

Joint Report: Features of Multilingual Individuals

Hanna Szczepanek

Erin McInerney

Multilingual Map of Europe

Professor Magdalena Wrembel

15 March 2021

Introduction

As an ever-evolving phenomenon, the study of multilingualism continues to provide researchers with productive data when exploring the roles, motivations, identities and cognitive processes of the multilingual individual. While often discussed alongside bilingualism for the sake of comparison, multilingualism represents a set of cognitive processes that significantly distinguish the bilingual person from the multilingual person (Aronin and Hufeisen 2009b, Aronin and Jessner 2015). The clear separation between these two competences has rendered the notion of ‘multilingual’ particularly salient. While some consensus has been reached about nature of multilingualism, the nuances of ‘multilingual’ as an adjective continue to elicit questions and discussion amongst scholars. For the purposes of this report, we refer primarily to individual multilingualism, unless otherwise expressed, and adopt a view of multilingualism as meaning the use of three or more languages.

Features of Multilingual Persons

One feature that characterizes multilingual processes as distinctive is complexity. As Aronin and Singleton (2018) evoke, complexity is inherently associated with third variables. Multilingual individuals are then no strangers to complexity, having the unique task of procuring and processing a third lexicon as well as a third grammar. It is perhaps unsurprising that highly proficient multilinguals, such as polyglots or super polyglots, also demonstrate proficiency in other areas typically associated with complex processes, including maths and musical ability. However, extensive work has been done on the notion of motivation, which can be interpreted as one characteristic uniting ‘successful’ language learners, from bilinguals to hyper polyglots (see Dörnyei 2009, Thompson 2019, and Henry 2017). Below we offer a brief qualitative case study of two multilingual individuals, and investigate the ways in which multilingualism intersects with other characteristics that have been observed as dominant trends within the domain of multilingualism.

Case Study One

Erin is a 28 year old female English-French successive bilingual from the United States. Having begun her French language acquisition process in high school at the age of 15, Erin is also considered as a late bilingual. ‘Foreign’ language instruction in her context was largely formal due to the fact that she had little contact with French outside of school. This may be due to attitudes towards learning foreign languages in US which as she reports, were at the time rather negative. Despite this, she exhibited motivation to learn French, primarily through studying French on her own (particularly French conjugations). This motivation may have played a role in her reaching what she identifies as an approximate B1 level by the time she started university. Erin expressed her perception that, although learning languages is not actively encouraged in the United States, a hierarchy of language prestige does exist, the French language sitting squarely above other, more widely spoken languages in the US (such as Spanish). After learning French at the university, Erin moved to France in 2014, where she began using the language in everyday communication.

Today, Erin uses English more often than French or German (e.g. at work – during classes, in her home), particularly due to universities being closed at the moment and the national 6 pm curfew that has been imposed across the country, as she most often uses French in communication with her colleagues and friends. Residing in the multilingual city of Strasbourg, Erin has regular (weekly) contact with the three languages that have shaped the region’s linguistic history: French, German and Alsatian. Erin’s proficiency in German has been acquired from contact with colleagues, stays with family friends in Germany, teaching experience in international schools, and most particularly by her former training as an opera

singer. Now, she uses German daily or weekly, e.g. for grocery shopping or speaking with acquaintances and friends.

Case Study Two

Hanna, a 22 year old woman from Poland, is perhaps also best described as a late successive bilingual. While her English (L2) language acquisition process began in primary school, Hanna reported only experiencing initial command over English from the age of thirteen or fourteen. However, following a span of less than ten years, Hanna now identifies as a proficient and balanced Polish-English bilingual.

Hanna defines linguistic context of Poland as one steeped in pride for the Polish language and its integrity. Notably, coinage, particularly from English, can be perceived as a type of language degradation, therefore institutions and edifices work regularly to ensure the veracity of the Polish language and its acquisition of new vocabulary. However, attitudes towards English, as Hanna reports, are quite positive and linked intrinsically with prestige and education. Reference accents, such as RP, are viewed as linguistic ideals for English learners in Poland and one's ability to acquire these phonological features may incite assumptions (whether held correctly or incorrectly) about the individual's linguistic proficiency. Language attitudes in Poland may also play a role in the rate of third language acquisition. For instance, historical ties to German, Hanna's third language, render its place and value in Polish society still complex today.

The intersection of language attitudes and language learning motivation is intricate- a composite of many unquantifiable experiences and of changing variables. While defining or discussing these terms at length is outside of this paper's scope, it is perhaps worthwhile to note that Hanna's language learning motivations were strongly directed towards English. The perceived prestige of English in Poland, positive linguistic experiences with English teachers, a belief in the value of English within her home, as well as the extended vision that comes with having family outside one's own country can all be described as plausible factors in Hanna's success in achieving proficiency in another language.

With proficiency may come awareness, and Hanna, like some other successful multilinguals or polyglots, is capable of identifying language learning practices that are best suited to her language acquisition process. Amongst these practices she cites the significance of both regular exposure to the target language and consistent communication practice. At the end of her interview, Hanna cites her intention to engage more frequently with German before taking the time to commit to serious study of her newest language, Spanish—observing her own multilingual profile from another vantage point, both as representative and as a retrospective of her linguistic journey.

Conclusion

The two brief case studies above provide further data about the experiences of multilingual individuals, but more specifically, how the path from monolingual to multilingual may be carved out, particularly when the individual is a product of a monolingual home context and second language is not acquired before adolescence. While neither participant recounted particular talents for maths, a trend that has been observed particularly in multilingual men, Erin is proficient on the piano and studied music from the age of seven. Most notably, however, these case studies further the understanding in current multilingual research that underlines motivation as an extremely salient variable in the learning of multiple languages. Further research may wish to seek how contemporary monolingual to multilingual paths intersect with the use of technology as a means of exposure and motivation in language learning.

References

- Aronin, L., & Hufeisen, B. (2009). 6. Methods of research in multilingualism studies: Reaching a comprehensive perspective. In L. Aronin & B. Hufeisen (Eds.), *AILA Applied Linguistics Series* (Vol. 6, pp. 103–120). John Benjamins Publishing Company.
<https://doi.org/10.1075/aals.6.06ch6>
- Aronin, L., & Jessner, U. (2015). Understanding current multilingualism: What can the butterfly tell us? In U. Jessner-Schmid & C. J. Kramsch (Eds.), *The Multilingual Challenge: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives* (pp. 271–291). De Gruyter.
<https://books.google.fr/books?id=c5mnCgAAQBAJ>
- Dörnyei, Z. (2009). *The psychology of second language acquisition*. Oxford Univ. Press.
- Henry, A. (2017). L2 Motivation and Multilingual Identities. *The Modern Language Journal*, *101*(3), 548–565. <https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12412>
- Singleton, D. M., & Aronin, L. (2018). *Twelve lectures on multilingualism*. Multilingual Matters.
- Thompson, A. S. (2020). My many selves are still me: Motivation and multilingualism. *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching*, *10*(1), 159–176.
<https://doi.org/10.14746/ssllt.2020.10.1.8>