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Multilinguals are ...?



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*C'est par le malentendu universel
que tout le monde s'accorde.
Car si, par malheur, on se comprenait,
on ne pourrait jamais s'accorder.*¹

Charles Baudelaire
(*Mon Cœur Mis à Nu, Journal Intime*)

Multilinguals are ...?

Multilinguals are... what, indeed? This book is about how you could fill in the blank with almost any label and get away with it. Multilinguals have been called all sorts of names, which have cast more shadows than light on what they are, thereby portraying them as very, very odd creatures.

I am one of those creatures and also a parent of three trilingual children, in a family where the mother uses Portuguese, the father Swedish, and the children English among themselves. Ours is the first multilingual household among monolingual households from both sides of the family. We have lived in Singapore for over 15 years, a country with four official languages and where individual multilingualism is the norm. My everyday observations as a parent, educator and scholar made me realise the amount and scope of confusion that seeps through when people talk about multilingualism, in technical as well as lay settings, in official as well as informal ones, where baffling labels top it all.

Labels should be useful tools. They name things that are relevant to whoever found reason to name them, and so help us organise our thoughts about them. They usually fulfil their job of identifying things with reasonable accuracy: if I say *molecule*, or if I say *unaspirated allophone*, anyone who has used these words before will know what I mean. Everyone will also understand that these two labels, because they are distinct labels, refer to distinct things, both worth naming and both worth talking about. But what if I say *semilingual*, or *balanced bilingual*? Chances are that you won't have a clear idea (or any idea at all) what I'm

¹ 'It is by universal misunderstanding that people reach agreement. For if, by some misfortune, we understood each other, we could never agree.'

talking about. What's more, chances are also that I won't either. My perplexities, together with my refusal to agree that multilinguals are odd at all, are what prompted me to write this book.



Questions about multilinguals start with the word *multilingual* itself, which is about as difficult to define as the word *word*. I can propose one definition: multilinguals are people who use more than one language in their everyday lives. I make no distinction between bilinguals, trilinguals, quadrilinguals, pentalinguals, and so on – and I focus on spoken language, although what I'll have to say of course applies to sign language too. This definition may look like a straightforward enough way to start thinking about multilingualism, but the snag is that there are virtually as many definitions of it as there are people who discuss it, which means that no two people are actually talking about the same

thing when they talk about “multilingualism”. No wonder then that ambiguity and vagueness have become the rule in these discussions, all the more so that generalised interest in matters of multilingualism has boomed in the last few decades.

The book is written in a light-hearted style, guiding you through the keys to the origin and endurance of several of these descriptive oddities, starting with the master-key to them all. Retracing someone’s thought processes and arguments (our own included) is the best way to understand how people think. I draw on solid academic research to make my points, quoting that research in constructions like “It has been argued that...”, or “The findings showed...”, or “They were found to...”. Constructions of this kind are commonly used when you either don’t know or don’t want to say who dunnit, that is, who was it that argued, showed or found. My reason for doing this is neither: I do know who and I would certainly say so if this were a different kind of book. Supporting your claims and arguments with named references is standard etiquette in research pieces (which this book is) targeted at academia (which this book is not). But this doesn’t mean that I am saying whatever I fancy. I will be more than happy to provide sources to anyone who so wishes, and likewise to discuss whatever I say here. My e-mail contact can be found through my academic webpage.²

The purpose of the book is to raise awareness about what multilinguals really are, by helping dispel misconceptions about multilingualism. These often entail sanctioned but damaging advice to individuals and families, as well as to educators and policy-makers. Each chapter deals with paradoxes and/or myths about multilingualism that have been etched into the popular imagination as unquestionable truths. The book shows that paradoxes, myths and oddities arise because of the language that is used to talk about multilinguals, not because of multilingual behaviour itself. Child multilingualism, adult language learning, dominant vs. balanced languages, semilingualism, multilingualism vs. language impairment, gifted language learners, all find their niche and a dedicated discussion. Whether you are monolingual or multilingual (and if you read English), this book is for you.

One final note. My first thought was to call this book *Funny-lingualism*. My reasoning was that the various ways in which multilingualism has been described, prescribed, flattered and lambasted, taken together, have two things in common. They are paradoxical, they apply to fantasies and/or they simply make no sense, on the one hand, and they are all extremely funny, on the other. In the spirit of Occam’s Razor, I thought we might as well use only one label for them all. By these accounts, multilinguals are funny-linguals.

² <http://linguistlist.org/people/personal/get-personal-page2.cfm?PersonID=8708>

The publisher liked the final title of the book better and so do I. I've nevertheless kept the word *funny* in many places around the text. Partly as a sort of deference towards the runner-up title, but mostly because I couldn't honestly find another word which describes so well the ha-ha and peculiar nature of what I go on reading and hearing about multilingualism and multilinguals. The focus of the book is still the same, but I'd rather leave to readers the choice of alternative labels to the kinds of "multilingualism" discussed in it. By any other name, they will sound as funny.

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