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On The Benefits of Bilingualism

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Abstract: The first part of this paper examines the benefits of bilingualism as they relate to personal relationships, academic learning, and financial advantages in the workplace. It also examines the importance of affective and cognitive empathy, along with what is often called metalinguistic awareness. The second part of the paper addresses the benefits of bilingualism as they relate to advanced research and development in an academic or professional setting. The third part examines philosophical issues of translation raised by Martin Heidegger and Walter Benjamin.

Keywords: Bilingualism, Learning, Academic, Social, Financial.

Introduction

At first glance, the benefits of bilingualism are numerous. International students are already aware of the academic and financial advantages of learning a second or third language as part of their transferrable soft skills. They can communicate and collaborate with classmates and later on with fellow employees. In both examples, problem-solving, multi-tasking, and creative thinking become easier to master. One of the most significant advantages of bilingualism is a general sense of *empathy*, in particular, the ability to emotionally understand what other people feel, to see things from their point of view, and to imagine oneself in another person's place. *Affective* empathy, or the ability to respond appropriately to other people's emotions, is especially useful in a work environment, while *cognitive* empathy, or the ability to understand someone else's response to a situation, is particularly valuable in both academic and workplace environments (Wegner, 2023: sec. 3).

In Canada and elsewhere, students often come from bilingual homes and are already used to speaking to parents or grandparents in languages other than English. Once again, potential benefits include advanced linguistic, cognitive, and social-emotional skills. Studies have shown that children who learn multiple languages during the most critical years of brain development are more likely to show proficiency in various areas (SWHD, 2017). Their brains are more active and flexible, which results in stronger *thinking* skills and a heightened awareness of one's own *language* skills. Bilingualism also helps children to maintain strong ties with their extended family, culture, and community (Zelasko and Antunez, 2000). All of these advantages are key aspects of a child's developing identity, empathy, and tolerance toward new ideas.

But what are the educational benefits of bilingualism for Canadian students, especially as it relates to academic research? We mentioned above that bilingualism increases affective and cognitive empathy toward others. It also increases the capacity for creative thinking and comprehensive skills. Bilingualism increases awareness of one's own language skills regarding *pragmatics* (i.e., the study of language as it relates to the social and historical context of meaningful utterances) and *semantics* (i.e., the branch of linguistics that deals primarily with the creation of meaning). Granted, language is *symbolic* and thus arbitrary, ambiguous, and abstract. Attention to these aspects is called *metalinguistic awareness*, which is the ability to *consciously* reflect on the arbitrary and ambiguous nature of language. Like a gifted poet, the bilingual writer-thinker uses this awareness to carefully select and organize the *necessary* terms required to overcome the inherent ambiguity of language. But they also acknowledge the revised meaning that may result from the newly manipulated language (Bialystok and Ryan, 1985).

A metalinguistic awareness consciously reflects upon language in four different ways. First, it understands that language always has the potential to overload the *literal* meaning of a single term or phrase with multiple or implied meanings. Second, it recognizes that a word can be unmoored from its referent. Depending on the semantic field, a term can resonate with multiple poetic meanings and yet remain intentionally detached from all immediate references to the known world. "What is poetry if not the revolutionary moment of language," asked Guy Debord, the one-time director of the Situationist International, "inseparable as such from the revolutionary moments of history and from the history of personal life?" (Debord, 2006: 150). Third, it identifies the possibility that, through the use of irony, sarcasm, and poetic word games, language can once again become fluid and flexible. Fourth and last, it acknowledges that the syntactical structure of language is open to manipulation and re-ordering.

Bilingual students who develop a metalinguistic awareness recognize the *subjective* relationship between words and their meanings, as well as that of syntax and semantics (Peal and Lambert, 1962). Metalinguistic awareness acknowledges that language is malleable and open to linguistic substitution (Barac and Bialystok, 2012). But where can a bilingual student benefit from exercising such an awareness in an academic or professional setting? In what context can this ability be most useful? The answer to both questions is research and development, specifically, the acquisition of research materials in languages other than English. Depending on the nature of the research project, a second language may be indispensable. The following is a list of advantages bilingual students have regarding research and development.

First of all, given the benefits associated with the skill set we have just described, bilingual students have access to a much larger informational database with which to conduct their research. One of the truly revolutionary aspects of web-based research is the almost dizzying number of peer-reviewed essays and articles written in a variety of languages that are available to students. The online international library known as "Project Gutenberg" is a remarkable collection of multilingual and culturally significant texts dating back to the 1600s. Granted, college students typically do not write dissertation-length reports that require primary or even secondary sources in a language other than English. But, depending on the task at hand, having a reading knowledge of a *secondary* language, along with a metalinguistic awareness of one's own *primary* language, allows students to compare the accuracy of a translation with the original text. (Eco, 2015: 23). Moreover, bilingual students may find it easier to paraphrase or write brief summaries of entire chapters or essays because they are able to use their metalinguistic awareness to identify the *intrinsic* meaning of a given statement rather than having to struggle blindly in substituting one term for another.

But what if relying exclusively on English-only sources is not an option and students *have* to engage with untranslated materials? What if the

research project requires that we search for materials in a language other than English? In *How to Write a Thesis* (1977), Umberto Eco lists three reasons why students cannot adequately research a foreign author if they are unable to read their texts in the original language (Eco, 2015: 23). The first reason is that not all of the author's works may be available in translation. For example, Anna Cancogni's English translation of Eco's *Opera Aperta* (*The Open Work*, 1962) is missing the introductory essay to the first and second Italian editions along with the last three chapters. The French translation by Chantal Roux de Bézieux contains a truncated and incorrectly titled "*Préface*" that runs three-and-a-half pages; the "*Préface*" is actually an abridged version of a 28-page "*Introduzione*" to the 1967 edition.

A lack of proper translations and/or unacknowledged abridgements not only compromises our understanding of the author's *intellectual* development but it also ignores the author's *critical* self-awareness. How can we become aware of this critical development, which is usually addressed in a preface, if the only texts available in English are those from an earlier period in their development? We are doing the author(s) a great disservice if we only access sources that are available in our own language. A *direct* source is always a text written in the author's own language. Thus, a translation is not a *direct* source but a *secondary* reflection on that source. "[Translation] is a means by which I *gain access*," writes Eco, "to something that lies outside my range" (Eco 2015: 23, my emphasis). In the original Italian, Eco uses the transitive verb "*raggiungere*" to suggest that the English translation merely allows us "to arrive at," "to get to" the author's thought rather than fully engage in a comprehension of their work (Note 1).

Second, there may be secondary sources listed in the author's own bibliography that only appear in the author's original language. How do we know whether the most influential critical commentary on an author's work is written in a language that we can understand? If we cannot answer that question, then we can neither conduct proper research nor adequately write an essay on a topic in which most of the secondary sources and commentaries are in a language we cannot read. Moreover, we also need to consider that, although the critical literature often cites from *primary* sources, citations are nonetheless *indirect* sources. They are still *translations*. We have no way of knowing whether the citation used in the secondary critical literature has been properly translated. With that in mind, Eco warns readers that we should *never* rely on an indirect quote taken from a secondary source and pretend that we have read the original. At the very least, we need to warn the reader that that is the case.

Third, and perhaps the most important reason why a second language is indispensable when conducting research, is that the translation may not always do justice to an author's original thoughts, either through falsification brought about by an inferior translation or by vulgarizations of various kinds. Examples of falsified or inferior translations are plentiful. For example, the 1978 English translation by Edmund Jephcott of Walter

Benjamin's essay on surrealism incorrectly translates the German verb "*gesprengt*" as "explored" rather than "exploded" (Benjamin 1978: 178) ((Note 2). The verb "*Sprengen*" means "to blow up," "to explode." Jephcott's incorrect translation places Benjamin's view regarding the *explosive* nature of early 20th century surrealist poetry in a completely different light. The English translation is not only softer but patently false.

The translation and abridgement issues that I have pointed out regarding Eco's *Opera Aperta* are not uncommon. For example, it took until 2011 for the English-speaking world to finally have access to a newly translated and *unabridged* version of Simone de Beauvoir's *La deuxième sexe* (*The Second Sex,* 1949). The previous 1953 version may have been translated by Howard M. Parshley because he had an expertise in genetics, reproduction, and human sexuality, but he also heavily edited certain passages to minimize and/or completely remove the existentialist arguments that Beauvoir was trying to make regarding the Western notion of "Woman." Other English translations of French texts written by female writers have fared only slightly better. The 1985 English translation by Margaret Waller of Julia Kristeva's *La revolution du langage poétique* (*Revolution in Poetic Language,* 1974) is actually an abridged translation that contains only the first third of the original 644-page French text. English-only readers have access neither to Kristeva's comprehensive bibliography, nor to her attempts in the last third of the text (i.e., *Furieux d'intelligence,* ["Furious Intelligence"]) to develop in a bourgeois social setting her highly idiosyncratic and semiotic reading of 19th century Symbolist poetry.

In his book *Signs* (1960), Maurice Merleau-Ponty argues that language truly *means* only when, instead of rigidly copying the products of thought itself, it allows itself to be undone and remade by a continual *exchange* between *thinking* and *speaking*. What Merleau-Ponty is describing here is not unlike a metalinguistic awareness, namely, an *inherent* understanding of the arbitrary and ambiguous *nature* of language. He argues that we must always try to maintain a dialectical relationship between thought (i.e., the result of a pure act of thinking), and the final metaphoric translation that these thoughts take. One of the benefits of having a *second* language is the ability to *view* language from the other side, that is, to understand how and if words and their meanings are comprehensively linked together to properly convey a thought.

In the end, speech, or that which truly *signifies* as discourse, and that which truly *frees* meaning still trapped in the thing, is, from an empirical point of view, what Merleau-Ponty calls "*les fils de silence*" (Merleau-Ponty, 1960: 48). "We must uncover the threads of silence," he writes, "that speech is mixed together with" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 46). While Merleau-Ponty is referring to a general use of language, this encounter is brought into stark relief when we encounter the silences of a foreign language. When we encounter a text that is not written in English, we tend to "translate" it into our own familiar tongue and then "interpret" its semantic content. When done properly, these two intellectual acts result in a more profound

understanding of the creation of meaning in terms of individual words, terms, or phrases. A metalinguistic awareness of language allows us to identify the "threads of silence" that are not so easily translatable. Certain words or phrases will continue to resonate with multiple meanings that remain intentionally detached from all immediate references (i.e., connotations).

From a critical point of view, a metalinguistic awareness allows us to detect the creeping insidiousness of the languages of manufacturing, technology, and advertising into everyday life. The overabundance that we face today of inauthentic jargon and advertising phrases clouds our mind and stops us from thinking critically. Moreover, translation work becomes even more difficult. Although the multiple meanings of words may resist control by their speakers, the oppressive languages of advertising and pop culture actually deny our ability to speak *properly and authentically* with one another. The dominant forces that act upon our common language reflect the dominant organization of social life. They do not represent a desire to interfere with the inherent arbitrary and ambiguous nature of language; on the contrary, they represent a concerted effort to not only *minimize* the ambiguity of social life but to do so by intentionally reducing the ambiguous nature of language (Debord, 2006).

As Martin Heidegger points out, "to undergo an experience with language, then, means to let ourselves be properly concerned by the claim of language by entering into and submitting to it" (1971a: 57). To experience language as "the house of Being" ("*das Haus des Seins*") is to enter into its ambiguous nature (Heidegger 1971a: 63) (Note 3). The original German phrase is worth considering for a few moments. Heidegger literally writes "*Mit der Sprache eine Erfahrung machen heißt dann: uns vom Anspruch der Sprache eigens angehen lassen*" ("Having an experience with language then means allowing ourselves to be *approached specifically by the demands of the language* by responding to it and submitting to it") (Note 4). *We* must deduce what language *demands* of us and what the inherent ambiguity of words and phrases actually *signify*.

Using our metalinguistic awareness, we allow ourselves to be *approached* by the demands of language in order to be transformed by the *dialectical* experience of thinking, deciphering, and translating. We enter *into* a dialogue with the particular demands of language. It is also an experience that we undergo *with* language (Heidegger 1971a: 59). It is worth noting that the German title of Heidegger's essay is *Der Wesen der Sprache*, or the *essence* of language. The difference between "essence" and "nature" refers to the *materiality* of language. While the *essence* of language refers to its most important characteristics, they tend to be *intangible*. Language is intangible because it is primarily *symbolic* and *metaphoric* and, thus, arbitrary and ambiguous. The *nature* of language, on the other hand, describes characteristics that are more tangible. Ultimately, the materiality of language refers to the ability of individuals to communicate *authentically* with one another in social situations.

Earlier, we mentioned Merleau-Ponty's view of the dialectical relationship between thought, thinking, and speech, and how having an awareness of this relationship helps us to heighten our metalinguistic awareness. The arbitrary and ambiguous nature of language described by Merleau-Ponty recalls Walter Benjamin's ephemeral notion of a "supra-historical kinship ["*überhistorische Verwandtschaft*"] of languages" that lies beyond the historical process of time (Benjamin 1973: 74) (Note 5). In "The Task of the Translator" (1921/23), Benjamin presents a provocative argument that views the act of translation as sometimes *essential* to certain works. This does not mean that translation is essential in and of itself, but that a deeper significance lies within the original text that can only be expressed through its *translatability*.

Benjamin argues that through the act of translation the original text ascends to a *higher* linguistic realm. To translate a text into another language is to glimpse the "hitherto inaccessible realm of reconciliation and fulfilment of language [*Versöhnungs und Erfüllungsbereich der Sprachen*]" (Benjamin, 1973: 75) (Note 6). What is allowed to move briefly into this inaccessible realm of fulfilment is the element in a translation which exceeds the transmittal of a given subject matter. The original text contains something on a connotative level that transcends mere communication. This essential core can be defined as that which in itself is not translatable (the threads of silence?). Even if we extract as much information from the text as we can and translate it, what remains untouchable is what the true translator's work aims at. What remains untouchable is not transferable into another language because the relationship between words and their meanings is completely different in the original and in the translation.

Benjamin believes that "all supra-historical kinship of languages rests in the *intention* ("*Intentionen*") underlying each language as a whole" (Benjamin 1973: 74, my emphasis) (Note 7). Yet, intention cannot be grasped in or through a single language; instead, it is the result of a complementary relationship between *all* languages. But what does language *intend* – to communicate? to signify? to convey meaning? At its core, language intends to communicate in whatever tongue we use. Whether we use the term "*une pomme*," "*una mela*," or "*un apfel*," we still intend to describe an "apple." The difference is not the object but the linguistic mode in which we intend to describe it.

Intentionality relates to the capacity of our mind to refer to different objects or to a state of affairs. Perhaps this was the interpretation Benjamin anticipated when he wrote that the complementary relationship that exists *between* languages can be brought into being "by the totality of their intentions supplementing each other: pure language ["*die reine Sprache*"]" (Benjamin, 1973: 74) (Note 8). Meaning is never found in a *relative independence* to words; instead, it remains "in a constant state of flux" until it can emerge as a pure language that *harmonizes* all the other linguistic modes together (Benjamin, 1973: 74). The notion of a "pure language" that is accessible *only* through the act of translation recalls Merleau-Ponty's

distinction of the pure act of thinking and its "translation" into a linguistic statement. It also recalls Friedrich Nietzsche's belief that language-as-metaphor allows for the creative transfer of meaning, namely, the physiological transformation of a nerve stimulus in the brain into a mental image, then into a word; and finally, a term completely detached from its original mental setting (Nietzsche 1979). In each example, what philosophers are describing is still a form of metalinguistic awareness.

To conclude, we identified a metalinguistic awareness as something that bilingual and multilingual speakers possess that allows them to comprehend the metaphysical views of language that are evident in the works of Benjamin, Merleau-Ponty, and Nietzsche. As George Steiner points out in his book *After Babel* (1975), Benjamin's view of language, specifically, the question of discovering a pure or universal language, is "Kabbalistic" (Steiner 1975: 63). This is an important distinction that helps us to understand Benjamin's view of the possibility and *impossibility* of translation. Jewish Kabbalism is a set of esoteric teachings regarding the Old Testament. More importantly, it is used by Benjamin to explore the relationship between an ahistorical, pre-Babel pure language and the mortal, fragmented, and finite global languages through which this pure language seeks to express itself. At the messianic end of history, or what is known as "messianic times," followers of the Kabbalah such as Benjamin believe that individual languages will re-unify into a pure, eternal language. Because of this sacred relationship, Steiner argues that "translation has a task of profound philosophical, ethical, and magical import." (Steiner 1975: 64).

Translators engaged in *less* profound philosophical tasks still need to maintain a metalinguistic awareness in order to *critically* reflect on the ambiguous nature of language. As we have seen, one of the advantages of bilingualism is a heightened understanding of pragmatics and semantics. Still, translators *not* engaged in esoteric teachings or *exegesis* (i.e., the critical interpretation of either religious or non-religious texts) still need to maintain affective and cognitive empathy, along with an openness to new ideas. It is only *through* language that we can access new ideas and new ways of thinking. We act as if we are the shapers of language when in fact it is language that shapes us (Heidegger 1971b: 144).

Note 1: Eco, Umberto (1977/2001). *Come si fa una tesi di laurea: le materie umanistiche*. Milano: Bompiani/RCS Libri S.p.A., 62.

Note 2: Benjamin, W. (1928), para. 7.

Note 3: Heidegger, M. (1959/85). *Gesamtausgabe 1. Abteilung: Veröffentlichte Schriften 1910-1976, Band 12 Unterwegs zur Sprache*. Frankfurt Am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 156.

Note 4: Ibid., 149, my emphasis.

Note 5: Benjamin, W. (1972). “Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers” in *Gesammelte Schriften* (Bd. IV/1). Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 13.

Note 6: Benjamin, W. (1972), 15.

Note 7: Benjamin, W. (1972), 13.

Note 8: Benjamin, W. (1972), 13.

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