Multilingualism in a Society of the Future?*

ERNST APELTAUER

Being human among humans means living in a state of ever incomplete multilingualism.

Mario Wandruszka

Introduction

Recent European agreements are going to change our society. Opening up the internal market and granting freedom of settlement will enhance mobility among European peoples. Given that migration born of poverty is hardly going to diminish over the coming years, today's linguistic and cultural variety will be increased through the influx of more people from European as well as from non-European countries. Are we, therefore, facing the prospect of a Babel of languages which, in turn, will bring about the disintegration of European societies?

When the European Community was established in 1957, its aim was to bring nations closer together while respecting linguistic and cultural differences. Today, EC regulations governing the use of languages are causing high costs due to the need for translations. Whether this principle of multilingualism can be maintained in the face of further expansion of the EC is a controversial issue among experts (Brackeniers, 1991). However, bringing down customs barriers will only produce long-term benefits if we also succeed in bringing down linguistic barriers by teaching people to be multilingual (Finkenstaedt & Schröder, 1990).

In France and Italy such considerations have led to the introduction of foreign language teaching at elementary school level. Similar projects are under way in some German federal states, such as the Saar, Hesse and Rhineland-Palatinate (Trümmann, 1990). Thus Hesse expects all children to have two foreign language lessons a week from Year 2 and three such lessons from Year 4.

Other federal Länder, such as Northrhine-Westphalia, subscribe to the principle of learning foreign languages through 'encounters'. German lessons provide the framework within which children at elementary school are to be offered the opportunity of learning foreign languages in a more playful way and in shorter teaching units (20 minutes a week in Years 1 and 2, 45 minutes a week thereafter).

Numerous publications of recent years on the subject of multilingualism show

* Translated by Gisela Shaw, Bristol.
that this is not merely a topical but also a politically charged issue, not least because many questions remain unanswered.

The bulk of publications start from the assumption that it would make sense to start foreign language learning at an earlier stage (e.g. Thomas, 1990; Freudenstein, 1991). However, there are also arguments against such a move (Rück, 1990; Apeltauer, 1992, p. 9 ff.). For instance, it remains unclear when precisely foreign language learning is to start—whether as early as kindergarten (as is the case for German as a second language for non-German children in Germany) or only at elementary school (as with the ‘languages of encounter’ in Northrhine-Westphalia) or even as late as Years 3 or 4 (as for instance in Italy and Hesse) (Gompi, 1990, p. 52). The question also remains of what form first encounters with a foreign language should take (Doyé, 1991; Pelz, 1992). And which language should be offered first, which second or third? How can continuity of tuition be ensured beyond elementary school level? What training should teachers receive? Should native speakers be deployed to teach their own languages? In what way could parents help in such programmes of early foreign language tuition? What alternatives are there (intensive courses, extracurricular measures) to make lessons more attractive and effective?

These and similar questions arise and cannot be answered simply by reference to theoretical or practical considerations, as any decision would have far-reaching consequences. Should we therefore sit back and wait for relevant scientific evidence to be available?

The very demand in industry for multilingual personnel does not allow us to adopt such an attitude of wait-and-see. Well-informed parents and interest groups are also demanding that foreign language training be intensified. This puts pressure on ministries of education, as demonstrated by pilot programmes started in many federal states (e.g. the promotion of early language learning in Baden-Württemberg and bilingual teaching at grammar schools in Schleswig-Holstein).

To help us to evaluate such training schemes better and to reach a better understanding of the considerations underlying them, I would like to present some fundamental considerations against the background of recent findings.

Origins and Development of Multilingualism

Multilingualism can be the outcome of particular life circumstances (e.g. a multilingual environment) or of an individual's decisions and efforts. Correspondingly, we speak of multilingualism brought about by life circumstances (or simply of ‘socially conditioned multilingualism’) or of individual multilingualism.

Academic measures can serve two purposes: they can support socially conditioned multilingualism or they can provide incentives for the development of individual multilingualism. As the impact of academic measures taken at school is only slight compared with the influence of mass media, such measures will, as a rule, have no more than a limited effect.

Depending on the number of languages required for people to understand each other within a society, we talk of monolingual, bilingual, trilingual and quadrilingual societies. In this sense, Switzerland is a quadrilingual country, as German, French, Italian and Rhaeto-Romanic all enjoy official status.

In some publications the early promotion of foreign language learning has, somewhat euphorically, been called a ‘linguistic helvetianisation of Europe’ (Pelz,
TABLE I. Percentage of Swiss people speaking more than one language

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>bilingual</th>
<th></th>
<th>trilingual</th>
<th></th>
<th>quadrilingual</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>adequate</td>
<td>good</td>
<td>adequate</td>
<td>good</td>
<td>adequate</td>
<td>good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German-speaking Swiss</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French-speaking Swiss</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italian-speaking Swiss</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A total of 33,826 male and 977 female persons of the same age were surveyed (Dürmüller, 1991, p. 132).

1989, p. 10), started off by bilingually oriented projects such as 'Learn your neighbour's language'. But the mere fact that several languages enjoy official status within a country does not mean that all inhabitants of that country are actually in a position to use these languages.

We normally call a person multilingual if she or he masters at least three foreign languages (Christ, 1991, p. 25 f.). But what does 'mastering a foreign language' mean? This leads us on to a difficult problem which is still subject to controversy even among those researching into bilingualism (Baetens-Beardsmore, 1982, Ch. 1). When does multilingualism begin, and where does it end? Does a multilingual person have to have 'native-like control of three languages' (a definition based on Bloomfield), or would it be sufficient for a speaker to be able to produce complete and meaningful utterances in three languages (along the lines of Haugen’s definition of bilingualism)?

For the sake of simplicity I am going to adopt Haugen's definition for trilingualism or multilingualism. This presupposes productive abilities in all three languages but does not attempt to define the level of mastery of each of these languages.

Switzerland tends to be seen as a country where the majority of people speak several languages. A comprehensive survey has shown, however, that this belief is based on a myth. In fact, no more than about 6.2% of Swiss can be called multilingual (in the strict sense), with the majority of the Swiss population having no more than two languages at their disposal (Dürmüller, 1991, p. 115).

Admittedly, considerable efforts are made in Swiss schools to help children to learn the languages used in Switzerland. But the success rate varies greatly from region to region and can hardly be regarded as satisfactory overall. This is shown in Table 1.

For an interpretation of these results it is important to remember that 69.9% of Swiss are German-speaking, 18.1% French-speaking and 11.9% Italian-speaking (Kolde, 1981, p. 40). The smallest group is the one with the best language-learning results. This, incidentally, applies even more strongly with regard to the Rhaetian population, which has been disregarded here as it makes up no more than 0.8% of the Swiss population (Dürmüller, 1991, p. 120 f.). To put it differently, minorities have no choice but to learn majority languages, as even in Switzerland languages of ‘autochthonous minorities’ (speakers of minority languages with official status) do not enjoy equal treatment (Dürmüller, 1991, p. 117). It hardly needs stressing that this applies even more to allochthonous minorities.

Overall, multilingualism is found mostly in urban regions immediately border-
Autochthonous minorities tend to learn the languages of majorities (German, French), while members of the majority (the German-speaking population) are more likely to turn to world languages such as English (rather than Italian or Rhaeto-Romanic).

Does this mean that smaller groups are more likely to learn the languages of larger groups? In a school experiment in Arizona, pupils were to learn from each other English or Spanish respectively, according to the motto 'Each learns the other's language'. While pupils whose first language was Spanish did learn English, pupils whose first language was English were not very successful. Observations and interviews showed that at break-time English-speaking pupils tended to speak English with their Spanish-speaking school-mates. Neither group had seriously expected the majority, the 'Anglos', to learn Spanish (Edelsky & Hudelson, 1980, p. 38 ff.).

The motto 'Learn your neighbour's language' has recently been propagated in Germany. In some federal states, such as Baden-Württemberg (Pelz, 1989), children at elementary schools have been encouraged to learn French; in others (e.g. Northrhine-Westphalia) 'neighbourhood languages' such as Turkish, Polish and Italian were offered alongside Dutch and English (Böcker & Aydemir, 1991; Schwier, 1990).

It has been shown that the teaching of French is going well, especially in areas close to the border and where parents are included in the process (Pelz, 1989, p. 6 ff.). So far no results are available regarding the success or otherwise of the teaching of Polish and Turkish. However, we can anticipate difficulties here, as in Germany both Polish and Turkish—like Spanish in the US—are minority languages which a large proportion of the population regard as less worthwhile than, for example, French.

Value Judgments on Foreign Languages

People's desire and motivation to learn a foreign language are affected by socially conveyed attitudes and value judgments. Take, for instance, the way people in Germany judge French. French is still seen as the 'language of the educated' although France has long ceased to be la grande nation and in terms of population the French (54 million) only come fifth in Europe after the Russians (101 million), Germans (92 million) and British (59 million).

When people are asked why they value a language such as English highly, the reason most frequently stated is the 'size of the area where the language is spoken'; next comes the respective language's (supposed) economic importance, while touristic or cultural-historical interest ranks fairly low in the list of reasons (Schroder & Macht, 1983, p. 198 ff.).

Yet it is a fact that in our cultural area, languages used by much larger groups than English and French hardly receive any attention. One need only think of Chinese (or more precisely, Mandarin Chinese): it is the mother tongue of 770 million people and can hardly be regarded as insignificant in economic or educational terms. And yet—how many of us learn Mandarin Chinese or other important languages such as Hindi (290 million speakers) or Arabic (170 million)?

The value attributed to a foreign language by a society, and even its aesthetic appeal, can change (Schroder & Macht, 1983, p. 205 f.). It can be assumed that German and Japanese are currently undergoing such a process of reassessment in
many countries. Such reassessment also occurs due to technological developments. As distances can be negotiated more easily, speaking foreign languages is becoming more attractive. Career incentives also play a part. As the Single Market in Europe further increases people’s mobility, it will also boost the incentive to learn foreign languages and thereby the proportion of multilingual individuals.

People’s assessment of individual languages particularly affects the early stages of language acquisition. As mastery of that language grows, the language gradually loses its foreign character. The greater the learning success, the less important do attitudes (and motives) become for the acquisition process while the learning success itself gains in importance (Gardner, 1983). This allows us to conclude that to begin with, learners need to be put in touch with a foreign language and culture and to be motivated to study it over a lengthy period of time (to as high a level as possible) in order to reach the stage when they are able to continue their language studies in an independent form.

**Attitudes Towards Multilingualism**

Attitudes towards multilingualism and multilingual people range from discrimination via toleration to conscious cultivation and displaying of variety (Apeltauer, 1987, p. 10).

In Germany, for instance, many people still believe that the majority of the German population are linguistically homogenous (i.e. German-speaking). In fact, this applies, if at all, only as far as the written language is concerned, as the spoken language varies from person to person depending on region of origin, social class and age. If we ignore such special features, we might indeed say that over 60% of the German population are monolingual.

On the other hand, European elites (scholars, members of the clergy and the aristocracy) have always been multilingual. We only need to remember Frederic II, the Hohenstaufen Emperor, of whom it is said that he spoke, apart from the Italian people’s language, Latin and Greek, Arabic, Hebrew, French and Provençal (Nette, 1975, p. 66). Nor was it by chance that the career-oriented German archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann developed a passion for language learning and came to master (this can be proved!) 19 languages. No doubt, he was also highly motivated and ‘prepared to put language acquisition above all else in his life’ (Scherer, 1992, p. 154). Presumably he shared with Frederic II a favourable biological predisposition. Yet he would have been unlikely to have developed his talent in the way he did had he not also held a positive attitude towards multilingualism.

It can hardly come as a surprise that professional associations of teachers of foreign languages (Koblenzer Erklärung, 1989) and ministries of education (Tidick, 1992) consider multilingualism as something worth promoting in the face of all-European developments. After all, the EC has repeatedly reiterated its view that linguistic variety in Europe ought to be preserved and multilingualism encouraged, e.g. by means of language course bursaries and exchange programmes.

However, this view is rejected by part of Europe’s population. No doubt the growing migration from poverty-stricken regions plays a significant role in this context, for the monolingual sections of Europe’s population frequently deplore the changes in their own environment brought about in this way. They would like
to see their old forms of life preserved, including their monolingualism as part of their own identity. An increase in the number of languages and cultures around them is therefore often felt to be a threat.

To persuade monolingual people (and their children) of the value of multilingualism and cultural variety is a task which cannot be performed by schools and further education institutions alone. We will hardly succeed in developing tolerance towards other people, languages and cultures in the young if they are forever confronted in the mass media (comics, TV, video etc.) with outmoded interpretational models and patterns of response which they find embodied in the monolingual population around them as well as in their parents. In other words, we ought to consider 'enlightenment campaigns', for instance through exciting and yet educationally worthwhile films for children and young people or through cross-border school projects also involving parents.

Current Trends

Recent waves of immigration have multiplied the number of languages spoken in countries of central Europe. Today teachers, in Germany for instance, are having to teach classes comprising pupils speaking six or eight (or even more) different languages. For these pupils, German is no more than a second or third language. Although their knowledge of the language does sometimes appear to be adequate, they frequently restrict themselves to learning colloquial language and fail in written areas or those requiring technical terminology.

Immigrant pupils not only have to acquire a language that is foreign to them, they also have to find their way around a more or less unknown educational system (and its broader cultural environment). They are forever confronted with the unfamiliar, whether interaction rituals or forms of teaching and learning, including non-verbal reactions on the part of German teachers.

Nor are problems restricted to pupils. Teachers, too, are confronted with difficult tasks. For instance, they have to adjust to a target group whose composition and behaviour is becoming increasingly alien to them. Thus pupils and teachers are equally subject to tension and a growing sense of insecurity. Both sides are expected to accept major adjustments. Under these conditions, contacts and controversies gain a totally new quality, whether for better or for worse.

Irrespective of these developments, teacher training in Germany is still conducted as if only a minority of students will later have to work with foreign pupils. For instance, future teachers of German and English continue to be trained as if they will one day teach homogenous groups (which, in fact, have ceased to exist) rather than linguistically and culturally heterogeneous target groups. University students of education who have actually acquired expertise in teaching German as a second language or in pedagogics concerned with the teaching of foreigners often fail to find relevant employment as the resources available are not sufficient to create new posts, while teachers who received traditional training feel increasingly frustrated and overtaxed. It is quite possible that falling levels of achievement—much deplored in general—are not unrelated to the absence of differentiation measures and the neglect of alternative forms of language teaching. Teachers rightly complain that they are increasingly called upon to do social work without having been trained for this. It can be expected that such training deficits will contribute to the tensions which are caused by qualitative and quantitative changes
of the kind described above, thus adding to the strain placed on coexistence in schools.

**Languages are Products of People Living Together**

One important prerequisite for a peaceful and cooperative coexistence is the awareness that languages originate from people living together.

If contact between speakers of foreign languages is superficial, for instance non-committal neighbourly or business contact, this will lead to limited bilingualism or multilingualism, possibly even a simplified language for communication purposes, a pidgin. (As is well known, this was the expression used by Chinese traders for ‘business’.) In antiquity such *linguae francae* were well known in the Mediterranean (e.g. Greek or Latin).

If contact is more intensive, for instance in the case of immigrants, people and their languages will begin to mix. However, language mixing also occurs through language fashions. The fact that language fashions can even cross national frontiers is demonstrated by the German word *Perückenmacher* (wig-maker) being adopted in Russian as *parikmacher*—a word now used to mean ‘hairdresser’ (the German for which is *Friseur*, a loan from French).

Language mixtures are particularly evident in terms of a language’s lexis. For instance, the English language has been subject to three different influences, as is evident from its lexis: Romance (Latin, French, Spanish—53.6%), Germanic (Old English, Scandinavian, Dutch, German—31.1%), and Greek (10.8%) (Bodmer, 1955, p. 3).

The German language is a different mixture, though hardly less varied. Thus an analysis of an arbitrary sample of 200 entries in the *Große Duden* dictionary produced the following results regarding origin: Greek (14%), Latin (14%), English (12%), French (10%), Italian (4%). The sample also contained one word each of Arabic, Danish, Japanese and Polish origin.

Alongside lexical evidence there is also syntactical evidence of foreign influences on languages. For instance, Romanian, though a Romance language, uses the postpositional article rather than the prepositional article, thus following the model of its neighbouring languages Bulgarian and Albanian (Ineichen, 1979, p. 97). Similar phenomena have been shown to exist in the areas of morphology and word formation (Birnbaum, 1965, p. 17). It is assumed that such assimilation facilitates the process of translating between neighbouring languages. All this allows us to conclude that living languages are (to a greater or lesser degree) mixed languages, that is products of contact between people speaking different languages, be this contact shorter or longer, more superficial or more intensive.

**Everybody has a Potential for Developing Several Languages**

In looking closely at a language, we find not only influences from other languages but also numerous subsystems (or varieties). We all normally master several such subsystems. For instance, we are familiar with the variety typical of our region (dialect) or social stratum (sociolect). We can also usually tell whether a word is still in use or already outmoded. In English there is the very telling phrase of a ‘temporal dialect’ (Gregory & Carroll, 1978, p. 13). The German expression
'language of a generation' (Sprache einer Generation) rather serves to designate the particular language of an age group.

The availability of linguistic varieties has occasionally been called 'inner multilingualism' (Wandruszka, 1979). However, as transitions between individual varieties are fluid and as the latter can hardly be defined as independent languages, I would prefer to speak of 'budding multilingualism'. What remains indisputable is that everybody appears to have a potential for multilingualism.

Just as there are reasons for monolingualism or simplified linguae francae, there are also reasons for the development of linguistic varieties and multilingualism. We are all aware of the fact that young people (but also young adults) develop special languages of their own which far exceed what could be termed a mere fashion. What are the motives for such developments? What makes even some children want to set themselves apart from their peers or from older children?

Parents who bring up their children bilingually following Ronjat’s recommendation (one person, one language), sometimes find that the children temporarily neglect one language or even actively refuse to speak the second language. On the whole such rejections do not last. For in growing up and with changing interests children discover that language represents one aspect of their identity and can be used to set themselves apart from others. A six-year-old who, for several years, has refused to speak his 'father tongue' with his father, may suddenly rediscover this language because he has found his father's work interesting or because he has found that mastering another language enhances his standing in his peer-group.

Of course, peer-groups can also act in favour of not using a language. This is particularly likely if the language concerned holds little social prestige, as is the case with Arabic or Turkish in Germany. In the long term, this may lead to a partial or total suppression of this language, which in turn may have a negative effect on children's cognitive development.

To conclude, alongside tendencies to make languages more uniform and more easily comprehensible (e.g. pidgin, lingua franca) there are also moves towards modifying languages to make them more suitable for specific tasks or for reaching certain target groups. These contradictory developments account for the development of linguistic varieties (e.g. languages for special purposes or technical languages) and—within appropriate contexts—for the origins of multilingualism.

What Limits to Multilingualism?

How many languages can a person learn? Where are the limits of multilingualism?

However simple these questions may sound, they are not easily answered. To gain a first orientation we are going to look at multilingualism which develops without any systematic tuition, i.e. multilingualism acquired without (or largely without) external control, or 'self-controlled language learning'. Such natural language acquisition can still be found among Vaupé Indians who live in the border area between Colombia and Brazil on the Papuri and Tiquié rivers. Sorensen reports that they all speak at least three languages fluently, many four or five, and that some of them are able to understand more than ten languages. This is in spite of the fact that the Tukano languages appear to be less closely related to one another than, for example, Romance languages (Jackson, 1974, p. 53 f.).

If we compare these observations with reports about European multilingualism, the following picture emerges: in smaller countries a relatively high proportion of
the population speak several languages (Denmark, 31%; the Netherlands, 44%). On the other hand, the proportion is relatively small in larger European countries, such as Italy, the UK, Spain or Germany (6% in each case). While in the latter countries well over half the population is monolingual (Italy, 76%; UK, 74%; France, 67%; Germany, 60%), the proportion of monolinguals in the Netherlands is no more than around 28% (Finkenstaedt & Schröder, 1990, p. 18).

As it is unlikely that the Vaupé Indian population is more linguistically gifted than that of Europe, it is reasonable to assume that Europeans have not yet exhausted their natural talents. Besides, experts are critical of the fact that our teaching of foreign languages is not as efficient as it might be (Homburger Empfehlungen, 1980; Koblenzer Erklärung, 1989). But if improvements are to be introduced, intensive and applied research activities are required, particularly regarding the acquisition of third and fourth languages at different life stages.

It remains to be remembered that most people are capable of learning three or four languages. If in a future European society the bulk of the population were to be multilingual in this sense, this would favourably affect social conditions in general because:

—understanding would be facilitated through increased opportunities for personal contact with people speaking other languages
—prejudices and stereotypes would be dismantled or differentiated, and
—more flexible cooperation (not merely in the context of the economy) would become possible.

The ability to speak several languages (like the ability to play various musical instruments) requires regular practice so that skills are not unlearned or forgotten. Regular practice seems to be less important if a foreign language is mastered at a high level.

However, the more languages a person acquires, the greater the danger of skills already acquired getting lost through neglect or disuse. For instance, a move into a less used language may become blocked when another (perhaps newly acquired) language is being used more intensively. People find themselves desperately searching for words in one language, e.g. a German might be casting around for French expressions but only come up with words from a language recently learned, such as Turkish, or from languages used more frequently, say, English or Italian. Experience has shown that the reverse is also true. Someone reactivating a language temporarily neglected may experience problems if, at a later point, he or she wants to move into a fourth or fifth language.

First indications of linguistic erosion are normally observed with regard to productive skills (Cohen, 1989), while receptive skills (reading and listening) appear to be less affected. For our context it is important that younger learners (especially children) tend to pick up basic knowledge of new languages more quickly than older learners, but they also lose it more quickly (Cohen, 1989; Olshtain, 1989). Generally speaking, erosion can occur at all levels of language, albeit to differing extents. Words drift away and are recognised but no longer actively remembered, while remaining vocabulary becomes harder to call up. Constructions and phrases as well as marked elements seem to be lost more easily than basic structures and functions as well as unmarked elements. This entails a loss of fluency of speech. Observations have also shown that there is a relapse into the foreign accent (De Bot & Clyne, 1989).
Like everything connected with languages, the process of forgetting a language is a dynamic one. In many areas forgetting, like acquiring, a language seems to move in the form of waves.

From experience we know that related languages are learned faster and forgotten less easily than more remote languages. In other words, it is going to take more effort to acquire and cultivate a more remote language than a related language.

To sum up, we can say that everybody has a potential to learn other languages. Being able to cope with three or four languages does not appear to be unusual, while acquiring further languages requires an increasing effort to maintain languages already learned, particularly if the languages to be learned are more remote ones. Multilingualism of the kind displayed by Frederic II and Schliemann are likely to remain the exception, requiring specific preconditions. Although we know very little about poor language learners, it must be assumed that there are people who find learning a foreign language extremely difficult. If these people acquire a second language, this should be acknowledged as a genuine achievement and they should not be expected to learn any further languages.

Research into Multilingualism

While acquisition of a first foreign language has been the subject of research for a number of decades and that of a second language has been investigated at least over the last 20 years, research into multilingualism has hardly begun (Rude-Dravina, 1967; Kadar-Hoffmann, 1983; Mägiste, 1984; Thomas, 1988; Helot, 1988; Bartelt, 1989; Möhle, 1989; Cohen, 1989; Jaspaert & Lemmens, 1990; Swain et al., 1990; Valencia & Cenoz, 1992; Stavans, 1992).

Leaving aside a small number of case studies (Kadar-Hoffmann, 1983, who spent several years studying the acquisition of negation with learners acquiring German, French and Hungarian simultaneously; Helot, 1988, a case study of two children in two different families who grew up with English and French and learned Irish at elementary school), we can say that current investigations are dominated by experimental or quasi-experimental procedures.

Research focuses both on language-learning strategies and processing of ‘beginners’ and ‘experts’ (Thomas, 1985; Nation & McLaughlin, 1986; McLaughlin & Nayak, 1989) and on the impact of learning and, in particular, production processes of languages learned previously. Investigations in this area tend to refer either to test analyses (Ahukanna et al., 1981; Jung, 1981; Mägiste, 1984) or a combination of participatory observation and tests (Jaspaert & Lemmens, 1990) or on the analysis of descriptive tasks under contrastive perspectives (Möhle, 1989; Bartelt, 1989; Hufeisen, 1991).

How then does knowledge of a foreign language affect acquisition? Are there differences between learners who already have one or several foreign languages at their disposal (‘experts’) and learners who have never previously learned a foreign language (‘beginners’)?

Acquisition Processes of Beginners and Experts

In an experiment, Nation and McLaughlin confronted monolingual, bilingual and multilingual people with an artificial language and made them learn this language over ten days without (implicitly) or with (explicitly) instructions. In the case of
explicit learning, no differences among the groups emerged. However, in the process of implicit learning, bilinguals did better than monolinguals, and multilinguals did considerably better than bilinguals (Nation & McLaughlin, 1986, p. 49). It is assumed that multilinguals are better at abstracting and are also able to recognise different patterns more easily due to their previous learning experience.

In a different laboratory experiment, a number of people were encouraged to learn an artificial language under different conditions (rote-learning, rule-based learning). Those with wider language-learning experience reacted more flexibly to learning tasks. They were in a position to deploy memory strategies more effectively and to resort to a larger number of learning strategies to understand rules. The authors drew the conclusion that experienced learners manage to penetrate faster to a meta-level as well as being able to assess better the effectiveness of the strategies and methods used (McLaughlin & Nayak, 1989, p. 11). Generally speaking, language experts (i.e. multilinguals) appear to apply strategies more flexibly. Above all, they are quicker at abandoning inappropriate methods as well as at gaining new insights by restructuring their learner language system. It appears that in acquiring new languages people also learn how to learn languages.

**Influences of Languages Learned Previously**

Thomas studied 26 college students whose first language was English, who had begun to learn French and who had no or only one foreign language (Spanish). Some students had acquired their second language through informal contacts, others in language courses. After one semester these learners were tested regarding their knowledge of French vocabulary and grammar. They also had to sit a written French test.

The analysis showed that, overall, bilinguals produced the better test results, regarding vocabulary as well as grammar.

Bilinguals who had learned Spanish in structured courses proved clearly superior to those who had acquired their second language through informal contacts. Besides, bilinguals who had learned their second language in a formal context scored most highly in the written test.

These results suggest that in learning a further (related?) language (e.g. Spanish as second and French as third language) a positive transfer can assist the learning process. This is confirmed by a study by Möhle (1989) which focused on learners whose first language was German, whose second language was English and whose third language was French. The learners were studying Spanish as a fourth (or fifth) language and were asked to describe a short film in Spanish. Möhle found that in receptive processes the influence of the first language was stronger. However, in production there were influences of not only the first language but also of the third (French), particularly in the lexical field, while there seemed little evidence of any influence of the second language (English). Interestingly, the influence of French was evident even where French had not been used actively for a considerable period.

Learners seem not only to benefit from having previously studied a (related) language, but also from mastering more than one system of written language. Even a sound mastery of the written language in one's mother tongue has, it has been shown, a positive impact on the acquisition of a third language (Swain et al.,
Thus we can assume that language learning is facilitated if a learner's second and third languages are related. However, it is as yet unclear to what extent this encourages mistakes based on interference, as relevant studies did not differentiate sufficiently between intralingual and interlingual mistakes, i.e. development-based and language-based errors. For instance, certain errors attributed by Hufeisen to influences of English can also be observed with learners of German who never learned English (e.g. Hufeisen, 1991, pp. 74 and 82: 'shuh' and 'shade' or 'hinter').

The influence of a previously learned language can, under certain circumstances, fade or also grow. Hufeisen reports about a decrease in interference between English as a second and German as a third language with learners whose first language is Arabic, while interference increases with learners whose first language is Thai (Hufeisen, 1991, p. 93 f.). Such observations ought to be tested and explained.

The Need for Languages

It is useful in this context to distinguish between social needs (i.e. in industry and politics) and individual needs (i.e. individuals' desire to learn foreign languages).

The need of German firms for foreign languages is summed up by Schröder, (1991, p. 10) as follows:

- English: 95%
- French: 75%
- Two or more foreign languages: 85%
- Spanish: 40%
- Italian: 25%

He explains that knowledge of foreign languages is required particularly at middle and upper management levels in medium-sized firms with links abroad. At lower management levels a knowledge of English is normally sufficient. The ability to write in a foreign language appears generally to be of inferior significance (except in certain very specific posts) (Schröder, 1991, p. 11).

Considering (a) that the size of a firm is by no means crucial in defining its need for foreign languages, (b) that export- as well as import-oriented firms require a multilingual workforce, and (c) that in large firms three or more foreign languages are often needed, there seems to be a very good case for advocating a multilingual education. Large firms such as Siemens and BASF now provide intensive in-house language training for their staff. This obviously proves that the costs so incurred are offset by gains from having multilingual personnel. Even in the US a process of rethinking has begun. A recent concept is that of the IMQ, the 'international meeting quotient', which is linked up with the number of foreign languages mastered. It has become obvious that in the US, too, knowledge of foreign languages has become an important ingredient for those hoping to climb the career ladder (Northeast Conference, 1991).

As far as individuals' language needs are concerned, many people feel the wish to improve their language knowledge acquired in school or to add other languages. In other words, adults are increasingly interested in acquiring foreign languages,
which explains the high level of demand for foreign languages in German adult education institutions.

**Languages Sequence**

The Helsinki Agreement of August 1975 asked for foreign language teaching to be intensified in order to facilitate international understanding and in future also international collaboration. These suggestions were elaborated in the 'Homburg Recommendations' (Homburger Empfehlungen, 1980) by German scientists, writers and members of the civil service working in the field of education. Here distinctions are drawn between languages for human encounters, fundamental languages, languages to be used as *linguae francae*, and 'opening-up' languages. This was done to create a positive awareness of multilingualism as well as to provide arguments for a possible sequence for learning certain languages. I would like briefly to look at these concepts because I regard them as helpful for an extended understanding of multilingualism.

Languages for human encounters are defined as those which were taught in a playful context under informal as well as formal conditions at kindergarten and/or at elementary school levels (Homburger Empfehlungen, 1980, p. 76 f.), for instance German (or Danish) in northern (or southern) Schleswig. In some conurbation areas in Germany the languages would be Turkish or Greek, Italian or Spanish, Russian or Polish. It is recommended that German children, too, 'are introduced, be it only to a modest degree, to the languages and cultures of foreign groups whose members have come to live in the Federal Republic, whether temporarily or permanently' (Weinrich, 1986, p. 318 f.). Admittedly, this must be squared with the social prestige of these languages as well as with attitudes of German and foreign residents. Besides, it is currently not yet clear whether an encounter with a foreign language ought primarily to serve linguistic sensitisation rather than systematic language acquisition (Landesinstitut für Schule und Weiterbildung, 1990) or whether it should represent a pre-dating of the teaching of foreign languages (Doyé, 1991; Pelz, 1992).

'Fundamental language' is the name given to the first foreign language to be offered in the first year of all German secondary schools, irrespective of the type of secondary school. The language in question ought to be one of high cultural prestige, such as French, Italian or Spanish. It is argued that English, which is related to German as well as being widely used in German mass media (films, TV, rock music etc.), might be learned at a later stage. It is hardly surprising that only West European languages are mentioned, as the Homburg Recommendations were conceived at a time when the Iron Curtain was still firmly in place (1980). Today, Polish and Hungarian would presumably need to be included.

Even at pre-16 secondary school level, a further foreign language ought to be taught, 'which can be used particularly when two interlocutors with different fundamental languages cannot communicate with each other in either of them' (Weinrich, 1986, p. 320). Such *linguae francae* could be Russian and Spanish, as well as of course English.

Finally, the Homburg Recommendations refer to 'languages for opening-up purposes'. These are languages such as Arabic, Chinese or Japanese which are to help in opening up more remote cultures. Thus, they are languages which are
regarded as difficult by Central Europeans. They are to be taught in the upper level of secondary schools.

**Prospect: Education Towards Multilingualism**

'Where is my shovel, Mama?', Tanja asked on entering. 'I have been speaking French. Do answer in that language.' Tanja wanted to say it, but had forgotten the French for 'shovel'. Her mother whispered it to her and then told her in French where to find the shovel.

_Tolstoy, Anna Karenina_

There can be no doubt that in the long term the number of multilingual individuals in Europe is going to grow, due to the increasing mobility of the European population and the incentives deriving from interesting career prospects. However, this is going to be connected with a specific language choice. English will continue to take priority as it is likely to maintain its position as European and global _lingua franca_ over the coming years. Languages such as Chinese, Japanese and German will presumably gain in importance, while we can expect less widely spoken languages and those lacking in economic interest, such as Danish, Greek, Czech or Portuguese, to be neglected.

The EC's linguistic policy is attempting to counteract this trend. Thus regional languages are to be revalued through being used more intensively. In addition, everyone in the Community will have the right 'to speak their mother tongue in any life situation, although they should also be able to learn foreign languages' (Brackeniers, 1991, p. 11).

Whether such measures are going to be sufficient to support and preserve minority languages, and to prevent their gradual displacement in the long term by widespread and economically important languages, has to remain open. How important such an attitude towards minority languages actually is may be demonstrated by a conflict (hardly noted in the West) around the Georgian language, which in 1970 was to be abolished as an official language in the Soviet Union, a plan which promptly caused a revolt (McLaughlin, 1986, p. 42).

Brakeniers' statements refer to the autochthonous minority languages of Europe, e.g. Basque or Frisian. But what about the numerous languages of immigrant (i.e. allochthonous) minorities, such as Turkish, Arabic and Tamil? Should not these languages, too, be supported and cultivated? Should we not campaign intensively for their equality?

Today we know that mastery of the first language is an important prerequisite for the acquisition of a second. Generally speaking, a well-developed first language is regarded as a sound basis for language learning, while a less developed first language may even represent a learning obstacle (Baur & Meder, 1989). This allows us to conclude:

_Educating people to become multilingual ought to begin with their respective first language. For the first language to fulfil its function as a 'positive learning prerequisite', it must be as well developed as possible. As comprehension processes in foreign languages seem to take place to a considerable extent on the basis of first-language competence (Möhle, 1989; Rehbein, 1987), teaching in the first language ought to be reinforced._
Spolsky pointed out that the 'standard variety' of a language, which is the variety taught in schools, is actually used by fewer and fewer speakers as 'mother tongue'. Thus no more than 20% of children in London start school speaking, 'standard English' (Spolsky, 1986, p. 182). What does this mean for the development of standard varieties? What new significance do the mass media acquire as disseminators of 'standard varieties'? Scientific investigations into these issues would be extremely welcome.

By and large, speakers of 'standard varieties' of languages enjoy higher social esteem than speakers of 'non-standard varieties'. Speakers of less valued varieties or of minority languages are frequently regarded by teachers as cognitively less able or as less willing to learn or as linguistically less gifted.

The fact is often overlooked that the exclusion of a child's 'family language' (or of the family variety) from school life may negatively affect the child's cognitive and emotional development. This applies particularly if the 'family language' is displaced by the 'standard variety' (Spolsky, 1986, p. 183 ff.).

On the other hand, an accepted and well developed first language can serve as the basis for an 'additive bilingualism', that is a bilingualism which positively affects the whole personality. In terms of educating individuals to be multilingual this means:

Teachers of first languages ought to be made aware more strongly of the phenomenon of 'linguistic varieties', so that, on the one hand, they learn to accept their pupils' 'family languages' as varieties of 'equal validity', while on the other hand being able to introduce this topic in a competent manner and thereby help to dismantle negative value judgments regarding linguistic varieties and especially minority languages.

It has been pointed out above that mastery of a written language system tends to have a positive effect on the acquisition of a foreign language. If, however, a second system is being introduced while the first is not yet firmly in place, this will confuse the learner and undermine rather than support the developmental process (McLaughlin, 1986, p. 35 ff.; for a successful experiment aimed at simultaneously introducing two written language systems, see Nehr et al., 1988. However, this was only possible due to the availability of a high level of qualified staff.)

With regard to an education towards multilingualism, it should be stressed that mastery of even two or three written language systems appears to benefit the acquisition of foreign languages. For this reason, the development of such 'academic skills' should be given particular attention. For the acquisition of a written system goes hand in hand with a process of increased awareness and the development of analytical and metalinguistic skills. These will have a positive impact, firstly in the area of the first language and secondly in the area of a second and third language. Besides we know that analytical and metalinguistic skills can facilitate independent study for the language learner and, with elderly people, compensate at least partially for reduced memory capacities (Apeltauer, 1992).

Thus, although writing in a foreign language is only required in 'specialised jobs' (Schroeder, 1991, p. 11) and a restriction to the two basic skills (listening and speaking) is recommended if foreign languages are
taught at kindergarten age (Gompf, 1992, p. 30), foreign language
teaching in schools should also include an introduction to the respective
written system as this helps to promote the development of specific
language learning abilities.

If we assume that learning related languages is easier than learning more remote
languages—for which there appears to be a fair amount of evidence—this would
suggest that the first foreign language for learners with favourable prerequisites
ought to be a more remote language. This is supported, firstly, by the fact
that younger learners find it easier than older ones to acquire the intonation
and pronunciation of a foreign language. Secondly, children behave more
spontaneously than young people or adults, for example in imitating others’
speech, and are not guided to the same extent by their first-language system
or by conscious cognitive operations which, in the case of more remote languages,
tend to lead the learner astray. In other words, children keen to learn foreign
languages are the better candidates to begin foreign-language learning with an
‘opening-up’ language, or a more remote, non-related language such as Turkish,
Arabic or Japanese, while weaker language learners should restrict themselves from
the beginning to learning one of the related linguae francae (e.g. English or
Russian).

As there is always a bidirectional relationship between languages, we can
assume that not only does a differentiated first language benefit the processes of
acquisition of a foreign language, but the reverse also applies: acquiring a foreign
language does have a positive impact on the development of the first language,
especially in the case of children. This leads us to suggest that a second language
ought to be taught as intensively as possible in order for the learner to achieve a
high level of linguistic competence.

Other arguments can be adduced to support this claim. As explained above,
languages mastered at a high level are forgotten less easily than languages where
no more than basic skills have been acquired. Besides, children, although fast
learners, also forget more rapidly than adults. Thus it does not seem to make much
sense to confront children with ‘languages of encounter’ for only a brief period, as
this would mean a waste of learning opportunities and an encouragement to forget.
Finally, we also know that bilingual speakers tend to be better language learners
than monolinguals (Valencia & Cenoz, 1992, p. 445; see also the bibliography
given in this book). I therefore suggest that the second language ought to be
developed as fully as possible, as in acquiring a second language learners can also
learn how to learn languages, thus creating valuable impulses for the development
of the first language. A high level of competence also counteracts the danger of
forgetting. There is also evidence that two well-developed languages facilitate the
acquisition of a third language.

This does not mean that I wish to cast doubt on the basic validity of the
concept of ‘languages of encounter’. What I do wish to stress is that a short-term
confrontation with one (or several) language(s), though useful as a means to
sensitise learners, can replace neither the effort nor the experience involved in
128 f.) still requires closer scrutiny.

As multilingualism needs to be prepared for at school and, above all, main-
tained after young people have left school, an awareness as to what it takes to
cultivate a language once learned ought to be developed while young people are still at school. In adult education a larger number of refresher courses would be desirable in order to allow adults to re-activate their language skills.

Currently, young people at school in Germany have to learn one or two languages. The Homburg Recommendations would prefer three to four languages. One ‘language of encounter’ (neighbouring language) would be taught in a playful manner at pre-school level, followed by a ‘fundamental language’ from the age of 11 (French, Italian or Spanish) and only a little later by an international *lingua franca* (English, Spanish or Russian). Finally, at the post-16 stage, an ‘opening-up language’ (Arabic, Chinese, Japanese) would be taught (Homburger Empfehlungen, 1980, p. 76 f.).

Given the current state of training I do not necessarily consider it wise to increase the number of languages to be learned. Still today many pupils leave school without sufficient knowledge of foreign languages. Rather than offer more languages (as recommended by professional associations and experts) I would prefer to see existing language courses improved. Someone who has learned a foreign language successfully is going to be more easily motivated to learn a further foreign language than a previously frustrated learner. Besides, she or he is going to enjoy a better starting position.

Admittedly, there are experts who maintain that a foreign language cannot successfully be learned in a classroom (Felix & Weigl, 1991, p. 178). Should we therefore send all pupils abroad so that they can acquire a foreign language under ‘natural conditions’?

We know that learners with good prerequisites learn just as well under informal conditions (Obler, 1989) as under formal ones. On the other hand, learners with less favourable prerequisites benefit from formal teaching, as structures and connections can be made ‘transparent’ for them. Normally there would also be additional ways of consolidating what has been learned.

However, let me return to the myth of the ‘natural way to learn’. It has never been regarded as totally acceptable by the ruling classes (Bourne, 1988, p. 96), as demonstrated by elite schools who have always successfully trained multilingual individuals—a fact which apparently eluded Felix and Weigl.

One example of such elite schools are the European Schools where pupils learn at least three languages each, and where often (e.g. in the Brussels School) a total of seven foreign languages is offered. Here training in several foreign languages has successfully operated for many years, though teaching is supported by carefully planned extracurricular measures, so-called ‘peer group activities’. By now, these schools also encompass sizable contingents of working-class children (in Brussels, for instance, from Italian miners’ families) whose learning success does not substantially differ from that of the rest of the school population (Housen & Beardsmore, 1987, p. 100).

Although French is the dominant language in public life in Brussels, a large proportion of the population also speaks Dutch. The fact that large sections of the centre of Brussels are inhabited by immigrant families from the Mediterranean (Leman, 1990, p. 8 f.) makes for contact zones in schools which encourage multilingualism. Pilot schemes take this into consideration. Children from immigrant families (Italian, Greek, Turkish, Spanish, Moroccan) receive language tuition for three years at kindergarten level before entering schools where they are
introduced to a majority language (Dutch) and later also to French. This scheme pays great attention to the respective first language (Jaspaert & Lemmens, 1990, p. 47). The results available so far are encouraging, partly because in the meantime even elite schools in Brussels are taking an interest in this multilingual scheme or participate in the project.

Can foreign languages then be taught at school after all? Teachers tend to assume so, not totally mistakenly, it would appear to me. Admittedly the quality of teaching is bound to play a crucial role (teaching methods geared to the needs of particular age groups, stimulating variations in terms of content and form, offering an element of choice to learners).

Not only qualitative, but also quantitative aspects are bound to play a part, such as the number of classes per week, group sizes, availability of media facilities and rooms. The question of whether ‘normal’ schools can be adjusted in all areas to match this model is ultimately going to be a matter of resources. It is very likely that results could be improved through all-day supervision, smaller groups, appropriate facilities and better-trained teachers, although location-based advantages (Brussels as a multilingual environment) and ‘starting advantages’ (parents belonging to socially advantaged groups) could hardly be compensated for even then.

To sum up: if we are to educate people to become multilingual, this requires a level of knowledge regarding processes of learning and teaching not currently available to us, except in very rudimentary form. For this reason, the EC, too, ought to provide financial support for relevant research projects, be it in the area of basic research or in applied research, with the latter investigating ways of securing or evaluating hypotheses or results produced by basic research. It is self-evident that such projects ought to include studies of the ‘educational impact’ of mass media on standard varieties, stereotypes, prejudices and changing attitudes towards multilingualism.

REFERENCES


FREUDENSTEIN, R. (Ed.) Fremdsprachenlernen im Kindesalter (Dortmund).
European Journal of Education

Studierenden des Grundstudiums in Deutschland, Belgien und Finnland (Augsburg).


