

# Funny-lingualism

Using a label as a tool

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**STARTING WITH THE JULY-AUGUST** 2007 issue of Multilingual Living Magazine, I have been discussing 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. But 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 am illustrating 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.

## SEMILINGUAL (half a language?)

In the first instalment of this column, when I discussed multilingual mixes, I said that if you mix different languages in your speech your overall command of the mixed languages is likely to be taken as deficient. In other words, you are a semilingual. The reasoning that associates mixing with semilingualism goes roughly like this: you mix because you have incomplete knowledge of each of your languages. If you knew those languages through and through you wouldn't need to import words and expressions that do not belong to them in order to say what you mean.

This reasoning is, to put it charitably, thoroughly

circular: you mix because you are semilingual, therefore you are semilingual because you mix. The reasoning is also judgmental, because it assumes a 'good practice' benchmark which is left unstated. Namely, either you toe the single language line, or you can kiss goodbye any aspirations of being counted among proper users of language. We may safely guess that whoever concocted a reasoning along these lines was decidedly, and probably fiercely, monolingual.

This reasoning, besides, raises many questions, all quite puzzling. What does 'complete knowledge' of a language mean? In particular, how do you measure this kind of thing?

Or, if you are inclined to more broadly philosophical musings, can a language ever be said to be complete at all? Was English less complete before words in it like fluorophosphate or blog were invented? And if I do use blog and know what it means but not fluorophosphate, do I then have deficient knowledge of English? Questions like these are very entertaining, because you can spend your whole life looking for answers to them. They are also entirely pointless, because languages are not containers to be filled or unfilled to capacity, they are tools that get moulded to serve our needs as and when we use them. This is why talking about complete (or incomplete) languages is so funny, and this is why talking about complete knowledge of something that cannot itself be complete is even funnier.

Let's now take a closer look at the label itself. As we know, semi means 'half'. But a semilingual is not someone who knows half a language, or one-half of each language -- for one thing, the math would be funny too: being semilingual in, say, four languages would be something really worth striving for, in that your cumulative language abilities would add up to 200%. If you look up semilingualism, you will find that it does exist, and that it is something that we should all be concerned about. The word defines a pathological deficiency in expressing oneself through language (not through particular languages). Semilingualism affects monolinguals and multilinguals alike, which means that it is unrelated to the number of languages that you speak. The word 'pathological' is the clue here: we all produce lapses, slips and bad grammar when we speak whichever language, we all hesitate, mumble and fumble for words or the right turn of phrase without triggering automatic suspicion of language deficiency. Now if, on the other hand, you look up semilingualism in connection with multilingualism, you will find definitions of a semilingual as someone who has deficiencies in their languages, compared to monolinguals' uses of the same languages. The 'comparison' bit here is clearly a funny extension of what semilingualism means, first because of the arbitrary endorsement of monolingual uses as a gauge for multilingual ones,

and second because of the mistaken assumption that monolinguals cannot be semilinguals.

When things don't make much sense to me, I like to turn them on their heads, to see what happens. Why not cook up, just for the sheer fun of it all, a similar reasoning which takes a multilingual perspective instead. Like this: if you can't express yourself in more than one language, then you can't express yourself. Period. It does sound funny, doesn't it? Or perhaps not: perhaps this formulation resonates among multilinguals instead. Multilinguals need to express themselves in more than one language for the simple reason that they talk about different things to different people in different languages. ❖

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**Coming in the next issue of  
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**Dominant Multilingual**