

## WHY INVESTIGATE THE MULTILINGUAL LEXICON?

Multilingualism both as an individual and social phenomenon is very common in the world considering that there are approximately 5,000 languages and speakers of different languages which have contact with each other in everyday life. Some specific historical, social, economic and political factors have contributed to the development of multilingualism in recent years. Among these factors we can consider the economic difficulties of some countries that result in immigration or the economic and political power of some English speaking countries that have had important implications for the spread of English. Nowadays, it is extremely common to find individuals who can speak more than two languages.

In spite of its importance as a global phenomenon, multilingualism has not received much attention on part of researchers in linguistics, psycholinguistics and applied linguistics. For many years linguists have tried to describe and explain the way human languages work by focusing on monolingual speakers and have ignored bilingual and multilingual speakers. Bilingualism has received a lot of attention in psycholinguistics and applied linguistics in the last few decades but most researchers have not gone beyond bilingualism and have limited their theoretical proposals and empirical work to two languages. For example, most research on language acquisition focuses on first and second language acquisition. Even in cases in which the term 'second language acquisition' is said to be used for the acquisition of languages other than the first language, no distinction is made between the acquisition of a second language and additional languages (see for example Sharwood-Smith, 1994). Similarly, the extensive research on the effects of bilingualism on cognitive development devotes very little attention to the effects of bilingualism on the acquisition of additional languages.

So apart from its limited tradition of research, the study of multilingualism has not benefited from the statements made by some researchers about including situations involving the use of more than two languages as part of bilingualism (see for example Schreuder & Weltens, 1993, 3).

Furthermore, the word 'bilingualism' which includes the Latin prefix 'bi' (two), is not appropriate to refer to more than two languages. In contrast, the term 'multilingualism' encompasses not only 'bilingualism' but also additional

languages, three, four or more, and is the most appropriate term to be the cover term for phenomena involving more than one language.

The need to use the term 'multilingualism' and to conduct specific research that goes beyond bilingualism has a theoretical and empirical basis. Bilingualism is a phenomenon that may have a lot in common with multilingualism, but research on the acquisition and processing of two languages cannot explain the specific processes resulting from the interaction between the languages that may result from the simultaneous presence of more than two languages in the multilingual person's mind. Research on multilingualism is more complex than research on bilingualism. Apart from all the factors and processes involved in bilingualism, it has to take into account the implications that the knowledge of more than the first language has on the acquisition of an additional language or the multiple relationships between the different linguistic systems in language comprehension and production. Theoretical models of multilingualism (see for example Herdina & Jessner, 2002) emphasize these differences, and recent research on different aspects of multilingualism provides additional evidence of the differences between second and third language acquisition (Cenoz & Genesee, 1998b, Jessner, 1999; Cenoz, Hufeisen & Jessner, 2001a). Furthermore, specific research on the cross-linguistic influence of previously acquired languages on third language acquisition has reported interesting patterns that indicate that third language production has specific characteristics that distinguish it from second language production (see Cenoz, Hufeisen & Jessner, 2001b).

This volume focuses on a specific aspect of multilingualism, the multilingual lexicon, and aims at contributing to develop our knowledge of the way multilingual individuals acquire and process language. To date, books on the mental lexicon have mainly been concerned with the processing of one or two languages. The present volume goes beyond this and provides an additional theoretical and empirical basis to justify the development of multilingualism as a specific area of research.

A multilingual individual can be defined as a person who is able to communicate in two or more languages. As is the case with definitions of bilingualism, the ability to communicate covers a broad spectrum of proficiencies from having a native-like command of more than one language to the general ability to function and communicate in more than one language at almost any proficiency level. Balanced bilingualism is highly infrequent and a balanced level of proficiency in several languages is not to be expected if we take into account the different dimensions of communicative competence including linguistic, pragmatic, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic competence (Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei & Thurrell, 1995). As has been proposed by Grosjean (1985) and Cook (1992), a multilingual speaker has a specific type of competence which is different from monolingual competence in each of the languages s/he speaks. This volume provides interesting insights into the analysis of one of the areas of multicompetence, the multilingual lexicon.

## 1. THE MULTILINGUAL LEXICON

The lexicon has always been at the centre of interest in studies on bilingual individuals and/or second language learners. Discussions on the nature of the acquisition of the lexicon have concentrated on questions concerning similarities and differences between lexical operations in L1 and L2 learning and the relationship between form and meaning in processing one or two languages. One of the main questions in research on the mental lexicon is still formed by the discussion on the L1/L2 interdependence/dependence – linked to the classic compound/coordinate dichotomy. But researchers dealing with the question of separation/integration have now shifted their attention to the degree of interconnectivity. Many of the studies on bilingual representation and processing focus on the conceptual and lexical or associative links in the bilingual mental lexicon (several studies in Harris 1992 and Schreuder & Weltens 1993; Singleton 1999, 167ff.).

Processing models which have been developed so far are models adapted from monolingual processing models such as de Bot's (1992), which is based on Levelt's production model (e.g. 1989) where lexical knowledge including lemmas and forms, i.e. sematico-grammatical and morphophonological knowledge, is a part of declarative knowledge.

Other studies on the nature of the lexicon often stem from acquisition studies which were originally motivated by classroom research and concentrate on the connections between the languages which are in contact in a language learning situation. In these studies of cross-linguistic influence the prominent role of the lexicon in language acquisition becomes very obvious. Investigations of codeswitching and –borrowing have formed another research area where the bilingual lexicon has always been a crucial part of the discussion.

To find out whether there are interconnections between the various lexicons in the multilingual's mind is certainly a burning question for research on multilingualism. Other related issues deal with the way the various lexicons are organized and can be accessed and under which conditions they appear. Whereas many scholars, depending on their theoretical approach and scientific background tend to subsume multilingualism under bilingualism and/or second language acquisition (e.g. Singleton, 1999: 130), others have started to concentrate on specific aspects of third language acquisition in order to pinpoint the differences between the processes involved in the acquisition and processing of two or more languages. Some important indicators for the activation of languages in a multilingual individual include recency of activation and use of different languages together with the role assignment of specific languages in an individual (Williams & Hammarberg, 1998). The role of typological factors in a more complex language contact situation where more than two languages are involved has also to be reassigned (Cenoz, 2001).

Furthermore, studies employing trilingual or multilingual subjects not only offer the opportunity to investigate the acquisition and processing by testees representing the majority of the world's population but also offer new perspectives on the study of language acquisition in general. For instance, a study by Abunawara (1992) showed that the number of connections between the lexicons is higher at lower

The Multilingual Lexicon

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2003, X, 208 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-1-4020-1543-4