that a large part of its population is bilingual. Rather, speakers of a minority language normally also speak the majority language and are thus bilingual or multilingual whereas speakers of majority languages are frequently

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monolinguals. Still, these facts suggest that bilingualism is more common than monolingualism.

The answer to the question of how widespread bilingualism is depends, in part at least, on who counts as a bilingual. UNESCO, for example, defines bi- and multilingualism as the use of more than one language in daily life. In other words, for someone to be considered to be bilingual does not necessarily require that this person have an equally good command of two languages. This definition reflects the linguistic reality of many bilingual societies, and it takes into account the fact that bilingualism is no longer confined to multiethnic societies. Rather, because of political and economic changes, bilingual societies have emerged in many other parts of the world, including countries that had previously been linguistically and ethnically homogeneous. Labour migration and movements of political refugees played an important role in this process, but this does not mean that these changes affect only economically disadvantaged groups. Rather, local mobility within and across national borders is currently a requirement at many workplaces, especially for highly qualified people. Although the social, economic and even political status of these temporary labour migrants differs substantially from that of migrant workers in Europe during the second half of the twentieth century, they face similar linguistic challenges. So-called guest workers were expected to stay for a limited time in the host countries, and for many of them this was initially their own expectation, too. They eventually became bilinguals, using two languages in daily life, but because of the uncertainty about their duration of stay, they did not necessarily attribute a high priority to the task of acquiring the language of the host country, at least not from early on. Those sent to a foreign country by their employers today find themselves in a rather similar situation: they live in bilingual settings, but only temporarily. Some experience this as an excessive demand; others see it as a welcome opportunity to acquire another language. At any rate, local mobility in modern societies, no matter what its causes are – politics, economy, even tourism or student exchanges – generates new types of potentially bilingual settings. These are not only situations of social but also of family bilingualism where a

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language is spoken in the family that is not the one of a mostly monolingual ambient society. Either all family members speak this language, as in the case of immigrants, or one of them speaks a different language, as is the case in binational marriages.

To return to the question of what is myth and what is fact in claiming that everyone can or rather should become bilingual, it is not only a fact that many countries in the world are multilingual but indeed also a fact that the majority of the world's population is bilingual. Moreover, bilingualism is an issue for all social classes, albeit in different fashions, depending not merely on social and economic status but also on attitudes towards bilingualism that vary considerably from country to country and across social groups within countries.

This means that becoming bilingual is not always an inevitable necessity. Particularly in cases of potential family bilingualism, there are choices to be made. However, well-founded

Monolingualism is curable

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choices require adequate information about the advantages and risks possibly entailed by each option. Being told that monolingualism is curable can hardly count as such. For adults who are already native speakers of at least one language and who consider learning another one, obtaining information about the benefits or possible problems related to bilingualism is perhaps not a crucial issue. However, the decision on whether to raise children bilingually, either simultaneously from birth or successively during their first years of life, is clearly a very different matter that does raise concerns among parents and other caregivers. Rumour has it that acquiring more than one language during early childhood might contain risks for the children's linguistic, cognitive or social development or that early bilinguals might get confused and will not be able to function in each of their languages in the same way as monolinguals. Quite obviously, such concerns need to be taken seriously. Are they, too, facts or merely myths emanating from prejudices or misconceptions? Knowing that the majority of the world's population is bilingual does not really help in this case because we do not know how proficient these bilinguals are in each of their languages. This will not do for parents who decide to raise their children bilingually and who want to be sure that these children will become fully competent speakers of at least one and preferably both languages.

Unless they know with reasonable certainty that this goal can be achieved, parents are likely to decide against a bilingual education for their children, even if they have a favourable attitude towards bilingualism and do not reject the other language. A well-known example is the adoption of Proposition 227 (English Language in Public Schools Statute) in California in 1998 that effectively eliminated bilingual classes in most cases. Parents from linguistic minorities supported this proposition because they wanted to make sure that their children develop a knowledge of English that allows them to participate fully in all domains of the larger community. Proposition 227 was largely reversed by Proposition 58 (November 2016), but it is by no means a unique case of minority parents following this kind of reasoning and deciding against

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bilingualism. In fact, such concerns are known to have contributed in significant ways to the decline of regional languages that had served for centuries as the dominant or even only language of their communities.

Occitan, spoken in the southern half of what is today France, is one example at hand. It was the first literary language in Modern Europe, with a writing system developed in the tenth century and an internationally read literature, especially the poetry of the troubadours of the twelfth and thirteenth century. It was also the first and preferred language of King Richard I of England (the Lionheart). When the County of Toulouse was incorporated into the French kingdom (1271), Occitan became one of the languages of France, and with the incorporation of other Occitan-speaking regions, e.g. the previously English territory in the fifteenth century and the Provence, annexed in 1547, it was the one with the largest number of speakers.

For a long time, being part of France did not change significantly the linguistic situation of its speakers, not even when French became the only official language of the country (1539). In their daily interactions, they continued to use Occitan, which was also the first language of most of the bilinguals among them. Although French was now the largely dominant means of national interaction, in court dealings and other public functions, not many people could actively use that language. In fact, even at around 1800, less than one out of five citizens of France were able to speak and understand French. This only began to change in the nineteenth century with the introduction of compulsory military service, exposing large parts of the male population to various French dialects, other regional languages, and the national language. Finally, with the introduction of compulsory school attendance (1881), all children were exposed to French. Until the 1940s, most of them learned it as a second language at primary school.

In 1930, there were still 14 million speakers of Occitan. Yet at the beginning of the twenty-first century, UNESCO lists it as a seriously endangered language. It is estimated that it is currently used in everyday life by one or two million people,

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and that approximately 100,000 persons are native speakers, mostly bilinguals who acquired it simultaneously with French. Sociolinguistic studies suggest that a major reason for this dramatic decline is that parents were concerned that bilingualism might be a risk for their children's achievements in school. Note that minority languages were long banned from the public school system in France. Only as of 1951 could they be offered as an optional subject, yet not as a medium of instruction. Bilingual Occitan-French classes in a small number of public schools in southern France are an achievement of the twenty-first century – and they are still a matter of considerable political controversy. It is easy to see why parents worry that raising children bilingually might lead to problems when they enter an educational system where only French matters.

The decline of Occitan in France is just one blatant example of how concerns that bilingualism might cause problems for children affect social bilingualism. Although lack of support by the educational system played a major role in this case, this does not explain why parents, especially those who themselves speak another language in addition to the official one, should come to believe that it could be disadvantageous for children to know another language, in addition to the one taught and used in school. The main reason for such concerns and for why parents decide against a bilingual education for their children seems to be that they have doubts over whether it is possible to develop competences in two or more languages in early childhood, equivalent to those of monolinguals. This is clearly a concern that needs to be taken seriously. If it proved to be well founded, it would indeed be a reason to be reluctant to opt for a bilingual education of young children. But is this really the case? Is it difficult or even impossible for young children growing up with two or more languages to acquire in each of them the kind of linguistic knowledge and the linguistic skills that characterize monolinguals? Or worse, do they run the risk of not developing a native competence in any of their languages?

The question of how children exposed to more than one language from early on can become native speakers of these languages is

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one of the main topics of this book. It is an issue that, understandably, triggers highly emotional debates because what is at stake is children's linguistic development or perhaps even their well-being more generally. As a result, one finds strongly opposing views, among parents and caregivers as well as in newspaper articles and other media contributions dealing with child bilingualism. Whereas some voices warn against early bilingualism, pointing to possible risks, others see no limits to children's linguistic capacities and find only benefits in childhood multilingualism. Quite obviously, these views cannot both be correct because they make a number of contradictory claims or interpret the observations on which they agree differently. However, this does not necessarily mean that one view is entirely right and the other one completely wrong. Rather, it is precisely in this controversy that we face the challenge of disentangling myths and prejudices about child bilingualism from facts. In order to be able to do so, one needs to examine in some detail the alleged risks and benefits, and this is what I will do in the following chapters.

Let us nevertheless have a brief look right away at some of the issues to be discussed. In the two boxes below, I have summarized several of the more fundamental issues, beginning with possible problems and risks, followed by benefits attributed to a bilingual upbringing. The claims listed here are concerns expressed by parents, caregivers in daycare and preschool facilities, speech therapists and paediatricians, and in questions addressed to counselling services.

Possible Risks of Early Child Bilingualism

- Children exposed to more than one language at an early age cannot keep them apart. They fuse – temporarily or permanently – the two linguistic systems into a single one.
- Even if they do succeed in developing separate linguistic systems for their languages, they will confound them

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when using them in everyday communication, speaking a macaronic language mix.
- Rather than becoming bilinguals, they end up as semilinguals in two languages, with incomplete competences in each of them.
- The competence attainable in the weaker language resembles that of foreign language learners; it is incomplete in comparison to monolingual native speakers.
- The rate of linguistic development in bilinguals is considerably slower than in monolinguals. This delay can have negative effects on children's success in preschool and in school.
- Balanced bilingualism is not possible – one language will always be stronger than the other one.
- If parents or caregivers communicate regularly in a foreign language with children, the children will not be able to become native speakers of that language.
- The task of acquiring two languages simultaneously puts excessive strain on the mental capacities of young children.
- Fusion of linguistic systems can cause problems, affecting children's cognitive development in general.
- Confusion about languages negatively affects children's psychological development. Individuals torn between languages and cultures experience difficulties in developing their personal identities.

These critical remarks on child bilingualism paint an extremely negative picture. If only half of them could be shown to be based on facts, one would indeed have to warn against a bilingual upbringing of children. Yet this is not the case. In fact, some of these comments reflect ideologically motivated biases and prejudices rather than problems documented in the course of bilingual development. There exists no evidence, for example, that exposure to two languages confuses children and causes cognitive

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or psychological disorders. The ideological nature of such claims becomes evident when they serve as arguments against risks of an undefined nature in only some contexts but not in others. A clear example of this kind of biased view is that of a French politician who warned against negative consequences of bilingualism in France but who supported, only a few days later, French-English bilingualism in Québec. A similar case is when scholars argue that bilingualism is an unrealistic goal for most children but recommend it for the happy few, i.e. those growing up in economically and educationally privileged families.

To the extent that rejections of this kind are at all based on facts, they rely on studies carried out during the second third of the twentieth century that reported on cases of lack of success in school by children from economically disadvantaged immigrant families. They confound effects of socioeconomic factors with those attributable to bilingualism. Nevertheless, this does not mean that all objections raised by critics of child bilingualism can safely be ignored. Rather, they must be examined carefully in the light of research findings provided by studies of child bilingualism over the last years, and this is what I will do, beginning in Chapter 3. Quite obviously, this critical examination must also be extended to the alleged benefits of bilingualism, some of which are listed in the following box. Only the ones supported by empirical research qualify as possible arguments in favour of a bilingual education of very young children.

Alleged Benefits of Early Child Bilingualism

- Children exposed to more than one language from birth become native speakers of all their languages.
- Even if onset of acquisition happens later in childhood, children can attain a perfect knowledge of this language.
- Bilinguals are more successful than monolinguals in learning further languages at a later age.

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- Bilinguals outperform monolinguals in their reading and mathematical abilities.
- Bilinguals achieve higher scores in intelligence tests.
- Bilinguals tend to make better financial decisions than monolinguals.
- Bilingualism helps to delay neurological disorders like Alzheimer's disease and other types of dementia.

These by no means exhaustive lists of claims – some outright contradictory – concerning risks and benefits of child bilingualism illustrate the dire need for clarification. Parents and caregivers must be able to find out which of the alleged risks are real and whether they can be avoided. Moreover, they need to know what to do and what not to do in order to support the linguistic development of the children in their care. The question thus is whether we know enough about bilingualism and how it is acquired in early childhood to be able to disentangle facts from myths and offer the required guidance to parents and other caregivers. The answer is decidedly an affirmative one: it is indeed possible to give reliable answers to most of the questions underlying the lists of risks and benefits. Linguists, psychologists and other scholars have studied childhood bilingualism for more than one hundred years. Over the past 30 years, this research has increased dramatically, accumulating a huge amount of facts and providing many new insights. This is not to say that all problems are solved. Rather, as is typically the case in scientific research, for some of them there is a broad consensus among researchers concerning their explanation; for others, plausible solutions have been proposed, but further investigations are needed, and still others are topics of considerable controversy.

A guide for parents that bases its recommendations on insights gained by scientific research will necessarily reflect this state-of-the-art. In other words, some of the questions underlying the concerns and expectations of parents and educators can be answered with great certainty; for others, the answers rely on solid

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