

Having it both ways

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SUZANNE ROMAINE

Bilingualism

337pp. Oxford: Blackwell. £35 (paperback, £10.95).

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JOSIANE F. HAMERS and MICHEL H. A. BLANC

Bilinguality and Bilingualism

324pp. Cambridge University Press. £35 (paperback, £12.95).

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The problem of bilingualism is socially important for obvious reasons. Even if relatively stringent definitions of language ability were employed, probably a majority of the world's population would be considered bilingual. Further, with increasing immigration, significant proportions of students in schools are coming from language backgrounds other than that of the majority culture. One study predicts that by the year 2000, one in three students in Western Europe will be of immigrant background, and in the United States there are currently a conservatively estimated 4.5 million students with language minority backgrounds. In addition to its social importance, bilingualism raises fundamental questions about the relationship between language, mind and culture. These issues, such as the role of language in cognition or in the development of social identity, are not unique to bilinguals, but they become prominently displayed in bilingual individuals.

Both Suzanne Romaine's *Bilingualism* and Josiane Hamers and Michel Blanc's *Bilinguality and Bilingualism* are intended to be surveys of the subject and are very similar in scope. As is now standard in the field, they distinguish between a bilingual individual and a bilingual community (which in the extreme case might consist of two groups of monolingual individuals). The discussion of the bilingual individual draws primarily from the literature in linguistics, cognitive psychology, social psychology, and neurolinguistics, while that on bilingual societies draws from sociology, political science and education.

The research contained in these volumes is full of dichotomies and taxonomies, many of which, as Hamers and Blanc point out, masquerade as theories. An important distinction concerns the social prestige accorded to bilingualism. In most immigrant groups, bilingualism is not valued by the majority culture, and therefore is of a "subtractive" variety, in which the dominant language gradually replaces the ethnic one. In other cases, it does have prestige, so that middle-class Anglophone families

in Canada may send their children to "immersion" programmes in French. This is the "additive" variety of bilingualism, so-called because there is no threat to the status of the first language, and the second language comes to enrich the first.

A less successful distinction is the classical one between "compound" and "co-ordinate" bilinguals. "Compound" bilinguals are those whose cognitive organization of the two languages is essentially fused together, because they have learned both languages in the same environment, such as a bilingual home. "Co-ordinate" bilinguals separate the two language systems functionally as the result of having learned them in different contexts. This distinction has led to a string of studies attempting to see whether these two types of bilinguals, as distinguished by their own accounts of how they acquired their languages, perform differently in cognitive tasks. In a nutshell, they do not, although this line of research has led to other exciting avenues of research – a story all too familiar to those who try to discover differences in cognitive organization.

Another salient theme in the study of bilingualism is its constant encounter with societal norms and values. As Romaine points out in the first sentence of her book, "It would certainly be odd to encounter a book with the title *Monolingualism*." She shows that monolingualism is the norm not only of the mainstream society in which she and many other researchers operate, but also of the paradigms that they use. True to the tradition of sociolinguistics to which she belongs, she rejects the rationalist pursuit of knowledge of the idealized (monolingual) speaker-hearer of a language, and marvels at the beauty of the variability in language behaviour found across different social groups and different conversational settings. Consider, for example, the quintessentially bilingual behaviour known as *code-switching*, exemplified in the following sentence from a Panjabi/English bilingual in Britain: "kio ke six, seven hours te school de vic spend karde ne, they are speaking English all the time" (meaning: "Because they spend six or seven hours a day at school, they are speaking English all the time"). Such utterances were once seen as evidence for imperfect separation of the languages in bilinguals, and seemed to confirm the suspicion that they were competent in neither language. Upon closer analysis, however, it turned out that code-switching generally occurs only among bilinguals, and serves a variety of communicative functions which take advantage of the bilinguality of those involved. Monolingual standards are not appropriate in judging such utterances, even if monolingual societies would like

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to label them as "deviant".

A powerful example of the extent to which our own values and expectations shape research in bilingualism can be found in the literature on the effect of bilingualism on mental development. There was speculation earlier this century that it could have a negative consequence on development and even result in mental retardation, and a tradition of research developed in which scores of bilinguals were measured by standardized intelligence tests administered in the majority language, English.

When the obvious and predictable results were obtained – bilinguals performed at levels considerably below the average for monolingual English speakers – they were taken to support the view that bilingualism affected the development of intelligence negatively, and linguistic minorities were recommended to abandon their own language in favour of the mainstream one. Since this research was conducted in the midst of an active social debate in the United States concerning the "Americanization" of immigrants, the social expectations that led to such a result are hardly surprising. By contrast, once technical improvements were made in methods of research, and especially once bilinguals from socially prestigious groups were investigated, it was found that bilingualism can have positive effects on various aspects of mental and language development.

Speculation about language and issues related to it (culture, ethnicity, education) is not the exclusive franchise of academics; indeed, they are popular topics of conversation among people on the street, so there is a considerable role for the student of bilingualism as a debunker of myths. This is especially true in the area of bilingual education. One false belief, for example, is that young children cannot easily handle two languages, and that immigrant students should therefore be taught immediately and exclusively in the majority language. However, research on second language acquisition is relatively unambiguous about the fact that the two languages do not interfere with each other. In the case of minority students, both these books strongly recommend the development of strong language skills in the native language before introducing the majority tongue. Yet another wrong idea is that young children pick up a second language quickly and readily, and therefore do not need much help. The evidence is quite strong that, especially for academic uses of the second language, it takes quite a long time, especially for younger children.

Hamers and Blanc echo the frustration of most basic researchers in bilingualism that

policy-makers rarely pay attention to their findings (except when these support their politically based conclusions). Perhaps mercifully, both books leave out the role of evaluation studies of the effectiveness of bilingual education programmes, such as those that have been conducted in the United States. Such evaluations are highly politicized and have generated little reliable information. Their quality of research is low, and needs to be strengthened if it is to inform policy. But, as researchers who have ventured to influence social policy rapidly discover, it is not sufficient to send copies of research articles or books to policy-makers; active involvement in the political process is what is needed.

Although both these books cover similar ground, the authors have different perspectives. The strengths of Romaine's book are on the sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic side. She also writes engagingly and provides many illustrations from her own research among various ethnic communities in Britain. She advocates the maintenance of bilingualism on the grounds that "Languages should be thought of as natural resources, which can either be squandered or protected. Like endangered species, languages under threat can die, unless they are protected." She is also outspoken (as she should be) about the notion of "proper English". Shortly after her appointment to a Merton professorship in Oxford, she writes that "an article appeared in a right-wing newspaper arguing that the University of Oxford was acting irresponsibly in allowing a person such as myself (a foreigner), who had engaged in research on non-standard English and the languages of ethnic minority groups in Britain, to occupy a chair which should, in their view, have been devoted to upholding 'good standards' in English (ie British English)".

The book by Hamers and Blanc is stronger in the areas of social, psychological and cognitive models of bilingualism, although its high quality is evident throughout. It is also less personal than Romaine's book. One complaint is that it has been updated from the French original (published in 1983), but the references still rely heavily on the older bibliography.

As for the prospects for the future of the study of bilingualism, I agree with Hamers and Blanc that its fate hangs on the extent to which a strong theory can be developed to take it beyond mere taxonomies of bilinguals and bilingual settings. I continue to hope that these books will not be the last to attempt to capture the "big picture", but my suspicion is that specialization is going to break the subject up so that the big question of how the bilingual individual fits within a bilingual society will forever elude empirical inquiry.