MULTILINGUALISM IN GERMANY: POTENTIAL AND CHALLENGES FOR SOCIETY AND INDIVIDUALS

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Abstract

After a general introduction, multilingualism in Germany will be discussed with respect to three main aspects: (a) demographics and development of multilingualism (b) the public view regarding multilingualism and (c) types of multilingualism.

Keywords: challenge, demography, multilingual,

A. GERMANY, A MULTILINGUAL COUNTRY?

In contrast to linguistically very diverse countries, such e.g. Papua New Guinea and Indonesia, who together account for approximately a quarter of the world's languages (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2003), Germany has traditionally been quite a homogenous monolingual society, with High German as the official language.

Thus, for a long time, autochtonous multilingualism has mainly been limited to minority languages with a relatively low number of speakers. Among these are for example *Upper* and *Lower Sorbian*, two Slavic languages, that are spoken by less that 50,000 people in a region in East-Germany, *Danish*, spoken by approximately 50,000 speakers in the region of Southern Schleswig in Northern Germany, and *North Frisian*, spoken in Nordfriesland by not more than 10,000 speakers. These minority languages are legally recognized and their respective speech communities are given certain support on that basis, such as e.g. bilingual school education in their language.

In addition to these recognized minority languages, many people, especially in the southern states, e.g. in Bavaria & Baden Württemberg, speak a dialect of German. These dialects are sometimes unintelligible with High German, resulting in a *diglossic* situation, with dialects spoken at home and with friends, and High German spoken in public.

Learning at least one foreign language at school is compulsory in Germany: English is by far the most popular choice and sometimes the only option. In line with the current EU's policy on multilingualism, encouraging every European citizen to speak at least two foreign languages in addition to their mother tongue, the current trend in Germany is to teach foreign languages already in primary school; children begin to learn their first foreign language (in most cases English, sometimes also French or another language) from year 3 onwards. However, Kubanek (2014) reports, that the proficiency of German primary school students after having learned English for two years is surprisingly low. This might be interpreted to mean that teachings methods for these early language learners should probably be revised to allow for better learning outcomes.

In secondary school (years 5 to 10/12/13, depending on the type of school), German pupils learn at least one modern language, in most cases this is English. If they choose to attend a *Gymnasium*, a school type that qualifies for university, they might have to learn one or two additional languages, either modern languages such as e.g. French, Spanish, or Russian, or ancient ones like Latin and Ancient Greek.

In a survey conducted by the European Commission (2006), 67% of Germans claimed to be able to conduct a conversation in at least one foreign language apart from their mother tongue, and 27% claimed to be able speak at least two languages other than their mother tongue.

In sum, historically, Germany has been a rather homogenous and monolingual country, quite poor on linguistic (and cultural) diversity. In the last decades however, Germany has become a country of immigration and consequently more multilingual: this started in the 1950s and 1960s, when, in response to a labour shortage, Germany started recruiting foreign workers (called *Gastarbeiter - guest workers*) to work in the industrial sector. First, recruitment agreements were signed with Italy, Greece and Spain, later with Ireland, Turkey, Morocco, Portugal, Tunisia, and (former) Yugoslavia.

Ethnic Germans from Eastern Europe, e.g. Romania, Poland and the (former) Soviet Union, who had been living there for several generations, often in German-speaking communities, represented a different wave of immigration into Germany. Since the 1950s, a large number of them (called *Aussiedler/Spätaussiedler*), have moved to West Germany, their remigration flow peaked in the end of the 1980s.

According to the census conducted by the Statistisches Bundesamt Deutschland (2012), 7.2 million people with foreign passports were living in Germany in 2011, equivalent to almost 10 % of the German population, that stood at 81.8 million. 16.6 million people living in Germany had an "immigrant background" (*Migrationshintergrund*). This term means, that either they or their parent(s) had immigrated to Germany or were born in Germany without German citizenship. Roughly two thirds of these 16.6 million people with

immigrant background speak another language than German at home (Wippermann & Flaig 2009). The immigrant languages most frequently spoken in Germany are Turkish, Russian, Kurdish, Polish, Serbo-Croatian, Italian, and Greek (Lewis, Simons, & Fennig, 2014).

After this brief overview over the nature and extent of multilingualism in the German society, I will now move to the topic of bi- or multilingualism at the level of the individual.

B. BEING MULTILINGUAL - MYTH & REALITY

Which level of proficiency does the term "bilingual" or "multilingual" imply? Opinions about the degree of proficiency that is required to be considered multilingual, vary a lot. They range from Bloomfield's very narrow definition "native-like control of two languages“ (1933: 56) to rather broad characterizations that do not require any minimal competence, e.g. Mackey (1962: 52) „the ability to use more than one language“.

Often, monolingual Germans, who are not familiar with scientific research on bi- and mulitilingualism, still expect multilingual speakers to speak all their languages on an equally proficient level as monolinguals do, as are not really aware, that this feat is almost impossible to achieve, as "The bilingual is not two monolinguals in one person" (Grosjean, 1989).

In North America and Europe, attitudes towards multilingualism have changed in the last decades (see e.g. Romaine 1995). In the 60s and 70s educators often discouraged parents to let their children grow up bilingual, as one was afraid, that growing up with more than one language would overburden children and might even cause poor school performance and language disorders such as stuttering. Specifically, code-switching, i.e. the use of more than one language within a conversation, was taken as a sign that bi- or multilingual children were having problems keeping their languages apart and might not reach ultimate attainment in any of their languages, but instead run the risk of becoming *semilinguals*, a term coined by Hansegård in 1968.

Nowadays this notion has changed, and there are quite a lot of books on the market, that aim to advise parents on how to raise bilingual children (e.g. Montanari 2010, Abdelilah-Bauer 2012, or Leist-Villis 2012). Nevertheless, the fear of mixed/mixing languages seems to remain, and most guidebooks explicitly address the topic of code-switching and advise parents, how they can prevent language mixing; often they recommend a strict division between languages.

One way to achieve this separation between languages according to these guidebooks is the "1 person : 1 language"-principle, meaning that in a bilingual family, e.g. the mother being of Greek origin, the father being German, each parent should only speak in their own mother tongue with the child, in this case, the mother in Greek and the father in German.

An alternative principle that is recommended in the guidebooks is the "1 place : 1 language"-rule; in the above case of a bilingual Greek-German family this means, that the family speaks only Greek at home, but German when they are outside.

However, it should be immediately obvious, that both principles, the "1 person : 1 language"-principle and the "1 place : 1 language"-principle are limited to conversations that involve only the parents and their children, with no one else present. In the moment when there are other people around, for example when the Greek-German bilingual child has a monolingual German friend over at their house, or when the mother is inviting a German neighbour, these principles cannot be adhered to.

While there is generally a lot of research into the bilingual language development of young children (from birth to 6 years) and while there are several guidebooks for parents of bilingual toddlers available, there is comparatively less focus on the bilingual development in later childhood, and not much advice for parents of older children, who often at a certain age start to refuse to speak the (non-dominant) home language and use only German (but see Mahlstedt (1996) for an analysis of factors that lead to successfull bilingualism). That is, the large body of research about how children are able to acquire two or more languages sharply contrasts with the relatively few studies on language attainment and/or language loss. (but see Schmidt 2013).

Concerning the relationship between cognition and bilingualism, there has been evidence for a *bilingual advantage* provided by Bialystok and her colleagues (e.g. Bialystok 2007, Bialystok & Craik 2010, Bialystok 2011), who demonstrated, that bilingualism might have advantageous effects on cognitive performance. For example, young bilinguals might outperform monolinguals at tasks requiring multitasking, and older bilinguals might even be able to better cope with certain forms of dementia such as Alzheimer's disease. However, the international scientific research, that is showing cognitive benefits of being bilingual, is virtally unknown to "ordinary Germans", who are no experts in psycholinguistics, and has not managed to influence the general view towards bi- and multilingualism.

Additionally to code-switching being frowned upon and frequently thought to indicate "language deficits", there are also often prejudices against non-native accents - sometimes subtle ones, sometimes rather outspoken ones, although it is nowadays agreed, that very few individuals can reach ultimate attainment in a second language, if they haven't started to speak it in early childhood (Critical Period Hypothesis, see e.g. Meisel 2009). When the chance of getting a job as nursery teacher can be thwarted if the applicant is speaking

with a slight non-native accent, it is not surprising, that for many immigrant parents their children's successful mastery of the German language is the top priority, even if that means raising monolingual German-speaking children who do not know their parents' mother tongues.

In the next section I will focus on two specific types of bi- or multilingualism in Germany.

C. HERITAGE SPEAKERS: GROWING UP WITHOUT THE MOTHER TONGUE

One aspect of multilingualism in Germany has so far not caught much attention, compared to the attention it gets outside Europe (e.g. Polinsky & Kagan, 2007, Valdés 2001) concerns *heritage speakers*. This term refers to multilingual individuals who possess native proficiency in the main language spoken in society (i.e., in Germany this would be German), their dominant language, but have not acquired native proficiency in their first language, their *heritage language* (HL).

This type of multilingualism is mainly linked to migration, and concerns children that grow up in a family, where an immigrant language is spoken. Most heritage speakers are fluent in their home language until they enter school at age 6, from that age on, they often gradually start to use German more and more and as a result start to forget their mother tongue. A broader definition of heritage speaker might also include cases, where the contact with the heritage language started later in life, as e.g. in the case of Barack Obama, who grew up with English as mother tongue, but spent his primary school years in Jakarta, and therefore could be regarded as a heritage speaker of Bahasa Indonesia, as he speaks and understands it to some degree, but is more proficient in another language, i.e. English.

Aspects of heritage speakers' proficiency in and attitudes towards their mother tongues have been researched since about 30 years almost exclusively in North America and Australasia, but this type of multilingualism has barely been studied in Germany or in other European countries (cf. Borgwaldt 2014). Currently, 19.5 % of Germany's population has an immigrant background; it is this group that generally accounts for the majority of heritage speakers.

Many heritage speakers want to re-learn their heritage language as young adults and take language classes. However, it is often difficult for teachers to assign them to the appropriate class levels, as their knowledge in the heritage language is quite different of the knowledge of a "normal" foreign language learner. For example, a heritage speaker might speak their heritage language fluently and know a lot of words for common house-hold items, but might not be able to write it, whereas the foreign languge learner will have learned the language's writing system but speaks the language with a strong accent. As a consequence, it can be very difficult for foreign language teachers to teach heritage learners and normal foreign language learners together in one class.

While in the US and in other countries foreign language teachers are well aware of this issue, and courses are often seperated, in Germany there are only very few courses explicitly targeting heritage speakers (mostly for Slavic languages like Russian or Polish).

D. INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AT GERMAN UNIVERSITIES

Another type of multilingualism in Germany, that has not yet caught much attention, concerns the increasing number of international students who attend German universities. Currently, more than 300.000 international students are studying in Germany, that is about 11.3 % of all students (DAAD & DZHW 2014). More than of 200.00 of them have passed their A-levels in their respective home countries, i.e. they are so-called *Bildungs-Ausländer.* Roughly a third of these students are from Asia: more than 25.000 from China, more than 7.000 from India, more than 4.000 from South Korea and almost 3.000 students from Indonesia.

To be allowed to start their studies in Germany, students have to pass language exams, e.g. the DSH-exam or the TestDaF-exams. However, the scientific German that is used in the specialist literature and in the lectures substantially deviates from the German used in day-to-day conversations. So even students, that have scored well on language exams, might find it very hard to understand the German used in an academic context, and these languagre difficulties in turn might affect study outcomes.

In 2002, 2007 and 2012, international students comprised roughly between 18% and 19% of the students that started their studies at German universities. In the same period however, international students only accounted for between 7% and 10% of the students that successfully finished their studies at German universities. While this discrepancy could partly be due to some international students planning to just spend part of their studies in Germany and then to return to their home countries to finish their studies there, these numbers seem to indicate, that appearently lots of international students (have to) quit their studies at German universities; one reason for this could be problems with the scientific language. While there is growing awareness of this structural problem, projects to help improve the attainment of international students are currently often only in the pilot phase (see e.g. Wahrig & Borgwaldt, 2014).

E. CONCLUSION

As I have described in the above sections, Germany has become more and more multilingual in the last 50 to 60 years. Whereas in the first half of the 20th century, multilingualism was largely restricted to the existence of autochtonous minority languages such as Sorbian, Frisian and Danish on the one hand and German dialects on the other hand, in the second half of the 20th century Germany's multilingual landscape has become increasingly shaped by migration into Germany and ensuing emergence of migrant languages like Russian, Turkish, Kurdish, Polish and others.

The general attitude towards bi- and multilingual individuals however often depends on the *prestige* of the language(s) in question: in the case of a German-English or German-Japanese bilingual children, the general opinion is probably very favourable and parents will be encouraged to raise their children bilingually, whereas in the case of a German-Turkish or German-Kurdish bilingual child, the prevalent assumptions might include "poor school performance" and "will not know any language properly".

Nevertheless, the increase in multilingualism is only one aspect of a rather complex overall changing situation with diversity increasing at various levels in Germany; we hope that the German society will be ready to deal with that.

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