



Multilingualism

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What is it?

Multilingualism (here used as a synonym to plurilingualism) refers to the capacity of humans to communicate in different languages, either individually or collectively. Depending on one's linguistic biography, one can be competent in more than one language. At the same time, societies can be composed by groups that use different languages. Both types of this phenomenon are increasingly common in today's world, and monolingualism (either individual or societal) now tends to be the exception rather than the norm. Linguists agree that there are approximately 6,500 languages spoken today, while there exist only 196 sovereign countries in the world.

Who uses the concept?

The term 'multilingualism' is appealing to scholars from many areas and disciplines. Being such a broad field, it can be studied from different angles, including: bilingualism and second language acquisition (how people become competent in more than one language during their lives); language and cognition (how language/s may have an impact on people's cognitive skills); and language in society (how to effectively manage and regulate the roles of different languages coexisting within a particular society). Not only academics have an interest in it, but also governments and organizations do. The European Union is a particularly relevant example.

Fit with intercultural dialogue?

Multilingual speakers can make use of their different linguistic resources for different purposes, most notably to (re)create different identities. Sometimes,

this mobilisation of their linguistic repertoire can produce a playful outcome; other times, the result of it may be not so positive, with the use of different languages enhancing group boundaries and barriers. In principle, the higher the shared knowledge between multilingual speakers, the lesser the probability of negative outcomes in multilingual encounters. Looked at from this stance, the concept of intercultural dialogue can benefit from incorporating multilingualism as a key component in the study of intercultural communication.

What work remains?

In the context of an increasingly diverse world, it is important to keep studying multilingualism from all points of view. Of crucial relevance is to continue investigating questions like how, when, and why speakers use particular languages and language varieties. The effects that this may have are not just relevant from a stylistic perspective. They can show differences in terms of speakers' relative position within their societies, indexing power struggles and inequalities.

Resources

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