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Bilingualism in the cosmopolis¹

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Abstract

Many cities are multilingual 'islands' which have either a relatively monolingual hinterland, or one which consists of several relatively monolingual zones. Such a city can be seen as a cosmopolis. In some cases a cosmopolis may maintain its cosmopolitan nature over centuries.

Within a cosmopolis, virtually all individuals habitually move between languages within their personal repertoires. In the cosmopolis, ethnic groups may occupy separate geographic and economic sectors, and may preserve a sense of ethnicity within a complex whole. Bilingualism in the cosmopolis is characterised by flexibility and change, both at an individual level, societally, and historically. This has consequences for several areas of the theory of bilingualism.

¹ An earlier and shorter version of this paper was presented at the *International Symposium on Bilingualism*, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK. April 10-12 1997. I would like to thank members of the

In such cities, the link between language and ethnicity is likely to be complex, and children learn the social complexities of multilingual life from an early age. This presents challenges to:

- the Language Rights movement,
- the SIL approach to literacy,
- the one-parent-one-child recommendation of the standard literature,
- the practice of speech-language therapy.

Language in the Cosmopolis

There is a setting of bilingualism which is common in the world, and which has a number of consequences. It is on the whole an urban pattern of bilingualism, found in many of the great trading cities of the past and of the present. Some of these cities are multilingual cities in a less multilingual hinterland. Some are literally islands, while most are metaphorically islands in the sense that they are linguistically different from the hinterland. I use the term *cosmopolis* (OED from 1892) to refer to a city which has in it a multiplicity of ethnolinguistic groupings, such that there is no single dominant ethnolinguistic group, and in which the pattern of everyone's linguistic interaction is determined by the multiplicity.

There are historical examples of cosmopolises, such as the great trading cities of Banten (in Java, which flourished in the sixteenth century) and Constantinople. Some,

audience for their valuable discussion, and especially Marilyn Martin-Jones, Salikoko Mufwene, Jean-Baptiste Piggin, Sandra R Schecter, & Carol Myers-Scotton.

such as Jerusalem, Baghdad, Bombay, Dar es Salaam, Malacca and Singapore, may maintain their cosmopolis features over centuries. Although the cosmopolises all seem to be great trading cities, not all trading cities are cosmopolises (London and Hong Kong are not, for example).

In many cosmopolises ethnolinguistic groupings are given specific recognition in the sense that they may be treated as a group for some purposes. They may be given quarters of the city for residence, and even for trading. Their languages may be recognised in administrative, media, or educational contexts. When Stamford Raffles established modern Singapore in 1819 he actually stipulated the ethnic layout of the city, allocating sections of the city to the Europeans, the Malays, and the Chinese (Buckley 1902: 56f). Malays and Chinese living in the wrong zone were supposed to move. By 1822 he was allocating areas to 'Bugis Settlers', 'Arabs', 'Amoy Chinese', and 'Chuliahs'. Whether legally stipulated or informally developed this physical zoning can be seen over and over again.

The PAP, who have governed Singapore since independence, have attempted to break down this geographical separation by requiring government housing estates to be mixed, and by setting limits to the proportion of minority students permitted in schools. This has been a controversial policy (Ooi et al 1993, Gupta 1994a, Tremewan 1994, Chua 1995, PuruShotam 1998) as there is some preference among the population for a degree of grouping. Smaller groups in particular benefit from the opportunity to congregate together, as this allows an ethnically based culture to be maintained. Thanks to its association with ghettos and apartheid, ethnic segregation is negatively viewed in some parts of the world, but it remains the case that given a free choice, many individuals choose to congregate with others who they see as being of their own ethnic group. It may

be better to think of this voluntary association as *congregation* (which is voluntary) rather than as *segregation* (which is enforced). When segregation or congregation ends, the loss of the cosmopolis may result, as groups find it harder to maintain their distinctiveness and lingua francas are likely to replace the traditional languages of ethnolinguistic groupings.

Even though Singapore now has a policy of compulsory integration for residential purposes, ethnolinguistic groups are still being recognised in Singapore in many ways -- the identification of official race is a crucial part of a citizen's identity with a number of housing, educational, and employment consequences. It is long been at the root of Singapore's concept of 'multilingualism' (Benjamin 1976). The image of the melting pot is associated with monolingual cultures: in the cosmopolis groups are expected to remain separate rather than to be absorbed into a dominant group.

In some cosmopolises the points at which different ethnolinguistic groups come together may be tightly controlled, while in others the dividing lines may be more fluid. The greater the separation of ethnolinguistic groups, the fewer bilingual individuals there will be. On the other hand, the greater the integration, the more risk there is of the loss of the cosmopolis. In some cosmopolises (such as modern Singapore) the points of contact are so many that there are virtually no monolinguals, whereas in others greater separation is possible so that there are fewer bilingual individuals. However, the proportion of bilinguals is always higher in the cosmopolis than in non-cosmopolitan cities. The cosmopolis creates a *culture of multilingualism*, which contrasts with the *culture of monolingualism* that is found in cities such as London or Paris, in which there are relatively small groups of minority language speakers. There is still, in a non-cosmopolitan city, a single dominant ethnolinguistic group, and the pattern of linguistic interaction of that majority group is unaffected by the presence of the minorities.

Majority groups and majority languages can emerge which result in the loss of the cosmopolis. In Singapore until recent years there was no ethnolinguistic majority. Although the ethnic Chinese constituted around 75% of the population, they were from many ethnolinguistic groups. However, since 1979, the government has successfully promoted the use of Mandarin as a language to represent the Chinese, and has so created a more homogeneous ethnolinguistic majority (Gupta 1994a). At the same time, the government has ensured that English is universally known by all who have been to school since the 1960s. In the long term the promotion of these two languages could result in Singapore ceasing to be a cosmopolis.

If you are not from a cosmopolis, your first exposure to one can come as a shock:

On 16 March 1718, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu wrote a letter (Jack (ed., Letter XLII)) about the language situation in Constantinople:

I live in a place that very well represents the Tower of Babel; in Pera they speak Turkish, Greek, Hebrew, Armenian, Arabic, Persian, Russian, Slavonian, Walachian, German, Dutch, French, English, Italian, Hungarian; and, what is worse, there is ten of these languages spoke in my own family. My grooms are Arabs, my footmen French, English and Germans, my nurse an Armenian, my housemaids Russians, half a dozen other servants Greeks, my steward an Italian, my janissaries Turks, that I live in the perpetual hearing of this medley of sounds, which produces a very extraordinary effect upon the people that are born here. They learn all these languages at the same time and without knowing any of them well enough to write or read in it. There is very few men, women or children here

that have not the same compass of words in five or six of them. I know myself several infants of three or four year old that speak Italian, French, Greek, Turkish and Russian, which last they learn of their nurses, who are generally of that country. This seems almost incredible to you and is, in my mind, one of the most curious things in this country, and takes off very much from the merit of our ladies who set up for such extraordinary geniuses upon the credit of some superficial knowledge of French and Italian.

Lady Mary goes on to complain that all this has caused her to forget her English, so perhaps we should take the description as rather highly coloured.

Mixed people

A month earlier Lady Mary had written to the Abbé Conti (Letter XL) about how 'Les fauxbourgs de Pera, Jophana, et Galata, sont des collections d'Etrangers de tous les Pays de l'univers. Ils se sont si souvent entre-mariés, que cela forme des races les plus bizarres du monde. Il n'y a pas une seule famille de Natifs, qui se puisse vanter de n'estre point melée.... Ce mélange fait naitre de creatures plus extraordinaires, que vous ne sçauriez imaginer.'² The combination she found most bizarre was a Dutch father and a Greek mother..... The creation of what Lady Mary calls 'mêtifs' ('mongrels') is one of the likely outcomes of a cosmopolis. Efforts to keep the groups separate seem unlikely to be totally successful. Sometimes mixed people maintain roots in both their cultures of ancestry, sometimes they are absorbed into one culture or another (many Indian Muslim men in Singapore and Malaysia have married Malay Muslim women and their descendants are

² "The suburbs of Pera, Jophana and Galata are collections of strangers from all countries of the universe. They have so often intermarried that this forms several races of people the oddest imaginable. There's not one single family of natives that can value itself on being unmixed.... This mixture produces creatures more extraordinary than you can imagine." [Jack's translation]

typically absorbed into the Malay culture). Linguistically, mixed ethnolinguistic ancestry can be linked to childhood bilingualism, or not. Sometimes, if a particular pattern of mixing is widespread at a certain historical moment, a *mixed group* can emerge.

In West Malaysia is Malacca, a city that has been a cosmopolis since the fifteenth century. The oldest elements were Malay, Arab, Chinese and Indian. These groups created a Malay trading port situated at a crucial point in East-West trade. The Portuguese conquered Malacca in 1511, followed by the Dutch in 1641 and the British in 1794. Ethnic mixing and contact in Malacca has created three mixed communities: the Chitties (Indo-Malay), the Kristang (Lusito-Asian), and the Straits Chinese (Sino-Malay). Plus a Muslim Indian group that is mixed Indian/Arab/Malay. The presence of mixed individuals and the development over time of groups defined by mixed ancestry is an important feature of the cosmopolis and mixed individuals often play crucial roles as linguistic and cultural brokers. The English of India and of Singapore was shaped by Eurasians (Gupta 1994a, 1996).

Contact varieties and language shift

Many of these mixed groups are associated with Creoles (including the Chitties, the Kristang and the Straits Chinese of Malacca, each of which has a Creole associated with it). Contact varieties of various kinds can also arise as a result of contact without mixed marriages. This is because an essential part of the cosmopolis is cross-group language learning. It is a common experience in the cosmopolis for individuals to regularly use languages that have come from groups other than their own.

Some languages can become prevalent lingua francas. When a language in the cosmopolis becomes a lingua franca it changes both in form and in sociolinguistic meaning. In form, it changes as a result of being spoken by those from outside its

ethnolinguistic community. In sociolinguistic meaning it changes because as speakers outside its ethnic home use it, the links between the language and the ethnic group are weakened. It can thus become an expression of another ethnic group. This allows speakers in a cosmopolis to use a variety of languages flexibly in their daily life, expressing complex sociolinguistic meanings by their choice.

Individuals can shift languages as a result of changing experiences throughout their life. In the cosmopolis it is common for languages to be acquired, and sometimes lost, throughout life. The balance of languages may change. For example, in Singapore I followed the linguistic development of children in two ethnic Chinese families from 1984 to 1991. In both families, English was the dominant language of the children at all stages. However the repertoire changed over time, due to changes in childcare patterns. To begin with the children of both families were cared for during their parents' work hours by middle-aged caregivers who spoke to the children in Teochew in the case of one family and in Hokkien in the case of the other family. Both families were Cantonese by ancestry, but the language of the caregiver played no part in choice of childcare. The elder children in the families thus grew up speaking either Hokkien or Teochew in addition to English. Both families then went through a period during which a grandmother had more care of the children. In one family this was followed by the employment of a Filipina maid. The changes in caregiving resulted in the second child of one of the families speaking only Cantonese and English, and in the third child of the family with the maid growing up with only English. In both families all the children acquired more Cantonese at this point. Later still, as the children began formal education, Mandarin was introduced. In one family the use of Cantonese (never very great) receded considerably, while in the other it was strengthened by the development of friendships with a family from Hong Kong. In

one family, Mandarin largely replaced Cantonese in use to the grandmother, while in the other family, Mandarin encroached on the use of English both within the home and with friends.

This casual attitude to changing language repertoire, and a weak association of language and ethnicity, is characteristic of many cosmopolises.

Some challenges for applied areas

The Language Rights Movement

In her paper at the Language Rights conference in Hong Kong in June 1996, Skutnabb-Kangas put forward a suggested wording of language rights:

A UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF LINGUISTIC HUMAN RIGHTS
SHOULD DECLARE AT AN **INDIVIDUAL** LEVEL,
IN RELATION TO

THE MOTHER TONGUE(S)

that everybody can

- identify with their mother tongue(s) and have this identification accepted and respected by others,
- learn the mother tongue(s) fully, orally (when physiologically possible) and in writing (which presupposes that minorities are educated through the medium of their mother tongue(s)),
- use the mother tongue in most official situations (including schools).

OTHER LANGUAGE

-- that everybody whose mother tongue is not an official language in the country where s/he is resident, can become bilingual (or trilingual, if s/he has 2 mother tongues) in the mother tongue(s) and (one of) the official language(s) (according to her own choice).

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LANGUAGES

-- that any change of mother tongue is voluntary (includes knowledge of long-term consequences), not imposed.

PROFIT FROM EDUCATION

-- that everybody can profit from education, regardless of what her mother tongue is.

(Skutnabb-Kangas 1996)

The construing of bilingualism in the language rights movement is very much one which sees ethnolinguistic groupings as stable and monolithic rather than as dynamic and flexible. In the cosmopolis this is not the case, despite efforts to maintain it through geographical separation. There are in fact many individuals who grow up with multiple mother tongues, who lose one or more of their mother tongues, and who have a weak sense of mother tongue identification.

There are also likely to be in the cosmopolis specialised languages associated with certain domains (such as education) and there is an expectation that individuals will have a wide repertoire. Within the cosmopolis not all languages are of equal status, as they are

linked both to the social prestige of the ethnolinguistic groups with which they are associated, and also to the domains in which they are used. The patterns of prestige can be extremely complex, and social sanctions can apply to those who choose the 'wrong' code in a given setting. Education in the mother tongue may well be rejected because the language is not domain-appropriate or because education is seen as an area where members of different ethnolinguistic groups come together for a common linguistic experience. There are also likely to be practical problems of delivery of the kinds of equal treatment implied here.

The SIL approach to literacy

The SIL are committed, like the language rights activists, though perhaps for rather different reasons, to initial mother tongue education, and to the development of literacy in languages which are not traditionally languages of literacy. Like the Language Rights activists too, languages are seen as possessions of communities. SIL workers acquire 'a deep appreciation of the people, their culture and a real learning of the language.' The SIL brochure *What is the Summer Institute of Linguistics?* states:

Children learn to master the complexities of their own language without conscious thought, but those same complexities are a formidable obstacle to others from outside wanting to learn that language. Only with patience and applying linguistic principles can one learn another language. SIL linguists devote years to such language learning and develop genuine and meaningful relationships with the people in the process.

This is construing second language learning as difficult -- a job for experts. In the cosmopolis, languages are seen as easily acquired through contact with speakers. They are not seen as something for experts to learn, but as something for all members of a community to pick up. Members of a cosmopolis expect to have to learn new languages on a need to know basis, as they progress through life.

Evaluation of bilingualism

In the cosmopolis bilingualism is either positively evaluated or simply accepted as an obvious and unproblematic issue. In the monolingual culture, it is typically problematised.

For example, here is a query from the LINGUIST list:

LINGUIST List: Vol-8-239. Wed Feb 19 1997. ISSN: 1068-4875.

Date: Thu, 13 Feb 97 03:14:29 EST

From: V2188G@VM.TEMPLE.EDU

Subject: Multilingualism question

First, please forgive the cross-posting. I am very interested in getting as much feedback as possible from as many people as possible. I am interested in the dynamics of a situation where a person is not a native speaker of any language, but learned three from an early age and now speaks several more. This person, as a result of this multilingualism, feels a lack of a solid grasp of verbal concepts and finds that oral communication is actually hampered by what might otherwise be considered a great gift in communication. Is this a very common experience? Can you point me to any published literature on the topic?

Thank you.

Cheers,

Dorine

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In the cosmopolis a child (like those in my Singapore study) growing up with three languages would be seen as being well placed to function in a multilingual setting, rather than as being hampered. *Semilingualism* is the notion that failure to develop the mother tongue may in some circumstances lead to a person able to speak no language fully. This goes back to Bloomfield's unforgettable description of White Thunder (1927), and has been further supported by some research on bilingual children's development (such as Skutnabb-Kangas 1984, Cummins and Swain 1986,). I would join those (such as Martin-Jones & Romaine 1986, Romaine 1989) who argue that the concept of semilingualism is based on a monolingual world-view which fails to look at bilinguals in a sociolinguistic context. In a cosmopolis individuals may fit into a linguistic setting in which no single language is used in all domains, and so they do not need a full functional range in any single language.

The National Curriculum for England requires the teaching of English and of one other 'Modern Foreign Language'. In the English curriculum it states, under the General requirements that 'The richness of dialects and other languages can make an important contribution to pupils' knowledge and understanding of standard English' (1995:2). Modern Foreign Languages are not introduced until Key Stage 3 (i.e. after the age of 11) and are clearly expected to be learnt from scratch. Other than in Wales, there is no provision in the National Curriculum for bilingualism.

It is not therefore surprising that bilingualism is seen as a problem. Over and over in the 1997 reports on the first primary school league tables, it was said that 'scores can often be explained by the intake of the school -- how many children have free school meals, speak English as a second language or have special needs' (Martin Bright, *The Observer*, 16 March 1997). Being bilingual is clearly being seen as negative here. An article in the previous week's *Observer* (by Katherine Whitehorn) had castigated Bradford's Muslims for failing to 'mix in with British life'. Among the problems is bringing in a bride or groom from abroad:

The family language goes on being Punjabi, or Bengali. The children learn Urdu as a stepping stone to the Arabic that's essential for the recitation of the Koran -- an hour or two each day at the mosque, boys and girls; English doesn't get much of a look in.

Children who have some knowledge of four languages (Punjabi or Bengali, Urdu, Arabic and English) are being faulted here because their bilingualism is seen as a cause of poor English proficiency. The notion that the learning of Urdu negatively affects English proficiency appears to have no basis in fact. Khan and Wright (1997) have given evidence of lessons in Urdu in senior secondary school students being a good predictor of *higher* achievement in the national curriculum. Similar negative attitudes to bilinguals can be seen in the USA (e.g. Schechter 1997). Conversely, in a piece on the same date in the magazine for readers of the *Straits Times* overseas (Singapore March-April 1997), James Gomez, reported on the shift among Singapore's Malayalees to English and spoke of efforts by older Malayalees to combat the trend, including speaking Malayalam at home

and trying to find Malayalam marriage partners for their children from within Singapore or from Kerala.

In the cosmopolis it is expected that the balance of language skills will be different for different individuals. However, knowledge of one language is also not seen as preventing the learning of another -- ability to learn a specific language to a high degree is generally attributed to intelligence or perseverance, rather than to being monolingual. This attitude is the result of the daily experience of negotiating different languages, and of having varying proficiency in the languages of one's own repertoire. This tolerance does not of course preclude the use of language to express ethnic identity, gender, and social class. In the cosmopolis people are just as likely to hold negative stereotypes of other ethnic groups as they are in a monolingual culture. In the cosmopolis particular occupations may be so closely associated with certain ethnolinguistic groups that members of those groups face opprobrium from their own and from other groups when they move outside them.

The one-parent-one-child recommendation of the standard literature

The 'one'parent one language' approach to bilingualism seems to have become axiomatic in many circles. Families in the cosmopolis are also unlikely to be able to maintain it. In these communities, where most people are bilingual, rapid codeswitching is the norm, and the socially correct use of codeswitching is an important part of life. In the cosmopolis many or even most children grow up in linguistically complex situations where everyone speaks two or three languages, often simultaneously. Children separate the languages by the age of two (at the latest), just like children in linguistically more ordered places, because there are some settings where mixing is not correct. Romaine (1989) pointed out that the kind of childhood bilingualism she called 'Mixed languages' (where the parents

are bilingual and sectors of the community are bilingual, and where parents code-switch) is 'perhaps a more common category than it might seem to be in the literature'. Although prevalent, the cosmopolitan pattern of bilingualism, and especially of childhood bilingualism, is still relatively little studied.

The practice of speech-language therapy

Many speech therapists feel that it is essential to concentrate on only one language if a child is having difficulties and will demand that the family switch to only one language. In some cases (see discussion in, for example, Gupta 1994b, Li et al 1997) a switch to a single language will be recommended even if there is no evidence of delay or disorder. The recommendations reflect a problematization of bilingualism, in the sense that bilingualism is seen as causing a problem. They fail to identify bilingualism in its social setting and are unworkable in the cosmopolitan, where a child has to fit into a social context which requires an ability to move between languages.

A real problem for speech therapists and referring agencies to cope with (Gupta & Chandler 1993, Gupta (with Chandler) 1994a) in the cosmopolitan, however, is that the high levels of linguistic tolerance and flexibility may lead to tolerance of the pathological. In a setting where many speakers of a given language are of relatively low proficiency, it may be that a child with development problems is seen as someone who isn't good at the language, rather than being identified as someone having problems with language. The less tolerant monolingual culture is more likely to seek help for a child with non-normal development.

Conclusion

In the type of urban 'island' which I have defined as a *cosmopolis*, a high level of language and ethnolinguistic contact leads to a high proportion of the population being habitual practising bilinguals. The cosmopolis is also associated with a relaxed attitude to language, and with a substantial amount of language shift. Ethnic congregation is a crucial part of a cosmopolis, but there are usually also identifiable mixed groups with fluid ethnolinguistic identification.

The presence of widespread bilingualism, of frequent language shift (by individuals and by groups) and of mixed individuals raises a number of issues. In the cosmopolis there is often a weak link between language and culture, while the mother tongue may fulfill a variety of roles in terms of defining identity, and in personal experience. Attitudes to language shift and to language learning have educational and therapeutic implications.

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