

## BILINGUALITY - A TOPICAL PHENOMENON

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**ABSTRACT.** The hereby approach attempts at displaying a series of issues connected to bilinguality, which is a phenomenon frequently encountered in all countries, including Romania. While certain authors consider that bilinguality represents the current use of two different languages by the same person, others, emphasizing the degree of mastering the two different languages, assert the idea that there are a small number of persons who use two languages at a similar high level. Meanwhile, other researchers stress the fact that bilinguality should be regarded in terms of a minimal competence in verbal skill (understanding of speaking, speaking, reading or writing), in a language that differs from an individual's mother tongue. The various definitions given to bilinguality require a description of the forms of bilinguality, which the hereby paper carries out, followed by an analysis of their effect upon intellectual functions, and the display of several occurrences of bilinguality.

**KEY WORDS:** bilinguality, balanced/ dominant bilinguality, compound/ coordinate bilinguality, childhood/ adolescent / adult bilinguality, endogenous / exogenous bilinguality, additive/ subtractive bilinguality.

### Introduction

Researchers consider that, at present, almost half of the persons worldwide are bilingual or live within a bilingual environment (Grosjean, according to Borbély A., 2008) and the number of bilingual people is continually increasing. Besides the term of "mother tongue", the phrase "father tongue" appears to gain ground and to be used whenever a child appropriates different languages from the two parents; meanwhile, terms like bilingualism and multilingualism are also widely employed.

Although it is largely acknowledged that the acquisition of several languages represents an advantage, nonetheless scientists often wonder whether it is beneficial for a child to be bilingual. While certain researchers consider that it is recommended for a child to learn two foreign languages at an early age, others, on the contrary, support the idea that the early acquiring of several languages leads to confusion and to a growing rate of language disorders. There are educators and schoolteachers who complain of the problems encountered in case of those children that use at home, in order to communicate with their family, a language that differs from the one employed in kindergarten and school.

### Defining bilinguality

There are persons who perfectly understand and use two languages. Yet, there are also persons who understand what they are told in a language different from their mother tongue, but who difficultly and incorrectly are able to give an answer in that specific language. Which of them may be considered a bilingual? The answer to this question depends on the definition one is willing to accept.

The explanatory dictionary defines bilinguality as a “phenomenon implying the current use of two different languages by the same person”. According to Bloomfield (in Borbély A., 2008) bilinguality is the use of two different languages, mastered according to the level of one’s mother tongue. Nevertheless, it is considered that there are a small number of persons who use two languages at the same high level, and M. A. K. Halliday calls such individuals bilingual.

Contrary to these definitions, which refer only to perfect bilingual individuals, McNamara (according to Hamers and Blanc, 2000, p. 6) supports the idea that bilingual persons are those who display a minimal competence of one of the following verbal skills: understanding of speaking, speaking, reading or writing, in a language that differs from their mother tongue. Certain authors also use to mention a fifth linguistic skill, the cognitive one, which regards the capacity of employing the acquired languages as thinking devices.

While defining bilinguality, it is important not only to stress the level of language knowledge, but to emphasize their functional aspect, too. Uriel Wienreich, in his volume entitled “*Language in Contact*” (the first significant work in the field of bilinguality), asserts that “the practice of the alternative use of two languages is called bilinguality, and the persons doing this are called bilinguals” (according to Borbély A., 2008. p. 33).

It appears that bilinguality may be regarded as a continual dimension along which bilingual individuals are represented according to their level of knowledge of two or several languages. One end displays the perfect bilinguals (bilinguals), while the opposite end exhibits those who possess, at least, one of the verbal skills appropriated at a minimal level.

Although the definitions previously mentioned regard individual bilinguality, there are a series of researchers who have analyzed bilinguality as a social phenomenon. With this in view, Hamers and Blanc (2000, p. 6) employ the terms “bilingualism” and “bilinguality”. Bilingualism (*societal bilingualism*) concerns the condition of a community where two languages are in contact and a lot of individuals are bilingual. Bilinguality (*individual bilingualism*), on the other hand, represents the psychological condition of an individual, who is able to access more than one linguistic code as an instrument of social communication.

The verbal behaviour of a bilingual person is not equivalent to the sum of the behaviours of two persons who know only one language. In other words, bilingual persons are able to speak as monolinguals in one of the languages they possess or may use linguistic phenomena specific for bilinguals. Among the specific behaviours of bilingual persons, the most important ones are the following: *code-switching* (the ability to switch from one code to another) and *code-mixing* (the blending of linguistic codes). Code-mixing may occur through the alternative use of the two languages during a conversation. Code-mixing produces whenever individuals, speaking a certain language, use words belonging to another language, while altering them according to the grammar rules of the first language. Such phenomena generally come out when communication occurs between persons who know both languages. At times, the hereby phenomena may be determined by the deficient knowledge of a certain language, yet, in most cases code-switching

and code-mixing represent a strategy specific to bilingual persons who, accordingly, are able to better express their ideas, attitudes or identification with a certain group. For instance, in India, the use of English in combination with various regional languages is a sign of high social status.

### **Forms of bilinguality**

Although bilingual persons generally share similar characteristics, owing to the fact that they acquired two different languages during childhood, nonetheless, they display various forms of bilinguality, which are further analyzed.

For instance, **A** belongs to a family where Romanian represents mother's native tongue, while Hungarian represents father's native tongue. Both parents wanted **A** to acquire both languages. Beginning with the child's first year of life, mother spoke with the child only Romanian, while father only Hungarian. "At around one year old, the child started to speak both Romanian and Hungarian. We were surprised that he did not tangle them: the child spoke Romanian with my wife and Hungarian with me. And the situation is similar even today. The child uses a different language, depending on the person with whom communication is established", these are the words of **A**'s father, on the occasion of an interview taken when **A** was in kindergarten (Erdei I., 2011, p. 67).

**B**'s family has had a different strategy. Both parents were Hungarians so that they spoke Hungarian at home; nevertheless, the child entered a Romanian kindergarten and school. As a teenager, **B** speaks both languages, yet, at home, where Hungarian is more likely to be used, **B** more easily employs Romanian. The teenager difficultly understands and uses the terms specific to the school matters when having to speak in Hungarian.

A large number of families emphasize the importance of acquiring foreign languages. Child **C**, for example, uses Romanian, both at home and at school; during the preschool period the child started to learn English and the parents spent several holidays together with the child, in England, so that the latter one could better acquire English. As a teenager **C** masters both languages.

**D** lives in a rural area where almost all the inhabitants are Hungarians. **D** attended the courses of a school in Hungarian; nonetheless, at school, he learnt Romanian very well.

**E** comes from a family where the parents' mother tongue is Hungarian. Yet, the parents, who wanted their child to have good school results, started using Romanian at home, after the child entered the kindergarten. When graduating the high school, **E** correctly employs Romanian, but hardly uses Hungarian.

Further, we are going to display a series of forms of bilinguality, the manner they are described by specialized works (Table 1), and, subsequently, we shall come back to the previously exhibited examples in order to identify the forms of bilinguality specific to each particular case.

**Table no. 1. Forms of bilingualism (according to Hamers and Blanc, 2000, p. 26; Borbély, 2008, p. 35).**

No.	Criterion	Form of bilingualism	Explanations
1.	Competence in the two languages	Balanced bilinguality	Competence in L <sub>1</sub> is identical with competence in L <sub>2</sub> *
		Dominant bilinguality	Competence in L <sub>1</sub> is higher than competence in L <sub>2</sub>
2.	Semantic organizing	Combined (mixed) bilinguality	The equivalent notions in L <sub>1</sub> and L <sub>2</sub> are associated with the same mental representations
		Coordinate bilinguality	The equivalent notions in L <sub>1</sub> and L <sub>2</sub> are not always associated with the same mental representations
3.	Age when languages are acquired	Childhood bilinguality:	L <sub>1</sub> and L <sub>2</sub> are acquired before the age of 10 / 11:
		- Simultaneous	- Simultaneously (both languages become mother tongues)
		- Consecutive (Successive)	- Successively (only L <sub>1</sub> generally becomes mother tongue)
		Adolescence bilinguality	L <sub>2</sub> acquired between 11 and 17
		Adult age bilinguality	L <sub>2</sub> acquired after the age of 17
4.	Context according to which a person becomes bilingual	Natural bilinguality	L <sub>1</sub> and L <sub>2</sub> are spontaneously acquired
		Artificial (educational) bilinguality	L <sub>1</sub> is acquired within the family, and L <sub>2</sub> is acquired at kindergarten or school
5.	L <sub>2</sub> employed/ not employed as a mother tongue within the community	Endogenous bilinguality	Both L <sub>1</sub> and L <sub>2</sub> are employed as mother tongues within community
		Exogenous bilinguality	L <sub>2</sub> is the country's official language and is not employed as a mother tongue in community
6.	Relative status of the two languages	Additive bilinguality	L <sub>1</sub> and L <sub>2</sub> are capitalized in community (bilingualism determines cognitive opportunities)
		Subtractive bilinguality	L <sub>2</sub> is capitalized, while L <sub>1</sub> is not capitalized in community (bilingualism may determine cognitive drawbacks)
7.	Group and cultural identity affiliation	Bi-cultural bilinguality	Double affiliation and bicultural identity
		Monoculture bilinguality – L <sub>1</sub>	Affiliation and cultural identity specific for L <sub>1</sub>
		Acculturated bilinguality – L <sub>2</sub>	Affiliation and cultural identity specific for L <sub>2</sub>
		De-cultured bilinguality	No specified affiliation and cultural identity

\* L<sub>1</sub> = the first language acquired by the child, which generally is the mother tongue

L<sub>2</sub> = the second language acquired by the child

**Balanced/ dominant bilinguality.** Depending on the degree of linguistic competence, Lambert (according to Hamers and Blanc, 2000, p. 27) refers to a balanced bilinguality (linguistic competence in the acquired languages) or to a dominant bilinguality (competence in one of the languages - mother tongue, as a rule – is higher than competence in the other languages). The balance or dominance are not necessarily equally distributed in all fields; each individual possess his/her own configuration of the dominance (for instance, one may deal with balance in conversations on household activities and dominance in conversations dealing with the professional field).

**Combined/ coordinated bilinguality.** Age and the context of language acquiring may determine differences of semantic organizing. Ervin and Osgood (according to Hamers and Blanc, 2000, p. 163) speak about combined or coordinated linguistic systems. In the combined system, the equivalent linguistic signs of the acquired languages are associated with the same mental representations. In the coordinated system, the equivalent terms have their correspondence in different representations. In terms of this situation, too, a bilingual person may be “combined”, in case of certain concepts (generally, in case of concrete notions) and “coordinated”, in case of other concepts (for instance, certain abstract notions); consequently, one may solely refer to the dominance of a system.

**Childhood/ adolescence/ adult age bilinguality.** An individual may become bilingual during childhood (until the age of 10/11), adolescence (between 10/11 and 17) or adult age (after 17).

Childhood bilinguality may be simultaneous or consecutive (successive). The individuals displaying a simultaneous bilinguality acquire both languages in the family environment, owing to an informal manner, through spontaneous, unintended learning. Such situations occur especially in bilingual families. While educating their children, a series of such families implement the so-called *Grammont principle* (also termed OPOL method = *one person one language*). According to this principle, each adult employs only his/her mother tongue while communicating with the child. Researchers, like Ronjat or Leopold (according to Hamers and Blanc, 2000, p. 51), who have applied this principle in educating their own children, show that the method has multiple positive effects: the acquiring of the two languages develops simultaneously; beginning with the age of 2-3, children become aware of the existence of the two linguistic codes and use them depending on their interlocutor; they become aware of the arbitrary character of language; and display an increased verbal flexibility. Usually, when such circumstances occur, children are going to possess two mother tongues. Other researchers have concluded that, in order to possess two mother tongues, it is not necessary to strictly observe Grammont principle. Instead, it is important to establish close relations between the child and the members of the communities that speak his/her parents' tongues.

Consecutive (successive) bilinguality involves the acquiring of a language, which differs from the mother tongue, during childhood, yet, after having acquired mother tongue. The acquiring of the second language may occur informally (through communication with the relatives or with the children in the play group, etc.) or intentionally, according to a systematic learning within the educational activities organized at the kindergarten, school, etc.

Bilinguality acquired during adolescence or adult age can only be consecutive.

**Natural/ artificial (educational) bilinguality.** A child becomes naturally bilingual in case he/she acquires both languages spontaneously, in the familial milieu and/ or the group of friends. In case one acquires the second language at kindergarten, school, etc., bilinguality is called artificial or educational.

There is an increased correspondence between the age and the context languages are acquired and the type of semantic organizing. The individual who acquired both languages during childhood, in the same milieu, displays a single cognitive representation for the equivalent terms. Those who acquire two languages in different environments (for instance, one in the family milieu, the other one at kindergarten and school) probably have different mental representations for certain equivalent concepts, so that they possess a coordinated bilinguality.

**Endogenous / exogenous bilingualism.** Endogenous language is the language used by the members of a community as a mother tongue. Endogenous bilingualism means that both languages spoken by an individual are mother tongues in the community he/she leaves in. Exogenous language is the official language of the country, which is not spoken as a mother tongue by the members of a community. Exogenous bilingualism consists in having acquired both the mother tongue and the official language.

**Additive/ subtractive bilingualism.** These notions have been introduced by Lambert (according to Hamers and Blanc, 2000, p. 99). In case of additive bilingualism, the acquiring of a language that differs from the mother tongue determines the improvement of the linguistic repertory of the individual. In case the two languages acquired by the individual are capitalized to the same extent by the members of the community, bilingualism is mainly additive. Under such circumstances, the child would cognitively benefit from bilingualism.

Subtractive bilingualism occurs when two languages are in “competition”: one language tends to replace the mother tongue of a community. Such circumstances appear in case an ethno-linguistic minority rejects its own cultural values in favour of the values belonging to another group perceived as more prestigious. At school, the children in the minority group are educated in a language that differs from their mother tongue. Such children frequently tend to abandon the use of their mother tongue and start employing the other language. Researches show that, under such circumstances, children’s cognitive development and linguistic competence are negatively affected.

**Bicultural, monoculture, acculturated, and de-cultured bilingualism.** Bilingual individuals may be ranged according to the manner they perceive their own cultural identity. Some of them, who effectively employ two languages, identify themselves with the two cultural groups and are acknowledged as belonging to both groups (bicultural bilingualism), to the same extent. Generally, this social and affective double identity corresponds to a balanced and additive cognitive bilingualism. Certain individuals, although they effectively use two languages, culturally identify with only one of the two groups and are perceived as belonging to that specific community (monoculture bilingualism). Other individuals abandon their cultural identification with those who speak their mother tongue and integrate within the group of those who speak the other language. Under such circumstances, we deal with acculturated bilingualism (an “acquired” culture). Sometimes the individuals quit their cultural identity, yet, they do not manage to identify socially and affectively with the culture of those who use the other language. Berry (according to Hamers and Blanc, 2000, p. 30) employs the term of de-cultured (“lost” culture) bilingualism in order to define such cases.

Let’s further return to the examples previously displayed and try to identify the forms of bilingualism specific to the five cases. Let’s also notice that the real cases are more complex, so that the hereby ranging according to classes has solely an illustrative value.

**Table no. 2. Probable forms of bilingualism specific to the previously displayed cases**

No.	Criterion	Form of bilingualism	Examples
1.	Competence in the two languages	Balanced bilingualism	A.
		Dominant bilingualism	B., C., D., E.
2.	Semantic organizing	Combined (mixed) bilingualism	A.
		Coordinated bilingualism	B., C., D., E.
3.	Age when languages are acquired	Childhood bilinguality:	
		- Simultaneous	A.
		- Consecutive	B., C., D., E.
4.	Context according to which an individual becomes bilingual	Natural bilinguality	A.
		Artificial (educational) bilinguality	B. C. D. E.
5.	L <sub>2</sub> used / not used as a mother tongue in community	Endogenous bilinguality	A., B., E.
		Exogenous bilinguality	C. D.
6.	Relative status of the two languages	Additive bilinguality	A., B., C., D.
		Subtractive bilinguality	E.
7.	Affiliation to a group and cultural identity	Bicultural bilinguality	A., B.
		Monoculture bilinguality - L <sub>1</sub>	C., D.
		Acculturated bilinguality - L <sub>2</sub>	E.
		De-cultured bilinguality	

### Conclusions

Bilingualism is a phenomenon encountered in all countries. It may be conceived as a continual dimension: one of its poles includes the bilinguals (perfect bilinguals), while the other pole includes those who possess a minimal competence in, at least, one of the following verbal skills: understanding speech, speaking, reading or writing.

Bilingualism may display various forms, each of them influencing the manner of communication as well as the cognitive function of the individuals.

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