



Funny-lingualism

Using a label as a tool **BY MADALENA CRUZ-FERREIRA**

IN THIS AND THE COMING FIVE ISSUES of Multilingual Living Magazine, this column will discuss the rationale for a proposal. I propose to change the different labels which have been used to describe multilingualism to the single label funny-lingualism.

The reason is that labels should be useful tools. They name things that are relevant to whoever found reason to name them, thereby helping us organise our thoughts about them. In science, labels fulfil their job of identifying very precise things: if I say molecule, or if I say aspirated allophone, everyone who's used these words before will know exactly what I mean. Everyone will also understand that these two labels refer to distinct things, both worth naming and both worth talking about. So, 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 talking about. What's more, chances are

that I won't really either. Now this is, to say the least, funny. I will illustrate this issue with six labels meant to describe multilinguals which, in my view, are used in very funny ways indeed. The labels are:

1. Language mixer / Code-switcher
2. Semilingual
3. Dominant multilingual
4. L1, L2, L3, ..., Ln speaker
5. Balanced multilingual
6. Native-like user of language

The discussion will show how the all-encompassing term funny-lingualism ideally encapsulates what these labels really mean.

LANGUAGE MIXER / CODE-SWITCHER

I start with mixes, because using more than one language in the same utterance or conversation has been hailed as the hallmark of multilingualism. Mixed language can only be used by people who, well, have more than one language to mix. It is a contradiction in terms to expect language mixes from people who know only one language -- although it would certainly be interesting to think a while about why we don't say that monolingual English speakers using

words like spaghetti or typhoon are mixing, and about how words like these came to be counted as 'English' words.

I like to think of language mixes as an instance of what I call the Buffet Effect. Faced with lavish gastronomic choices laid out before my eager appetite, who will blame me for wanting to sample the salad intended for the fish with a meat course? Even expert gastronomes might nod benevolently, and perhaps follow suit, just to make sure

that their seasoned taste buds aren't missing out on some scrumptiously mixed novelty. Why not indeed? You don't know unless you've tried. But if I choose to draw on the whole array of my linguistic assets and switch to language A in an utterance in language B so as to express, as eagerly, something unique, this is often taken as a proof that I don't know how to use language A, or language B, or both (both, more often than not). Now this is certainly funny, because in all human endeavours, we praise those among us who make the most of their resources and use those resources creatively. We line them up for promotion at work or pat them proudly on the head at home. In all human endeavours, that is, except multilingual language use. Instead of taking mixes as an obvious consequence of being multilingual, in the sense that you can't help being actively aware of all the resources which are available to you, including language resources, mixed speech is paradoxically viewed as showing lack of resources: you mix because you don't know how to use a single language properly. Mixing is therefore a bad thing which should be avoided at all costs. In other words, the linguistic resourcefulness of multilinguals ought to be stifled, because they should behave like monolinguals. I find it extremely funny that you're required to show competence by means of denying competence in the resources you've got. It's like asking pianists to ignore all their knowledge about music when playing the guitar, or else risk being judged as lesser musicians.

The other funny thing is that, in contrast to the loud alarm bells that go off about language mixes themselves, other features of multilingual language use tend to get swept under the carpet instead. For example,

that multilinguals do mix, but in exchanges with other multilinguals whom they know or suspect to share the same languages. In monolingual settings, multilinguals know that mixes result in communicative disruption. Take me, for example: I am quite multilingual, and I am writing this article in monolingual English, spaghetti and typhoon included. Multilinguals heed the needs of their interlocutors, just like everyone heeds the limited resources of children when interacting with them. In addition, the fact that research and general curiosity about multilingualism tend to focus on language mixes doesn't mean that mixes define multilinguals. This would be like saying that our current concerns with environmental issues define our planet, which is a very funny conclusion to draw. ❖

***Coming in the next issue of
Multilingual Living Magazine:***

Semilingual

