Introducing multilingualism: A social approach

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This textbook is aimed at undergraduates or at post-graduates without background in multilingualism. Main topics are the equality of all speech varieties and its consequences for education programmes, the interplay of individual and societal multilingualism and the analysis of political texts on multilingualism. Each chapter includes discussion questions, suggestions for project work and a reading list sorted by topic.

Chapters 1 and 2 provide a general introduction and describe the theoretical and methodological framework of the book. One of the main messages is that languages are not discrete countable units. Therefore multilingualism is conceived as a repertoire of different speech varieties, styles, registers, attitudes and norms on language choice (Blommaert 2010:102) that blend into each other. Therefore the distinction between languages is not so much based on linguistic factors, but on socio-political realities. This is illustrated with the example of Hindi and Urdu, which are linguistically very similar, but their speakers have a different religious affiliation and live in different countries. The theoretical and methodological framework of the book builds on the construction of meaning and therefore emphasizes ethnographic research in the study of multilingualism. As meaning is not absolute but depends on the context, so discourse analysis must be conducted with an understanding of the cultural, historical and social background of the speakers.

Chapters 3 to 5 deal with multilingualism within and across languages. The authors develop their position of language as a continuum of varieties further and illustrate the point with examples from India, Italy and Papua New Guinea. Consequently, in teaching they suggest adopting an additive bilingual approach: students who speak a non-standard variety at home should be encouraged to use it at school as well. At the same time the goal is high proficiency in a standard variety. In research, this definition of language leads to re-defining terms like multilingualism, mother tongue and endangerment which all imply that languages can be counted. Within a language, variation occurs over time and in space. For instance, today's English is not the same as the English of Chaucer. And today's English in Great Britain is not the same as English elsewhere. The relationship between African American English, Caribbean nation language and Singlish and standard English in the respective political context can be described with Pennycooke's
frameworks (2000; 2001). Depending on whether the focus is on the global language as a resource or on linguistic rights highlighting the value of the mother tongue, education programmes will promote one or the other. The most progressive framework incorporates a continuous definition of language and therefore a more flexible approach which allows for a combination of languages. Across languages, revitalization projects aim to maintain linguistic diversity. Conditions for successful revitalization, costs and issues of standardisation are illustrated with case studies from New Zealand, Norway, Israel and France. Furthermore, the authors demonstrate how the status change of Luxembourgish from speech variety to official language resulted in Luxembourgish being perceived as endangered.

In chapters 6 to 8 societal and individual multilingualism and their interplay are explored. Societies are not either monolingual or multilingual, but rather more or less multilingual. Case studies from multilingual countries like Ukraine, Switzerland, Singapore, Hong Kong, South Africa and Nigeria illustrate how political events influence the acceptance of multilingualism in a society. Individual multilingualism forms part of a person's identity and provides means to express it. The authors describe concepts of identity as being either essentialist or social-constructivist. The essentialist view sees the identity of a person as static at least at the core, while in the social-constructivist view the person re-invents her identity in dynamic processes. For the construction of identity, a multilingual individual can use different linguistic strategies such as code-switching, stylisation and language crossing. Thus, the interplay between individual and societal multilingualism is ambiguous. Individual multilingualism is seen as an asset whereas societal multilingualism is often viewed as problematic. This is particularly true for societies in which speakers of minority languages are expected to assimilate to a perceived mainstream culture. The resulting language policies may lead to the marginalisation of parts of the population.

Chapters 9 to 11 deal with fixed versus flexible models of multilingual education, mother tongue education and heritage language education. Fixed models of multilingual education have a fixed set of languages as medium of instruction and taught subjects. Flexible models allow for different combinations which cater for the needs of an increasingly multilingual population and the rising importance of English. The authors favour the flexible approach, though they don't comment on the costs and challenges of this model. Mother tongue education is conducted in the dominant or first language of the speakers. It becomes problematic if the so-called mother tongue is only one of many languages the students speak, and if the programme excludes the other varieties. The case study from South Africa illustrates how mother tongue education prevented adequate access to English and excluded students from quality education. The heritage language symbolises the ethnic origin and identity of a person, but is not necessarily spoken any more. In that case the main motivation for an education programme is the revitalization of the heritage language and the transmission of cultural values. For both scenarios the authors propose flexible bi-literacy programmes with literacy bridges: the students develop literacy skills in the language(s) that they actually speak. These can then serve as a bridge to literacy in standard, official or heritage languages.

Chapters 12 to 14 analyse political texts and letters to a newspaper on the topics of integration, multilingualism and linguistic landscapes. Discourses on integration use the metaphors of centre-periphery, game and mathematical graph that communicate that the immigrant constitutes
a problem that is difficult and time-consuming to overcome. In contrast, the statistical correlations view holds that a society is integrated when all members have equal access to education and the job market. These metaphors differ in their definition of integration and who the agent is. Discourses on multilingualism construct multilingualism as a deficiency of the speakers and as a burden on society, as seen in examples from Luxembourg, the UK and the US. The dominant language and culture are portrayed as superior and sometimes under threat from the minority language, revealing the underlying ideology of *one nation – one language*. The analysis of linguistic landscapes moves from written texts to multi-modal language use in public spaces. Aspects of the analysis include language choice and function (instrumental or symbolic), details of design and production, location and reception. For a better understanding of the context and impact of the signs it is important to go beyond a quantitative analysis and include the historical and ethnographic background.

In their conclusion (chapter 15) the authors point out four areas of future research and summarize the main points of the book. Further investigation is needed in the interplay of multilingualism and sign languages, the assessment of multilingual students, gender and institutional settings. The main message of the book is that individual multilingualism should be seen as the norm rather than as an exception. All varieties are equally valid means of communication. Therefore they should figure in education programmes so that students can profit from their full linguistic repertoires and have greater chances of educational success.

The ideas presented in this book have applications for language development projects in that they help to clarify underlying ideologies and motivations and challenge project planning. Underlying motivations can be revealed when applying Pennycook’s framework (2000; 2001) to a particular situation. Likewise, the distinction between *mother tongue* and *heritage language* raises the question what the motivations for an education programme are. The authors promote the students’ actual vernacular linguistic repertoire as the starting point for any education project with the goal of proficiency in a standard variety. The approach is a flexible additive education model, using the actual repertoire of the students as a bridge to literacy in other varieties. In contexts of high variation the authors propose the polynomial approach with flexible spelling rules for different dialects. At the same time they present standardisation as a negative intentional prescriptive activity (Weber and Horner 2012:40). Therefore, they do not address how to deal with variation in the development of an orthography. However, the authors' position highlights the need for good collaboration of the stakeholders.

**Evaluation:**

Though written while teaching at an English university, this book can be used as a textbook in non-European contexts. Many of the examples are from Europe or feature English as a global language, but there are also some from Africa, Asia and francophone contexts. A strong point are the quizzes, discussion points and practical projects that invite the reader to dig deeper. An up-to-date reading list at the end of each chapter is a helpful resource for the project work and for further reading. The instructor may want to adapt the examples to the local situation. He might also need to provide the journal articles in settings with limited access to a library or the internet. While I appreciate the very up-to-date material, I would have liked some more references to foundational authors of the discipline. Also, it would have been good to have a complete list of
references at the end of the book. Another strong point is the emphasis on language as a continuum of varieties, the equality of speech varieties and the consequences for education projects. The presentation of topics such as mother tongue education or underlying frameworks is rather one-sided and reveals that the authors feel strongly about flexible education models and the ownership of stakeholders in language development. In these cases the instructor will need to discuss definitions and underlying assumptions to help the student find his own position. Overall, it is a challenging workbook.

References


