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# BILINGUALISM: A DESCRIPTIVE REVIEW OF DEFINITIONS, TYPES, AND SOCIOLINGUISTIC DIMENSIONS

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## ABSTRACT

*Bilingualism is a complex phenomenon exhibited by human beings in various contexts around the world. Despite the increasing number of bilingual individuals in the world today as a result of migration, displacement, and armed conflicts, there is a lack of consensus and clarity regarding the definitions of bilingualism and how to classify bilingual individuals within linguistic literature. Bilingualism can be examined from a variety of different perspectives, all of which contribute to a well-rounded understanding of the phenomenon. Such a discussion will include a review of the definitions of bilingualism, the reasons for being bilingual, the different types of bilingualism, the advantages and disadvantages of being bilingual, and the factors that influence the acquisition of bilingualism, all within the context of multilingual societies like Saudi Arabia, the USA, and Canada. A narrative review of the existing literature on bilingualism in areas such as diglossia, code-switching, gender differences in bilingualism, the neurological aspects of bilingualism, and second language acquisition can reveal the many variables that influence bilingualism and how bilingual individuals can be categorized according to these variables. As a result, bilingualism exhibits numerous advantages to those who are bilingual, yet also includes some disadvantages to the individuals who have to navigate being bilingual. The findings of such a research project will contribute to the existing knowledge of researchers, language planners, educationists, and linguists, yet also lead to further research in this growing area of study in relation to the many human and linguistic communities across the world.*

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**KEYWORDS:** Bilingualism, Simultaneous, Consecutive, Balanced, Dominant, Cognitive, Code-Switching.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Bilingualism is no longer the exception. Across the globe, more than half the world's population is estimated to operate in two or more languages on a daily basis (Grosjean, 2010), a figure that continues to rise as migration, globalization, and geopolitical displacement reshape linguistic communities. In contexts as diverse as Saudi Arabia, Canada, and the United States, contact between languages is not incidental but structural – embedded in households, education systems, workplaces, and policy frameworks alike.

Yet even within the scholarship on the topic, there appears to be some disparity in the definitions of the term. For instance, Bloomfield (1933) proposed one of the more stringent definitions of the term, requiring that bilingual individuals exhibit native-like command of two languages. In contrast, Haugen (1953) proposed a different standard for the definition of bilingualism that permitted for speakers of a second language to exhibit such command even in the early stages of language acquisition. Furthermore, there are various classifications of bilingual individuals, such as distinguishing between simultaneous (exposure to two languages from birth) versus consecutive (exposure to a second language after the acquisition of a first language), balanced (ability to equally command each language) versus dominant (proficiency in one language versus the other), and early versus late acquisition of a second language (Baker, 2011; Romaine, 2017). Related to language acquisition is the cognitive and social aspects of bilingualism, which have been discussed by scholars across various disciplines (Krashen, 1982; Fromkin *et al.*, 2014). As a result, integrating these separate discussions of the topic can be challenging for individuals new to the field and those attempting to apply these concepts to other countries.

The fragmentation of knowledge about bilingualism produces difficulties for those seeking to learn about the topic in detail. There are few integrative reviews available on the topic of bilingualism (Wei, 2000).

This paper aims to review the literature on bilingualism to provide an overarching discussion of the topic. Such a review will discuss the definitions of bilingualism, the reasons for the spread of bilingualism, the advantages and disadvantages of being bilingual, and the factors that influence whether individuals become bilingual. Additionally, the review will focus on societies that are often multilingual, such as Saudi Arabia, the United States, and Canada. Overall, this paper will be of value to

students of linguistics, researchers, educators, and those involved in language planning.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. *Definitions Of Bilingualism*

Defining bilingualism is not a settled matter. The criteria for determining who qualifies as bilingual ranges from very strict to permissive. Bloomfield (1933) stated that to be bilingual, an individual must exhibit native-like control of two languages. This standard would, therefore, exclude the majority of bilingual individuals. At the other extreme, Haugen (1953) stated that bilingual individuals are those who are fluent in one language and who can produce complete sentences in another language. This standard would include individuals who are still learning a second language (Wei, 2000).

Bilingualism is also defined as the ability of an individual to use two languages in their daily life (Baker, 2011). Fromkin *et al.* (2014) differentiate between bilingual language acquisition (acquiring two languages simultaneously from infancy) and second language acquisition (acquiring a second language after the first has been established). The outcomes of learning a second language simultaneously are not the same as learning a second language sequentially (De Houwer, 1990).

Bilingualism can be acquired at any point in an individual's lifespan. Bilingualism can be acquired as a child in a household where the parents speak different languages. An individual can also become bilingual through education or through exposure to another language community. Regardless of the way in which an individual became bilingual, all bilingual individuals exhibit some degree of proficiency in the use of two languages (Grosjean, 2010). According to Grosjean (2010; Wei, 2000), it is estimated that more than 50% of all individuals in the world are bilingual in this functional way of defining bilingualism.

### 2.2. *Reasons For the Spread of Bilingualism*

Bilingualism results from a variety of social, political, economic, and demographic forces. Movements of individuals into new environments (whether voluntary or involuntary) results in the acquisition of a second language (Wei, 2000). Many of these movements are the result of armed conflicts throughout the world, leading to the displacement of individuals who must learn languages other than their own to live within their new homes.

Economic and professional motivations for learning a second language are also significant drivers of bilingualism. Many individuals learn second languages as a means of increasing their

career opportunities, especially with the availability of higher education in languages other than their own (Baker, 2011; Romaine, 2017). In many communities, there exist relationships between certain languages that associate one language with prestige over others (often due to issues related to ethnicity, religion, and social interaction with individuals who speak other languages). Furthermore, many communities exhibit phenomena known as diglossia, wherein there are two varieties of a language within a community and certain functions utilize one language variety while others utilize the other; bilingualism within these communities is nearly inevitable (Ferguson, 1959). Other factors that contribute to the bilingualism within certain groups include social class and gender; while some studies suggest that women learn second languages differently from men, the extent to which this occurs in any given society and for any given reason varies considerably (Pavlenko, 2005).

Saudi Arabia simultaneously exhibits many of the factors that contribute to bilingualism. For instance, the influx of expatriates into the Kingdom requires that those individuals learn Arabic. Saudis who live within the Kingdom are required to learn Arabic as a language of commerce, education, and professional life. As a result, English is the most widely studied second language among Saudis, as bilingualism and code-switching are common within the Kingdom (Myers-Scott, 1993). Additionally, many of the policies created by the Saudi Arabian government also lead to bilingualism within the nation.

### **2.3. Types And Classifications of Bilingualism**

The literature offers several overlapping typologies of bilingualism, organized around mode of acquisition, age of onset, and relative proficiency.

Classified by mode of acquisition, bilingualism is described as either simultaneous or consecutive. In simultaneous bilingualism, both languages are acquired concurrently from birth or early infancy, typically in households where each parent speaks a different language, a pattern found across multilingual communities in Saudi Arabia, the United States, and beyond (De Houwer, 1990). In consecutive bilingualism, one language is established first as the primary linguistic system before meaningful exposure to a second language begins (Fromkin et al., 2014).

Age of onset provides a second dimension. Early bilingualism refers to acquisition of both languages during childhood, whether simultaneously or in close sequence. Late bilingualism occurs when the second language is acquired after approximately age

six or seven, once the first language is already established (Lenneberg, 1967). The cognitive and phonological outcomes of early and late bilingualism differ in documented ways, with earlier onset generally associated with higher levels of phonological accuracy in the second language (Bialystok, 2001).

A third typology concerns relative proficiency. Balanced bilingualism describes individuals whose competence across both languages is broadly equivalent, more an idealized endpoint than a common outcome (Baker, 2011). Dominant or unbalanced bilingualism, by contrast, refers to cases in which one language is substantially stronger than the other, the most prevalent bilingual profile globally (Wei, 2000). Semi-bilingualism describes limited proficiency in both languages, a pattern sometimes observed in children of recently migrated families whose exposure to both languages has been interrupted or uneven (Baker, 2011). These profiles are not fixed, as an individual's bilingual balance may shift over time in response to changes in environment, education, and patterns of language use (Grosjean, 2010). To illustrate the range of bilingual societies, English and French function as co-official languages in Canada, while in the Philippines, Filipino and English serve as the national languages of instruction and public life.

### **2.4. Advantages And Disadvantages of Bilingualism**

#### **2.4.1. Advantages**

The advantages of bilingualism include communicative, cognitive, professional, and cultural advantages. The ability to communicate in two languages increases the range of interactions that an individual can have with others (Baker, 2011).

Studies have investigated the cognitive advantages of being bilingual. Bilingual individuals have advantages in executive functions, such as attention and problem-solving skills, as compared to monolingual individuals (Bialystok, 2001). Furthermore, bilingual individuals have increased metalinguistic awareness of language in general (Bialystok, 2001).

Many professions require bilingual individuals due to the need to communicate with individuals from other languages and cultures in their profession (Wei, 2000). Additionally, bilingual individuals have increased opportunities for careers in education, diplomacy, translation, the business world, and healthcare (Wei, 2000). Finally, bilingual individuals have the ability to interact with various cultures and communities, increasing their feeling of belonging to

those groups (Pavlenko, 2005). Furthermore, bilingual individuals exhibit sensitivities to others' needs that are stronger than monolingual individuals (Grosjean, 2010).

#### **2.4.2. Disadvantages**

These disadvantages are real disadvantages but exist on a tendency basis. For instance, linguistic interference can detrimentally impact the accuracy of bilinguals when speaking and may impact the language acquisition of young children who are bilingual (Krashen, 1982). Bilingual people may have smaller vocabularies in each individual language compared to monolingual people with the same education levels but have larger vocabularies in total when considering both languages spoken (Bialystok, 2001).

Code switching may be seen negatively by those who are monolingual or linguistically diverse (in terms of other languages they speak) as it could imply that the bilingual speaker does not have command of the language they are speaking (Myers-Scotton, 1993). Thus, despite the fact that bilingual individuals may have disadvantages in some areas, these areas do represent disadvantages for the bilingual population.

#### **2.5. Factors Affecting Bilingual Acquisition**

Several interacting factors govern the course and outcome of bilingual acquisition. The first is the mode of acquisition: native bilingualism, in which the child is immersed in two languages from birth, produces different developmental trajectories than tutored acquisition in formal instructional settings (De Houwer, 1990). The second is the nature and extent of exposure, whether naturalistic or instructed, and the third is the duration of that exposure over time (Krashen, 1982). Fourth, frequency of use in both languages is a critical maintenance factor, as a language that is not regularly activated is subject to attrition (Grosjean, 2010). Fifth, dominance effects, where the stronger language interferes with or suppresses development of the weaker, can constrain balanced acquisition (Baker, 2011). Sixth, psychological variables including motivation, attitude toward the target language community, and anxiety all modulate the rate and depth of acquisition (Krashen, 1982).

At the developmental level, Volterra and Taeschner (1978) proposed a three-stage model of bilingual language development in children. In the first stage, the child maintains a single lexical system drawing on both languages. In the second, lexical systems begin to differentiate while a unified

syntactic system is retained. In the third, both lexical and grammatical systems separate into two fully distinct linguistic systems. The language mixing observed in young bilinguals, rather than indicating confusion, reflects heightened sensitivity to the linguistic behavior of the surrounding environment (De Houwer, 1990).

Two theoretical models have shaped understandings of bilingual cognitive organization (Paradis, 2004). Cummins' (2000) Separate Underlying Proficiency model (SUP) holds that the brain has limited capacity to accommodate more than one language and that growth in one comes at the cost of the other, a position known as the Balance Theory. By contrast, his Common Underlying Proficiency model (CUP) proposes that languages share a common cognitive substrate, such that concepts and skills acquired in one language are available to the other without requiring relearning. The CUP model carries broader empirical support and underpins much contemporary thinking about additive bilingualism and multilingual education policy (Cummins, 2000).

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

The approach that was taken in reviewing the literature on bilingualism is that of a narrative review. A narrative review was chosen over a systematic review and meta-analysis of the literature due to the goals of the research study: to review the literature on bilingualism with the goal of gaining an understanding of the concept of bilingualism itself. A narrative review is a well-established research methodology within the field of applied linguistics (Norris and Ortega, 2000; Mackey and Gass, 2005).

Each of the databases that were searched included Google Scholar, JSTOR, ERIC, and Linguistics and Language Behavior Abstracts (LLBA). Each of these databases contain scholarly research publishers across a variety of different fields. Search terms that were used included terms related to the concepts of bilingualism, second language acquisition, bilingual language development, code-switching, diglossia, simultaneous bilingualism, consecutive bilingualism, and bilingual education. These terms were used both separately and in various combinations within each of the databases. The databases were searched in their entirety, without date restriction, as several of the foundational research studies on the topic of bilingualism (such as Bloomfield (1933) and Haugen (1953)) were published prior to the availability of digital databases.

Included studies had to be peer-reviewed journal

articles, book chapters, or monographs on the topic of bilingualism, and published in English. Additionally, the studies had to be directly related to the fields of bilingualism as defined within this paper. Any articles related to other areas of language learning were excluded from the research study. Thus, twenty primary studies were utilized within this literature review.

Retained sources were analyzed thematically. Each source was read in full and coded according to the thematic categories organizing the review: definitions of bilingualism, reasons for its spread, typological classifications, cognitive and social advantages and disadvantages, and factors affecting acquisition. Codes were reviewed iteratively to ensure consistency, and findings were synthesized discursively within each thematic section rather than tabulated, in keeping with the narrative review format.

This approach carries acknowledged limitations. Unlike a systematic review, a narrative review does not follow a pre-registered protocol, and source selection may reflect the author's disciplinary perspective. The corpus, while representative of the foundational literature, was not exhaustive; more recent empirical contributions, particularly on dynamic bilingualism, translanguaging, and heritage language contexts, were not within the scope of this review and represent productive directions for future work.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

The literature review of bilingualism yields three main observations. The first main observation is that bilingualism exists on a continuum. As discussed, Bloomfield (1933) proposed that bilingualism should be defined as the ability to speak and understand another language to the same extent as one's native language. This standard was later challenged by Haugen (1953), who proposed that bilingualism was met when an individual could communicate with another who spoke a second language. More recent models by Wei (2000) have proposed that bilingualism exists on a continuum of balanced, dominant bilingualism, and semi-bilingualism. The second main observation is that the effects of bilingualism are contextual. Studies by Bialystok (2001) have suggested that bilingualism confers some cognitive advantages on bilingual individuals. However, these studies have also found that the benefits are contingent upon the age at which the bilingualism began to develop, the frequency with which the languages are used, and the method by which they were learned (Myers-Scotton, 1993). The

third main observation is that the theoretical models of bilingualism agree with Cummins' (2000) CUP model, in which bilingualism is seen as an additive model of language acquisition rather than a subtractive model. Studies have refuted this model proposed by Baker (2011). In relation to Arabic-English bilingualism, which is emerging as a form of bilingualism in Saudi Arabia, these models have some relevance to the country (Pavlenko, 2005). However, most of the models of bilingualism were developed in Western societies (Grosjean, 2010). Few models have been developed for Arabic-English bilingualism in the Gulf countries, thus necessitating further research in this area.

#### 5. CONCLUSION

This paper set out to review the available literature on the topic of bilingualism in a way that encompassed different aspects of the topic, from its definitions to its consequences, from its social aspects to its cognitive aspects, and from the factors that contribute to its acquisition. Three aspects of bilingualism emerged as particularly important and informative from the literature review. First, research has shown that bilingualism encompasses a range of different types of bilingual individuals, from those who are simultaneously bilingual to those who are dominant in one language yet semi-bilingual in another (Wei, 2000; Baker, 2011). Second, the consequences of bilingualism for both positive and negative aspects of language and cognition are actually influenced by the individual's environment and their age of bilingualism, rather than the concept of bilingualism itself (Bialystok, 2001; Grosjean, 2010). Finally, cognitive models of bilingualism have shifted from suggesting the subtractive model to the additive model of bilingualism (Cummins, 2000).

Based upon these findings, recommendations for language education can be made. Language and education policies should shift away from the concept of the costly nature of bilingualism towards the additive model of bilingualism (Baker, 2011; Cummins, 2000). Teachers should be educated in the recognition of bilingual students and the acceptance of code-switching as a common and beneficial practice in bilingual individuals (Myers-Scott, 1993; García and Wei, 2014). These concepts have implications for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in particular, due to the growth of English-Arabic bilingual individuals in the nation (Pavlenko, 2005).

There are still some aspects to bilingualism that remain to be explored in future research. For instance, the majority of bilingual models were established based upon Western and European

bilingual populations, and have yet to be tested for their validity in Arabic-English bilingual populations of the Gulf region (Grosjean, 2010). Additionally, bilingualism in relation to other topics, such as gender (Pavlenko, 2005), heritage languages (García and Wei, 2014), and translanguaging practices in

Saudi Kingdom classrooms remains to be explored in future research. Such studies will help to both understand bilingualism theoretically, but also how it may relate to the region in which these bilingual individuals live.

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