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BILINGUALISM: WHAT'S IN A NAME?

» Abstract

The article takes another look at the National Bilingualism Plan through a discussion of the popular terms such as bilingualism, language knowledge, and nation. I argue that they are becoming common knowledge and often replace terms of overlapping or completely different meanings. The article also demonstrates that the Plan creates a particular image of the nation and its place in the world. Consisting of various proposals, it fails to present a clear policy, which opens doors to often contradictory interpretations and therefore fears and resistance to it. While reconsidering the role of bilingualism in reshaping the society, I propose to focus on the process of learning and knowledge instead of language as such, and an individual instead of a group.

Keywords: Bilingualism, nationalism, National Bilingualism Plan, empowerment, language

» Resumen

El artículo hace un repaso al Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo a través de la discusión de los términos tales como el bilingüismo, el conocimiento lingüístico y la nación. Yo sostengo que estos términos están siendo utilizados como conocimiento común y sustituyen a menudo términos con significados completamente diferentes. El Plan no presenta una política única. Esto crea múltiples interpretaciones, a menudo contradictorias y por lo tanto, los temores y la resistencia al programa y a la idea del bilingüismo. En mi discusión me enfoco en significado cognitivo y educativo del bilingüismo. Yo propongo que es más útil centrarse en el proceso de aprendizaje y en conocimiento en lugar del lenguaje como tal, y un individuo en lugar de un grupo.

Palabras clave: Bilingüismo, Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo, nacionalismo, empoderamiento, lenguaje.

Introduction

Soon after arriving in Colombia, I could not help but notice that bilingualism was among the top subjects of discussion in several educational events, institutions and debates. My first reaction was, “Why does everyone speak so much about it? What may that mean?” After all, as a medieval Middle East proverb attributed to Hoca Nasreddin says, “You can say ‘halva-halva’ but it will not taste any sweeter in your mouth.”

Then I realized that at the heart of this matter is the issue that ‘bilingualism’ became common knowledge. Since it is used on an everyday basis, the term is familiar to most people and thus acquires new meanings (depending both on where it has been used and by whom). In turn, the term loses its scientific components and becomes an umbrella term for various notions with overlapping usages (Mora, 2012). Moreover, on the psychological level, one eventually gets tired or mad at the word or starts ignoring it altogether.

Various religious, philosophical writings and mystical practices, as, for example, Kabbalah, share the belief that only by knowing the true name of the thing can you acquire control over it (Clute & Grant, 1999; Frazer, 2000; Laitman, 2005, 2007; Mayrink, 1999). So far, the thing – bilingualism – still has power over our minds (Cummins, 2000). In this article, I will focus on the key common knowledge words present in the equation of the debates around bilingualism to show what we still need to consider while trying to find its true name. I will focus on the debates around bilingualism rather than on bilingualism itself. On the one hand, the nature of bilingualism is

quite vague. On the other hand, it is the interpretation of bilingualism which causes debates instead of the ideas of bilingualism itself. The purpose of the document is a call to reflect on what we mean when saying bilingualism or introducing the idea of it, an idea that a colleague and I have recently been advocating (Golovátina-Mora, 2012; Mora, 2012; Mora & Golovátina-Mora, 2011, 2012).

A Perplexed Background

To start this discussion, I think it is important to introduce a couple of linguistic facts that can provide a useful illustration of the argument. On the one hand, language as such is not a homogenous whole. Any language is a system that includes a big variety of its forms that influence each other, such as standards, dialects, sociolects, accents, registers, idiolects, or jargon, to name just a few. It means that not every ‘native-speaker’ (I use inverted commas to underline the vague and disputable meaning of the word [Mora & Muñoz Luna, 2012; Moussu & Llurda, 2008]) speaks his or her language in the same way. For instance, American English alone may consist of twenty-six dialects (Delaney, 2010). On the other hand, according to a number of authors, we can trace all the languages back to one proto-human language (Schreyer, 2002), which would support the idea of general similarities across cultures. Finally, the number of languages in the world can be estimated at least between 1,000 and 7,000 depending on the source (Anderson, 2010). Meanwhile the number of nations (countries) ranges from 193 (members

of the United Nations) (U.N. at glance), 195 (U.S. Department of State), or 196 (Rosenberg, 2011) independent states. These two facts alone already makes the idea of ‘one nation-one language’ problematic. And, then there is the issue of the almost seven billion people in the world. If we take into account personal ways of pronunciation, vocabulary choices, and dimensions of acceptance of culture, we will have to accept the idea of multiple language varieties within one conventional language. The significance of this fact increases when we remember that a language has always been a tool of communication within a particular culture, reflecting it, contributing to its development, and developing with it.

Bilingualism and the National Bilingual Plan

A short description of the National Bilingualism Plan of the Ministry of Education of Colombia provided at the Ministry’s website “Bilingual Colombia” (Atablero, 2005a) explained that In the globalized world, a country has to develop an ability of its citizens to use at least one foreign language. Thereupon the Ministry of Education designed the National Bilingualism Program 2004-2019, which includes new standards of proficiency in a foreign language: English.

This introduction, which has been reproduced often in other documents sends mixed messages. First, it represents the process of constructing – or fortifying – the national frontiers: it creates an image of the nation that views itself as open to learning from and communicating with others while attempting to join an open globalized world of interdependence and competition.

English, as another document in the same issue of Atablero (2005b) explains, is an important means of communication, and “a third of the world’s population gave a positive answer to learning this language”. Second, the justification of the idea and the document itself also defines the place of the country in the world system – still a learner or even a disciple of the dominant power centers (Europe, not explicitly the United States) and with a reference to the new potential global centers of power (China). Finally, one may also view the issues in the document as an attempt to internationalize an internal problem and as a part of a decades’ long general tendency toward the internationalization of the country’s policies.

The document “Bilingual Colombia” (Atablero, 2005a) also creates a general vision of the National Bilingual Plan. It is a plan for a certain set period of time 2004-2019, which focuses on a particular problem of the language education in the general context of improving quality of education and access to education in the country (Vélez White, et al., 2006). The phrase “it is ideal to be able to command a second or third foreign language” delivers the following possible messages: (a) English is only the first step, especially if in the context of Europe as a frame of reference, where multilingualism is proclaimed as a “key feature” and a long-term objective according to the Commission Action Plan 2004-2006 (“for all EU citizens to speak two languages in addition to their mother tongue”, Eurobarometer, 2006, p. 3); (b) there is the recognition of the existing multilingualism of the Colombian society, either through inclusion of the foreign immigrants or recognizing Spanish as a foreign language in certain communities. This interpretation

is possible in the context of the projects of indigenous bilingualism (Altablero, 2005c). This message, then, makes the term bilingualism an umbrella term for literacy, multilingualism, and general foreign language education. This opens the door for multiple interpretations, but also misunderstandings. This message creates an image of the liberal inclusive society. Nevertheless, this accepts the idea of the Spanish language as a foreign language within the nation where Spanish is a titular language. This assumption thereby excludes indigenous communities and foreigners by recognizing their otherness from the titular nation at least for the time being (see Usma Wilches, 2009).

This is only one possible way of interpreting the Bilingualism Program, which in fact looks rather as a set of different messages and strategies that needed to be interpreted all together in each other's context as well as in the context of the past and present educational practices. The fact that they needed to be interpreted at all creates insecurity and therefore heated debates around bilingualism, which may cause resistance to the Plan and minimize the efficiency of its implementation (González, 2011; Vásquez, 2012).

Bilingualism as a Term

Bilingualism as the majority of terms in the social sciences and humanities has various definitions. The most general approach to bilingualism defines it as “knowing” two languages (Valdez & Figueroa, 1994 in Gottardo & Grant, 2008). Gottardo & Grant noted that a “major difficulty occurs in defining what it means to “know” a language” (2008, p. 1). That brings a whole

set of questions that include approach to language, its knowledge, its popularity or significance, learning process, etc., placing the bilingualism rather in the field of literacy (Hornberger, 2008; Mora, 2011, 2012), cultural studies and sociolinguistics. In addition, and going back to Bourdieu (1993), despite the certain degree of autonomy cultural fields exist “in a subordinate or dominated position within the field of power” (Johnson, 1993, p. 15), it brings it to the field of political science also. Soviet linguist Scherba (1974) defined bilingualism from a socio-cultural perspective as “an ability of a certain population group to make oneself understood in two languages. Since a language is a function of a social group, bilingualism means belonging to the corresponding two groups” (pp. 313-318), which helps to develop an argument of a positive educational and cognitive effect of bilingualism, particularly that of its mixed type. In his work *Language System and Speaking Activity*, Scherba (1974) devoted a section to bilingualism and distinguished two types of bilingualism: a pure bilingualism, when two languages exist as two separated systems, and the mixed type of bilingualism – a situation, when the usages of two languages overlap each other. In the former, the languages do not affect each other and therefore perform their functions better. This case is, however, difficult to achieve. The latter is more typical. The languages start affecting each other, but at the same time constant comparison of two systems helps the person to develop switching skills and better understanding of the two language systems, makes her potentially a better learner of the third, fourth, etc. language. That, as Scherba summarized, emancipates a thought “from the captivity of a word” (1974, pp. 313-318).

Scherba (1974) also argued that the standard language is different from the spoken language almost in all languages. When speaking one's native language, he claimed, one does not think about it as a tool, but rather just use almost unconsciously to express one's thoughts. However, one starts thinking of the usage of the words when speaking the standard language. From this perspective, it is a 'foreign' language of a kind, which makes an educated person bilingual already within the system of the native language.

This approach again brings the idea of knowing, which adds an important aspect to the debates on bilingualism in Colombia. In this aspect, there is a focus on education, its quality, and the knowledge that brings the learning of a new language, including knowledge about our first (primary or native) language too, and not the language as such. It means that while and for improving the teaching of foreign languages (even if we are speaking only about English), it is important to improve the quality of teaching of the native language (Spanish, for example), pay attention to how it is taught, what is taught, what the context it is taught within is. Finally, the whole public discourse around the language is important in this process. The languages should be presented as equal systems, for educational significance and cognitive development of the students (society) and easier acceptance of both language systems, cultures and worlds that come with them, which will also stimulate the interest in learning the language (for further discussion of teaching culture see Golovátina-Mora, forthcoming). However, this may require reconsidering the concept of the nation.

Language and Borders

In the epoch of nationalism, language (its grammar and vocabulary) became an important and powerful signifier of the nation and its borders. Language standardization became a powerful political tool employed for justification of a new nation formation (Billig, 1995, Ch. 2). One of the good recent examples is the ongoing debates about the Montenegrin language. Depending on to which political side one listens, Montenegrin has been defined as either a dialect of the Serbian language or an independent language (Lowen, 2010; Nikolaidis, 2009). Nevertheless, recent polls showed a slight shift since 2006 in favor of Montenegrin as their mother tongue (BalkanInsight, 2011).

The debates on how it is better to call the school subject Serbian or Mother-tongue (Serbian, Montenegrin, Croatian and Bosnian) and even school strikes in several cities of Montenegro (as part of the Union with Serbia then) after the Montenegrin Ministry of Education had declared changes in the curriculum in 2004 (Glas Javnosti, 2004) is a good example of the wide-spread myth of the nation-state 'one nation-one state-one language'.

As studies of nationalism – more specifically from constructivist and modernist perspective to nationalism – have shown, it is not the language that initially creates nationalism, but rather the other way around. However, century-long reproduction of nationalist beliefs and values creates a certain consciousness, logic, or group identity feeling or world-view that sees and presents the world divided into us and them. Paraphrasing Scherba's words (and to

a certain extent referring to Czeslaw Milosz's novel), it recreates the "captivity of the mind".

Challenges And Possible Solutions

Opening ourselves (as an individual or a nation) to the world, going out there, we will meet the Others. Nationalist logic often sees globalization as a challenge and a threat instead of a chance for development. Forcing people to learn another specific language, one that is not an officially recognized state language yet an internationally prevailing language and the language of power, without proper, thoughtful and precise explanation or even training, can cause reactions of resistance at different levels (see Bennett, 1993). This reaction may not be a reaction to the plan as such but rather to the ideas of bilingualism and language choice. This is especially important when we take into account the tendency in the postcolonial world to Revolt against the West and the fact that the first two places by language size (number of people speaking the language as a native language) in the world are Mandarin and Spanish (Ethnologue, 2009). The number of people speaking Mandarin in the world is at least 1200 million, which is similar to the number of people speaking English provided in the justification document of the Ministry of Education of Colombia – 1125 million (Altablero, 2005b). Some other possible reactions (see Bennett, 1993) are maligning one's own culture and disrespecting one's language or lack of understanding and therefore desire to develop language skills above a certain level.

Discussing different reactions to the other culture (that the language brings with

itself) and the ways of self-development in this process, Milton Bennett (1993) emphasized learning, developing awareness of intercultural differences and learning to employ this knowledge for self-development. In other words, the goal of learning the other culture or the other language is to learn more about Self, which my colleague and I recently emphasized in a few presentations (Golovátina-Mora, 2012; Mora, 2012; Mora & Golovátina-Mora, 2011). That also means that the process of learning has to be two-fold: learning the Other, while learning Self (or in this case English and Spanish, to begin with).

Once the focal point of the discussion shifts from the political and group identity spheres and moves toward the learning process, knowledge and Self (Self development and learning about Self), the debates will most likely become less heated. An instrumentalist approach to knowledge, language and culture is helpful in making this shift. Here, it is important to remember that the person does not own the language. The language is a mere tool of communication: the more groups one wants to communicate with, the more tools one has to learn. Such approach also helps to understand that there is no end in learning and brings into discussion the idea of life-long learning, which also makes a significant part of the educational strategies of the European Commission. Learning language without learning culture is impossible, which makes the content essential. Speaking of culture we are not speaking of mere eating habits, fashion, or everyday etiquette, because this is what lies on the surface and does not say much about the society as such. It brings us back to focusing on the group instead of an individual. I speak here

about general education and individual culture and values.

In other words, the Plan will find more support and understanding when it clearly demonstrates that its only purpose goes beyond mere self-actualization of the nation, and seeks to empower of every individual within its society.

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