



TITLE

What is plurilingualism/multilingualism/bilingualism? Social issues

KEY IDEA

Many deaf people are bimodal bilingual

CONSPECTUS

1. Introduction: Definition of Plurilingualism, Multilingualism and Bilingualism
2. Key idea: Many deaf people are bimodal bilingual
3. Reasons: Why do people become bilingual or plurilingual?
4. Consequences: Code-Switching
5. Conclusion: Plurilingualism and Multilingualism are consequences of globalization

REFERENCES

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OBJECTIVES

You can **match** the explanations for multilingualism, plurilingualism and bilingualism with the respective terms

You can **recognize** correct statements about bimodal bilingualism



You can **identify** the reasons for plurilingualism, multilingualism and bilingualism

FULL TEXT

1. Introduction: Definition of Plurilingualism, Multilingualism and Bilingualism

Plurilingualism is the ability of a person to know several languages: usually this means that they can use them and understand them. For example, a deaf woman knows Austrian Sign Language, German and English. If she travels to Italy a lot, she may also learn and use Italian Sign Language.

[Please substitute your own examples.]

When a society, country or region uses several languages, we use the word **Multilingualism**. For example, the official language of Austria is German, but Hungarian and Croatian are also official languages in Burgenland, and Slovenian is also an official language in Carinthia. People use the word multilingualism mainly in connection with education and policy and not with single people that know more than one language.

Bilingualism means that you know, understand and use two languages. Also, that you are able to use one or the other, depending on the situation.

There are different definitions of plurilingualism and bilingualism. Often, people do not know two or more languages equally well. People may know one language better than another language. Also, it is not clear how well you must know the other languages. Some scientists believe that plurilingual people or bilingual people have to master all the languages they know. Other scientists believe that it is enough if plurilingual people or bilingual people know only some words and phrases from the other languages. A good definition is that a person is proficient in two or more languages. This means that you know them well, but you need not be perfect.



One reason for plurilingualism and bilingualism is that there are many different languages in the world. If a person wants to communicate with someone from another country, one of them has to learn another language.

2. Key idea: Many deaf people are bimodal bilingual

Deaf people usually need to be bilingual. They are surrounded by hearing people who use the spoken and written national language. Some languages are only used by a smaller group of people. These languages are called **minority languages**. A spoken and written minority language is often used by a large group of people in another country. This is not true for sign languages. Most hearing people do not know sign language. So if deaf people want to communicate with the hearing majority without an interpreter, they have to have at least some knowledge of the spoken and written national language. Therefore deaf people often know the sign language and the spoken and signed language of their country. The spoken language is the **majority language**: this means that this language is used by the largest group of people in the country.

We have a special name for the bilingualism of deaf people. People who research languages call this **bimodal bilingualism**. People communicate in two languages, but the way how they produce the two languages is different: bimodal bilingual people use the acoustic channel for spoken languages and the visual channel for sign languages. You can also use the visual channel for written languages. This way of producing language in two different communication channels is called "mode". "Bimodal" means "two modes". The scientists add "bimodal" before "bilingual". Bimodal bilingualism is only possible if the person uses a sign language and a spoken language.

3. Reasons: Why do people become bilingual or multilingual

3.1 Individual bilingualism



This means that a person communicates in two languages. This can happen in a natural way: for example, when the parents of a child use different languages and the baby grows up with both. In this case, it is best if each parent uses only his or her own mother tongue. The people around the family may use one of these two languages. Sometimes both parents are from other countries. Then the parents' languages can differ from the national language. This means that the people around the family will use a third language. Normally, hearing children of deaf parents grow up bimodal bilingual – they learn both sign language and spoken language.

There are other possibilities of language learning as well: for example, a child can also learn another language when it meets children who use that language – on the playground, in kindergarten, in school and so on. Usually older children learn foreign languages mainly at school. Adults often learn foreign languages in a language course. The easiest way to learn another foreign language is to stay in a foreign country and to use the language in everyday life.

3.2 Bilingual/Multilingual countries

Countries can be multilingual or bilingual, too. There are countries or regions close to a border where two or more languages are used. Sometimes the laws of a country recognize two or more languages as official languages. Switzerland is an example of a country where the inhabitants use several languages. But even in Switzerland, the people of a certain region often know their own regional language better than the other languages that are used in the country.

When a country is multilingual or bilingual, there are usually political or historical reasons:

- A country wins a war against another country. Then the language of the winning country may become the official language of the losing country. An example is Africa: the winners often formed new countries. The borders of these new countries did not respect the old language borders.
- People immigrate to another country and form a language minority there. When this



happens, they may use one language at home and another language outside of their home.

- A part of a country joins another country. This can happen after a war or after negotiations. For example, South Tyrol belonged to Austria and later became a part of Italy. [Please substitute your own examples.]
- Globalization encourages people to use more than one language. There is a lot of exchange between the countries of the world. Many countries use spoken and written English to communicate with each other. Therefore it is important to know at least some English. It is even better, if you also know some other languages.

3.3. Bilingual/multilingual information

Information can be multilingual, too. For example, websites can show a text in two or more written languages or sign languages. If you look at the homepage of "SpreadTheSign", you can see the same text in many languages.

4. Consequences: Code switching

People who use two or more languages often change between the different languages. The language that people use may depend on the situation. One possible reason is that a person does not understand one of the languages. Another reason may be a quote in the original language: you sign or say another person's words. Sometimes people just use words, signs or sentences from another language. Often they decide to do this. Sometimes they use a different language without thinking about it.

5. Conclusion: Plurilingualism and Multilingualism are consequences of globalization



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Today, people travel all across the world. Through travel and media they learn new languages. The more languages you have already learned, the easier you will learn another language. This is because you have learned to compare the words and structures of different languages. Bilingualism and plurilingualism may also give you better job chances. They open your mind for other cultures and help you to make new friends worldwide.