

li136

Linguistic Insights

Studies in Language and Communication

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Becoming Multilingual

Language Learning and Language Policy
between Attitudes and Identities

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Introduction

This volume presents research that fits in with a range of studies over the past decade that respond to the widespread phenomenon of multilingualism¹. Multilingualism has become an increasingly common phenomenon around the world due to many factors, including issues concerning the maintenance and promotion of regional and minority languages, and the ever emergent need for people to know other languages than their own so as to be competitive internationally in the globalized business world. In 2004 Clyne claimed that multilingualism, rather than bilingualism, would become the desirable cooperative goal of all nations. Multilingualism maintenance, development and spread, according to him, would be “related to other issues in language policy, including school language choice, university language offerings, and the linguistic effects of the internationalization of universities” (Clyne 2004: 19). If one looks at the current world’s linguistic situation, there are around 7,000 languages and about 200 independent countries altogether, as reported in *Ethnologue* (Lewis 2009). The number of speakers of the different languages is unevenly distributed, and 40% of the world’s population has one of the most common eight languages as a first language: Mandarin, Hindi, Spanish, English, Bengali, Portuguese, Arabic and Russian (Gordon 2005). More than 4,000 of the world’s languages are spoken by less than 2% of the world’s population and 516 of these languages are nearly extinct. The most multilingual continents are Asia and Africa (see also Cenoz 2009: 1). Such a situation in a time of globalization calls for multilingual competences and multilingual speakers. Multilingual si-

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tuations are now becoming more and more common, and the contexts taken into consideration by the authors of the chapters in this volume contribute to research in this field.

Multilingualism is characterized by the nature of its multilingual participants' use of the languages involved, which usually takes place in environments of both linguistic and cultural diversity (see Cenoz 2000; Herdina/Jessner 2002; Hoffman/Ytsma, 2004; Pavlenko/Blackledge, 2004; Aronin/Singleton, 2008; Aronin/Hufeisen, 2009).

Multilinguals may use a number of languages on account of many different social, cultural, and economic reasons. They may live in a multilingual community, or overlapping bilingual communities, or be in contact with several monolingual communities. Their proficiency in each of their languages is likely to differ, and may fluctuate over time (Herdina/Jessner, 2002). Their languages may have different roles and functions, they may use them separately or code-switch, and they are still described as multilingual whether they know three or seven languages (Kemp, 2009:12-13).

McArthur (1992) defines the multilingual speaker as a person who has “the ability to use three or more languages, either separately or in various degrees of code-mixing. Different languages are used for different purposes, competence in each varying according to such factors as register, occupation and education” (McArthur, 1992: 673; see also Edwards, 1994 and Vildomec, 1963).

Multilingual communication is therefore not only the use of language as a medium of communication; it is also a system which enters into a relationship with other languages and imprints its own dynamics upon other human beings involved in communication by activating different links. “Participants in multilingual interactions can be said to activate links between language and actions, mental activities, perception, thought patterns, knowledge systems etc. – which are active both universally and in each individual language” (House/Rehbein, 2004: 2). In such a situation of contact between different languages as different communication systems, languages mutually influence one another and their interaction creates, as a result, multilingual communication systems.

The relationships between different languages in multilingual communication involve complex constellations of linguistic features,