

Individual Differences in the Light of New Linguistic Dispensation

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Abstract This article offers some theoretical considerations on the issue of individual differences within the context of contemporary global and sociolinguistic conditions. The essential changes in the field of second language learning and use are treated in connection with global shifts. In the first section the paper provides a description of the new linguistic dispensation as well as its emergent properties and developments. This section is followed by the analysis of the most salient current issues in individual differences such as the reassessment of factors explaining individual variation in view of recent developments, the increase and diversification of language learner populations, the limitless diversification and expansion of the factors deemed responsible for variety in the process and outcomes of language learning, the appearance of new categories of determinants for language learning and consequent re-assessment and restructuring of teaching methodology.

1 Introduction

The aim of this paper is to put forward some theoretical considerations on the issue of individual differences within the context of contemporary global and sociolinguistic conditions. To that end we shall, (1) first describe the essential changes

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in the field of second language learning and use which have taken place due to and along with global shifts. In particular, we will refer to the new linguistic dispensation of multilingualism as well as its properties and developments. Next, (2) we shall discuss the consequent changes which have occurred in the theoretical understanding of individual differences and show how each particular property and development of the new linguistic dispensation is related to various aspects of individual differences. Finally, we will (3) point to some implications of individual differences for the practice of second language learning. For the purposes of the present discussion we understand *second language* as any additional language other than one's mother tongue, that is, as a cover term for second, foreign, third, and subsequent language be it in terms of use, attitude or order of acquisition. Where the distinction between the terms *foreign*, *second* or *third* language proves necessary (Sect. 2 of this article) we will specify these languages as such. *Multilingualism* is treated here as the acquisition and use of two or more languages hence multilingualism subsumes bilingualism.

2 Contemporary Sociolinguistic Arrangements in Light of Global Shifts

2.1 Contemporary Multilingualism: The New Linguistic Dispensation

The global linguistic arrangements of modern times are predominantly connected with the use of more than one language. Bi- and multilingualism are ubiquitous in the planet and it is believed that there are more people using more than one language than those using only one (Graddol 1997; Fishman 1998). Further, language patterns have changed so significantly that sets of languages, rather than single languages, now perform the essential functions of communication, cognition and identity for both individuals and the global community (Aronin 2005). Therefore, in this article we will refer to the contemporary sociolinguistic situation as *multilingualism*.

Contemporary multilingualism is considered an ineluctable concomitant of all dimensions of globalization inextricably intertwined with all the major attributes of the dramatic social changes currently occurring in the world. These changes include the compression and expansion of time and space (cf. Giddens 1990; Eriksen 2001), the transcendence of territorial, physical and social boundaries, global mobility, manifested in rapid acceleration in movement of people, goods, trends, and ideas (cf. Bauman 1999; Urry 2000, 2003) in addition to the shift from the social topology of structure (communities, groups, states), via 'horizontal groups' (Friedman 1999), towards the fluid social topology of human society (Urry 2003). Critical globalization writers debate the emergence of global consciousness (O'Byrne 2005) as well as abstract and subjective forms of rationality where

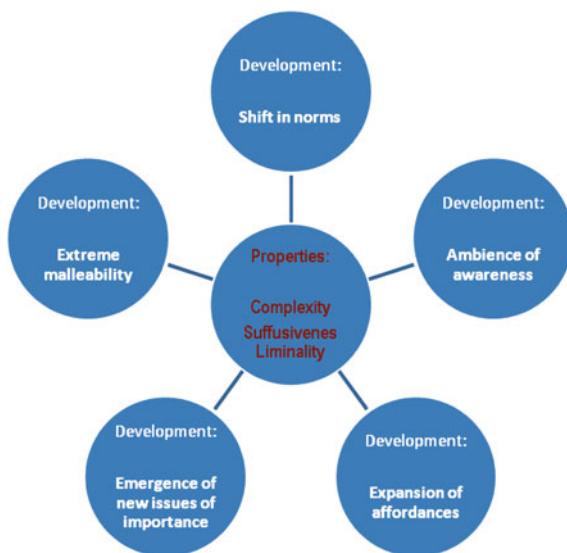
knowledge, self-discovery, and emancipation are associated with the concept of *lifeworld* (Habermas 1987). Roudometoff (2005, p. 84) believes that the component structures of lifeworld, namely, culture, society, and personality have undergone significant developments. The issue of identity has become remarkably important in general scientific discourse as compared with its profile in pre-globalization times (cf. Castells 1997). According to Friedman (2000), globalization has its own defining structure of power built around three balances, “(...) which overlap and affect one another” (Friedman 2000, p. 13). Besides the traditional balance between nation-states and the more recent balance between nation-states and global markets, the third and “the one that is really newest of all” is that between individuals and nation-states (Friedman 2000, p. 14). Friedman believes that with the advent of mobility and permeable borders of different kinds, the simultaneous wiring into various networks yields more power to individuals than ever before to the extent that “[i]ndividuals can increasingly act on the world stage directly—unmediated by a state” (Friedman 2000, p. 14).

The above and other changes have resulted in cardinal shifts in the realm of language use in individuals and society and have entailed the recognition that contemporary patterns of language use prove different from those characteristic of previous sociolinguistic contexts (Fishman 1998; Maurais 2003; Aronin and Hufeisen 2009). Although multilingual individuals and societies have existed throughout the history of humankind, the present stage of global sociolinguistic arrangements constitutes a novel development. To emphasize its difference from *historical multilingualism* it is referred to as *a new linguistic dispensation* (see more on this in Aronin and Singleton 2008a). This new dispensation is marked by the ubiquity of multilingualism, the increasing breadth and depth of the effect of multilingualism and its relationship to modifications of human experience. In general terms, researchers agree on the two trends broadly distinguishing today's world linguistic situation (Fishman 1998; Maurais 2003): the wide diversification of recognized languages in use accompanied by a troubling decline in the vigour and, indeed, danger of extinction of many languages and the other, an unprecedented spread of the use of English (Graddol 1997; Graddol 2006; Fishman 1998). Despite the simultaneity of these trends they appear *prima facie* to be in contradiction with each other.

2.2 *The Properties and the Developments of Contemporary Multilingualism*

The intricate interplay of the above two trends accounts for the three distinctive specific qualities inherent in the new linguistic dispensation (that is, current multilingualism): *suffusiveness*, *complexity* and *liminality*. These *properties*, separately and together, in turn, lead to the specific *developments* (processes and phenomena) unfolding in the realities of global society. The developments involve but are not limited to shifts in norms, an ambience of awareness, the emergence of

Fig. 1 The properties and developments of the current global linguistic dispensation (Aronin and Singleton 2008c)



new focal issues, extreme malleability and an expansion of affordances (Aronin and Singleton 2008c; Aronin and Singleton, Submitted) (see Fig. 1). The properties and developments of contemporary multilingualism relate prominently to individual differences and may account for significant emerging factors for learning and teaching languages today. These properties will now be discussed in further detail.

The property of *suffusiveness* manifests itself in the world wide permeation of multilingualism evident in the existence of multilingual populations, geographical areas, business, culture and other activity domains where multilingual practices prevail. *Suffusiveness* is supported and propagated by modern technology through the wide diversity of multilingual populations, countries and individuals. Multilingualism ‘is based’ on the ever rising number of languages—the most accepted figures ranging from 6,000 to 14,000 (Graddol 1997; Fishman 1998; Gnutzmann 2005). Technology, more specifically, computerization, miniaturization, digitization, satellite communication, and the Internet allow for and ensure integrative processes and spread languages and multilingual practices around the world. Multilingualism is suffusive not only due to its permeability but, crucially, on account of its being integral to the construction of a modern reality. Vital societal processes and salient characteristics of contemporary society are inseparably linked with multilingualism. While ‘historical multilingualism’ was largely supplementary to the development and maintenance of previous societies, virtually every facet of contemporary human life depends on multilingual social arrangements and multilingual individuals (Aronin and Singleton 2008a; Aronin and Singleton, Submitted).

The property of *complexity* relates to the multifaceted nature and dimensions of multilingualism which interact in intricate ways. The dynamic nature of

Table 1 Second language acquisition vs. multilingual acquisition (Cenoz 2000, p. 40)

Second language acquisition	Multilingual language acquisition
1. L1 → L2	1. 1. L1 → L2 → L3
2. Lx + Ly	1. L1 → Lx/Ly
	2. Lx/Ly → L3
	3. Lx/Ly/Lz
	4. L1 → L2 → L3 → L4
	5. L1 → Lx/Ly → L4
	6. L1 → L2 → Lx/Ly
	7. L1 → Lx/Ly/Lz
	8. Lx/Ly → L3 → L4
	9. Lx/Ly → Lz/Lz1
	10. Lx/Ly/Lz → L4
	11. Lx/Ly/Lz/Lz1

multilingualism makes it impossible to account for it as a sum of its parts. Multilingualism in general and the processes of second language acquisition and second language instruction are characterized by fuzziness, irregularity, fragmentariness and at times even chaos. Sociolinguists and educators have to consider multiple agents like number of languages, variety of speakers, modes of use, levels of mastery in relation to an immense variety of interactions resulting in a linguistic reality of language use perceived as unpredictable behaviour, often ‘on the verge of the chaotic’ (Larsen-Freeman 2002; Aronin and Singleton 2008b). The contact between thousands of languages of various standing and nominations (e.g. official, minority, heritage languages; on nominations see Aronin et al. 2011) carrying out various functions (e.g. mother tongue, second/foreign language) spoken by linguistically diverse populations with a variety of formal and informal educational experiences generates diversity.

As for factors influencing second language acquisition, these are many. Among them are, for instance, educational context, formal or informal and the particular goals of language learning: which and how many languages are taught? Are they taught as disciplines or as means of education? Which language skills are emphasized and what levels form the objectives? Other factors cover: the order of language acquisition, methods and techniques, specific aims and programs and teacher qualification. In regard to individual factors, these are numerous and include the origins of multilinguality, personal experiences and reasons for multilingualism, needs and affordances, world outlook, preferences, emotions and metalinguistic awareness.

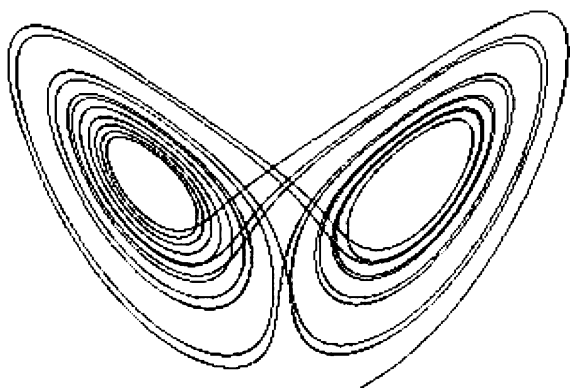
To exemplify the complexity of second language acquisition we refer here to the frequently cited table by Cenoz (2000, p. 40) (Table 1). The table shows only one factor in multiple language acquisition, that of acquisition order, but clearly demonstrates how this order gives rise to variation and the leap in complexity and diversity between second language acquisition and acquisition of a third and additional languages. With two languages involved in the acquisition process we may consider only two possible acquisition orders: the second language can be

acquired either after L1 ($L1 \rightarrow L2$) or at the same time as the L1 ($Lx + Ly$). In the case of third language acquisition there are already at least four possible acquisition orders. The three languages can be acquired consecutively ($L1 \rightarrow L2 \rightarrow L3$) or with a simultaneous component: the simultaneous acquisition of two languages (Lx/Ly) could take place after the L1 has been acquired ($L1 \rightarrow Lx/Ly$) or before the L3 is acquired ($Lx/Ly \rightarrow L3$). Or there could be simultaneous contact with all three languages ($Lx/Ly/Lz$). This diversity can be further increased where the acquisition process is interrupted by the acquisition of an additional language and then restarted ($L1 \rightarrow L2 \rightarrow L3 \rightarrow L2$).

Lately, one may note increasing recognition of the complexity of multilingualism in general, and of second/multiple language acquisition in particular. Larsen-Freeman (1997, 2002) pointed to striking similarities between chaos/complexity and second language acquisition. Herdina and Jessner placed the focus of their dynamic model of multilingualism (DMM) on “(...) the variability and dynamics of the individual speaker system” (Herdina and Jessner 2002, p. 2). Gabrys-Barker (2005) analysing quantitative studies on multilingual development, lexical storage, processing and retrieval, adopted the perspective of the complexity of multilingualism and of the fuzziness of multilingual lexicon as her frame of reference. Aronin and Tikhay (2005) demonstrated the remarkable parallel between the concepts of complexity and the recent key findings in multilingualism. The crucial novel approaches in multilingualism testify to the emergent qualities, that is, new properties and behaviours not contained in the essence of the constituent elements. Further, these new characteristics and behaviours cannot be predicted from knowledge of initial conditions. The recent view adopted by multilingualism studies asserts that:

- Multilingualism is not only quantitatively, but also qualitatively different from bilingualism, and possesses characteristics not found in bilingualism (see for example, Hoffmann 2001a, 2001b; Herdina and Jessner 2002).
- A bilingual is not the sum of two monolinguals and a multilingual is not the sum of multiple monolinguals but possesses very special characteristics not found in less-linguals. Following Grosjean (1985, 1992) and Cook (1992, 1993), bilinguals are now viewed as possessing a special constellation of language competencies which allow communication in various and multiple social contexts. Thus, multilinguals are represented as possessing “a configuration of linguistic competences that is distinct from that of bilinguals and monolinguals” (Cenoz and Genesee 1998, p. 19).
- Second, third and subsequent language acquisition processes do not exactly replicate the processes operative in previous language acquisition (Grosjean 1985, 1992). This means that trilingual education, for example, is not just a simple matter of the mechanical addition of one or more languages in the curriculum.
- Complexity presupposes sensitivity to initial conditions. Sensitivity to initial conditions of chaotic systems means that the slightest change in those conditions can produce radically different results.

Fig. 2 Graphic model of Lorenz's butterfly (the figure is taken from http://www.wiley.com/legacy/wileychi/systemsengineering/Systems_Engineering/page3/page3.html)



Lorenz's butterfly can serve not only as a model demonstrating infinite diversity and unpredictability of the possible outcomes of second language learning but may also symbolize the issue of individual differences (see Fig. 2—Graphic model of Lorenz's butterfly). In practice, in the domain of second/multiple language teaching sensitivity to initial conditions proves familiar to anyone who observes the variety of language profiles of every individual student in a given class. Thus, variations will be observed in early or late onset of study, sufficient or insufficient exposure to a language, encounters which may spark or enhance interest in a particular language. As indicated above, all these may result in significant diversions from any particular expected outcome. Discussions of the age factor in second/third language exposure, decisions regarding the sequence of language learning in childhood, school, as well as emigration conditions, all constitute attempts to cope with the impact of initial conditions.

The last property of contemporary multilingualism labeled *liminality* addresses the observation that many language related processes and phenomena have, of late, become especially discernible due to recent societal shifts and changes and in particular to those in the domain of language use. In other words, under current sociolinguistic dispensation, issues which previously were impossible to single out, are now becoming apparent. Spolsky (1999) provided a clear instance of liminality. Describing second/foreign language teaching and learning, he noted that "[t]hose of us concerned with the field of second language learning have been forced by the ethnic revival and by our new appreciation of language and ethnicity to extend our concerns to embrace the social context in which the teaching takes place" (Spolsky 1999, p. 182). This new concern forms a contrast with the purely linguistic approach to second language learning prevalent before. Another illustration of liminality may serve to clarify the property in question. Multilingualism, now increasingly perceived as subsuming bilingualism, was initially considered a case of bilingualism and developed within the framework of bilingualism. In fact,

this position is still held today by some researchers and lay people. Recently however, research has supplied findings testifying to and clarifying the special nature of tri/multilingual users as distinct from bilinguals (Cenoz and Genesee 1998; Cenoz et al. 2001; Herdina and Jessner 2002).

To sum up, the three *properties* of contemporary multilingualism, *suffusiveness*, *complexity* and *liminality*, materialize in the concrete *developments* taking place in the current global linguistic dispensation (Aronin and Singleton 2008c). In section two we will examine the changes in the domain of individual differences as they are connected with properties and developments of the new linguistic dispensation.

3 Individual Differences in the Context of the New Linguistic Dispensation

3.1 A Brief Overview of Traditional Perspectives on Individual Differences

The topic of individual differences in second language acquisition has been dealt with by a range of disciplines among them cognitive psychology and applied linguistics. Serious research into bilingualism which emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, (see for example, Gal 1979; Baetens Beardsmore 1982; Genesee 1983; Romaine 1989), focused on individual language behavior, including the psychology of language learning and the intricacy of the bilingual mind (Paradis 1985; Obler 1989). The cognitive effect of the contact between two languages, as well as advantages and disadvantages of bilingualism were widely discussed (cf. Skutnabb-Kangas 1981; Hamers and Blanc 1983). From that time on the focal points in individual differences include age, often considered within the topic of the critical period hypothesis (Marinova-Todd et al. 2000; Singleton and Ryan 2004; Singleton 2005), learners' cognitive abilities (cf. Ackerman 1988, Ackerman 1989) and motivation (Gardner and Lambert 1959, 1972).

In 1994 Ellis directed attention to the three large classes of variables that may be implicated in determining individual differences in second language acquisition: *learner differences*, *learner strategies* and *performance outcomes* Ellis 1994. In 1997 Ellis referred to learners' characteristics as *psychological dimensions* as opposed to *social* (which include conditions of learning). Segalowitz (1997, p. 86) noted that a cognitive linguistics approach "overlooks the social and communicative dimensions that necessarily affect the course of language development" and notably, called for "explicit recognition of the complexity of the perceptual, memory, attentional, and other demands made on the individual's cognitive resources, demands felt at every level, from the perception of basic linguistic units to the handling of communicative negotiations" (Segalowitz 1997, 86). Segalowitz formulated the problem of how to account for individual differences specific to second language development in the following way: "What are the psychological

complexities of communication that underlie L2 skill development, what cognitive resources are required to deal with these complexities, and why do individuals differ in the way they organize and manage their resources?”

Lightbown and Spada (2006) acknowledged the importance of the social and educational settings in which learners find themselves. Under the umbrella of individual differences they included intelligence, aptitude, learning styles, personality, motivation and attitudes, identity and ethnic group affiliation, learner beliefs, age of acquisition and the critical period hypothesis. In addition, these writers addressed the difficulties and challenges in assessing the relationship between individual learner characteristics and second language learning.

3.2 Individual Differences and the New Linguistic Dispensation

The global transformation and modification in language arrangements including language use and language learning has resulted in a shift in the perception of individual differences calling for a fresh look at which differences impact second language acquisition and the extent to which they do so.

The suffusiveness and ubiquity of multilingualism in accordance with the unprecedented spread of English and the diversification of languages in use resulted in the increase of language learner populations of all ages, abilities and statuses of citizenship. Increased physical and social mobility and the expansion of affordances have led to a surge in migrant populations characterized by diversity in relation to which and how many languages are learnt and used, in which role they are learned, as well as the level of mastery of the languages at one's disposal. Migrants represent a category of language learners with multiple subcategories. Walker (2006, p. 1), for example, in her study of multilingual migrants who use various minority languages in addition to English in Aotearoa, New Zealand notably, emphasized “(...) the complex interconnections between cognitive, sociolinguistic and social-psychological dimensions associated with language learning”. She concluded that viewing often already bilingual migrants as language learners in the process of renegotiating their identity carries implications for language learning pedagogy. From this perspective, second language learning and teaching methods and their outcome depend on particular learner characteristics, in other words, specific individual differences.

Amharic speaking illiterate adult Ethiopian immigrants to Israel learning Hebrew and English as second or additional languages possess distinctive characteristics which present special challenges to language teachers (Osmolovsky 2008). These immigrants study Hebrew in the framework of a specially organized course tailored for the needs of this population. Osmolovsky notes that the success of the project “depends on the right combination and application of linguistic and cultural context and includes, among other things, the students moving around the class as well as manipulating moving objects rather than learning only from verbal material”.

The beneficiaries of multilingual teaching projects in Europe such as EuroCom and projects funded by the European Centre of Modern languages (ECML) form a different group of language learners. In addition to differences in aptitude, cognitive abilities and age these European citizens are characterized by other important variables that impact language learning. These include the particular mother tongue or habitually spoken language and the typological distance between it and the target language. Since the aim of EuroCom, is “to provide European citizens with a solid linguistic basis for understanding each other, at least within their own language family” (Jessner 2008a, p. 36) teaching concentrates on specifically developed materials which practice inferencing techniques in typologically-related languages like Romance, Germanic and Slavonic languages (see more on EuroCom in Jessner 2008a; Hufeisen and Marx 2007b and EuroCom <http://eurocom-frankfurt.de> accessed 20.04.2011).

An even more narrowly identified group of European additional language learners are the speakers of Scandinavian languages. Receptive multilingualism recently has been officially introduced as a goal although the practices of inter-Scandinavian comprehension, have long been in existence (see for example, Braunmüller 2007). For Scandinavians learning a linguistically related neighbouring language, the ease and outcome of the learning process depend on perceived and real linguistic distance between the two related languages, and the extent to which the latter corresponds to the former. Other relevant factors include mastery of their own languages and exposure to the target neighbouring languages. Notably, for successful receptive multilingual communication such factors as phonological and linguistic awareness, metalinguistic and intercultural understanding, readiness for communication all need to be on significantly high levels (Zeevaert and ten Thije 2007).

In an attempt to level individual differences in receptive multilingual communication, facilitate the learning process and work towards better results, Möller (2007) explored lexical possibilities of inter-comprehension through the investigation of German cognates of Dutch words. In another study, Lutjeharms (2007) showed the importance of teaching learners to organize their comprehension by exploiting transfer and syntactic cues from more proficient languages to ‘correct’ the perceived structural similarity of the languages in question. Both studies along with others demonstrate that didactic implementations of the receptive multilingual approach to Germanic languages are under way (Hufeisen and Lutjeharms 2005; Hufeisen and Marx 2007a; Marx 2010).

The examples presented above were provided to illustrate the increase and diversification of language learner populations and how this expansion and branching out render diversity in the factors that have an impact on language learning processes and outcomes. To further exemplify the point we will now consider two most prominent lines of research which we identified as contributing the most into our knowledge about the individual differences. The first explores a variety of interactions between languages used by individuals. The second embraces studies which share the interest in various identity aspects of language learners as factors of influence on second language acquisition.

Research investigating the interaction between languages used by an individual is providing new data and important insights. Studies in the framework of second language acquisition (SLA) focus on multiple language acquisition, tri- and multilingual education and, in particular, cross-linguistic influences (Cenoz et al. 2001; Jessner 2008a) including cross-linguistic transfer between L2 and L3, i.e. not from L1, which was the previous focus (cf. De Angelis and Selinker 2001; De Angelis 2005; De Angelis and Dewaele 2009). The studies on cross-linguistic influences present an enormous variety of language learning situations and outcomes. Thus, being a mono-, bi-, tri- or multilingual learner/speaker adds dimensions of individual differences which, in turn, diversify exponentially.

Typologies and classifications of multilinguals capture differences between learners which in the long run determine their proficiency and may be seen as attempts to organise and consider the novel dimensions of differences between learners and speakers of multiple languages. For example, Skutnabb-Kangas (1981, p. 75) divided bilinguals into four sub groups—élite bilinguals, children from linguistic majorities, children from bilingual families, and children from linguistic minorities. Baetens Beardsmore (1982) provided a wide-ranged typology of bilingualism and bilinguals, in which he made distinctions between societal and individual bilingualism and receptive and productive bilingualism. These typologies may be extended to multilinguals. Li Wei (2000a, pp. 6–7) identified thirty-seven types of bilingualism, including, for example, balanced, incipient, dormant and receptive bilinguals. Hoffmann (2001a, pp. 18–19) classified trilinguals into five groups, taking into account both the circumstances and the social context under which the subjects became speakers of three languages. She noted that:

One could also establish other typologies reflecting, as criteria, features related to acquisition such as age, acquisition process (simultaneous, successive or a combination of them), acquisition context (home, community, classroom, school), language competence and skills attained, among others (Hoffmann 2001a, p. 19).

Other distinctions between bi- and multilinguals are found in learner strategies. Kemp (2007) reported that multilingual learners use different strategies than monolingual students learning their first foreign language. She also noted the variation in multilinguals' use of strategies. Previous linguistic knowledge constitutes a factor believed to be significant in learning subsequent languages. Most of the models used in research on multilingualism which developed from a psycholinguistic perspective on multilingualism take into account prior linguistic knowledge. Hufeisen's factor model serves a good example. The model clearly describes the processes of L1 acquisition, L2 learning, L3 learning and learning of the next language as consecutive stages showing the difference between each previous and following stage. Thus, it demonstrates that the groups of factors responsible for language learning and acquisition vary depending on whether the first, the second or the consecutive language is being learnt (Hufeisen 1998; Hufeisen and Marx 2007b). Another example comes from Gallardo del Puerto (2007) who reported that the acquisition of linguistic aspects in L3, in particular, phonological acquisition, does not follow the same route as the acquisition of

grammar or vocabulary of the third language. While acquiring the sounds of their tertiary language learners did not benefit from their bilingual proficiency in a significant way. Jessner (2008b) explicitly associates qualitative differences between L2 and L3 learning with the shift in norms language learners relate to:

Changes of quality between second and third language learning are based on the differences in norms that the language learners relate to, that is a bilingual norm in third language learning as opposed to a monolingual norm in second language learning. In addition, in most contexts, third language learning assumes that the learner has already gained experience in learning a first foreign language.

The second current development in the area of individual differences concerns the apparent emphasis on identity traits, both inborn and acquired through the societal circumstances a person finds himself/herself in. Among these factors are psychotypology (cf. Ó Laoire and Singleton 2009), emotions (cf. Dewaele 2005), affordances (cf. Singleton and Aronin 2007; Aronin and Singleton 2010b) and learner autonomy (cf. Little 2007). Language learner identity has become, in accordance with the current universal interest in identity, the point of departure for language teaching.

Aronin and Ó Laoire (2004) singled out the notion of *multilinguality* and defined it as “(...) a personal characteristic that can be described as an individual *store of languages* at any level of proficiency including partial competence—incomplete fluency as well as metalinguistic awareness, learning strategies, opinions and preferences and passive or active knowledge on languages, language use and language learning/acquisition” (Aronin and Ó Laoire 2004, pp. 17–18). Another definition of multilinguality by the same authors emphasizes that “multilinguality is a facet of a self, activated and expressed through language and language related phenomena, which influences the social and private life of an individual. Multilinguality is expressed through actions, perceptions, attitudes and abilities” (Aronin and Ó Laoire 2003). The identity of the contemporary language learner, his/her multilinguality in its multiple manifestations in the long run accounts for the speed, ease or difficulty and the outcome of second and consequent language acquisition.

The transition in attention from the monolingual perspective to the norm of using and mastering two or more languages led to increased appreciation of specific abilities exclusive to bi- and multilingual language users. One can note in this respect Baker’s (1993) concept of *communicative sensitivity*, characteristic of bilinguals (which may be extended to trilinguals) who navigate through complex pragmatic situations. However, the most unique and specific feature differentiating bi- and multilingual language users/learners from monolinguals is captured in the concept of multicompetence (Cook 1992, 1993, 1996).

Kecskés and Papp (2000a) proposed the notions of *Common Underlying Conceptual Base (CUCB)* and *multilingual Language Processing Device (LPD)* which, according to these authors, make the speaker multicompetent. Kecskés and Papp speak about individual variation in those who enjoy the affordance of multicompetence. They explain that crossing a proficiency threshold is the

prerequisite for developing CUCB: “If this threshold has not been reached, the learning of subsequent languages is merely an educational enhancement (...)” (Kecskés and Papp 2000b). Not only do monolinguals differ from bilinguals and those mastering their second language from those acquiring their third. In addition to the differentiation between monolinguals and multicompetent language users, the divergence between bilinguals and trilinguals is also under scrutiny.

Taking the idea of multicompetence further and looking at multicompetence from a psycholinguistic perspective, Cenoz and Genesee (1998, p. 19) state that “multilinguals possess a configuration of linguistic competencies that is distinct from that of monolinguals and bilinguals”. To close this section we wish to reiterate that multicompetence with its various interpretations deals with yet one additional dimension of language learner individual differences. As more concrete aspects of this quality of multilingual speakers crystallize it is becoming apparent that multicompetence comprises multiple dimensions going beyond those initially identified. The recognition of multicompetence as a crucially influential factor of language learning has practical implications since multicompetence approaches to language proficiency make a difference in multilingual education (Hufeisen and Neuner 2004; Jessner 2008b).

4 Conclusions

Globalization has shaped a new world of language practices and ideologies manifested in a distinctly new global linguistic dispensation, where constellations of languages rather than one single language are prerequisite for society’s functioning and progress on a world scale. The new linguistic dispensation, i.e. contemporary multilingualism, is characterized by special properties and developments. Singled out for theoretical purposes of understanding the contemporary global sociolinguistic settings, the properties of suffusiveness, complexity and liminality, and the developments of change of norms, emergence of new topics of importance, ambience of awareness, extreme malleability and expansion of affordances take effect jointly or each in cooperation with another or several others to make for the changes referred to in this article.

Alongside the continuing traditional inquiries into individual differences, the focus of interest in this area has moved towards the factors determined by recent global social changes. The new global linguistic dispensation has resulted in shifts in the domain of second language acquisition in general, and, in particular, has brought about an essential reconsideration of factors influencing individual variation in learning additional languages. In that context we have pointed to the increase and diversification of language learner populations, the limitless diversification and expansion of the factors deemed responsible for variety in the process and outcome of language learning and the appearance of new categories of determinants for language learning. Factors of individual variation that already enjoyed researchers’ attention are undergoing revision and reassessment as a result

of developments in contemporary sociolinguistic arrangements. More attention has been channeled to cross-linguistic influence, transfer of language knowledge, learning strategies and developing linguistic and metalinguistic awareness. Further, there is notable recognition of the interactions between L2 and L3/Ln rather than the unidirectional transfer from L1 to L2. Variables determined by identity of a learner receive particular attention and research into diverse identity-related factors is on the rise. Consequent re-assessment and restructuring of teaching and learning methods have taken place, finding their practical outcome in the development of the concepts of tertiary language didactics, plurilingualism didactics and language learning projects taking advantage of specific characteristics of multilingual learners.

To conclude, the new global linguistic dispensation has led to the recognition of additional factors impacting individual differences. This development has repercussions for language pedagogy. As new insights emerge further implications will require consideration.

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