



Funny-lingualism

Using a label as a tool

BY MADALENA CRUZ-FERREIRA

This column discusses the rationale for a proposal. I propose to change six different labels which have been used to describe multilingualism to the single label funny-lingualism. The reason is that these labels, in my view, are used in very funny ways indeed. L1, L2, L3, ..., Ln speaker is the fourth label I chose to illustrate my point.

Balanced Multilingual...

“Balanced Multilingual” is an extremely appealing label, because it involves weight-watching. To check whether you’re a balanced multilingual, you measure the degree of bulk of each of your languages by sampling them item by item. For example, how many words you have in each, or whether you can use the present perfect continuous and tell jokes in each of them. When you’ve done that, you calculate the differential weight of each of your languages. If there is no difference, you are a balanced multilingual; if you find any difference, you are unbalanced.

This is undoubtedly a neat way of getting neat data and neat labels for your findings, but funnily enough we run into immediate trouble. Balanced means ‘equally weighted’, which therefore means equally good -- or equally bad. I doubt that I am a balanced multilingual in Russian and Greek if I can say ‘Good morning!’ fluently in both languages and this constitutes my entire repertoire in these languages, or if I consistently misuse grammatical gender in all my languages. So, being a word with positive connotations, because nobody wants to be called ‘unbalanced’ about anything, balanced cannot mean ‘balanced’ here, because ‘of equal weight’ is a statement about observed quantities, and hence neither positive nor negative. The word in fact means ‘with perfect command of all languages in all four skills, listening, speaking, reading and writing’.

Wow! you may think. Wow indeed: this is where things get really, really funny, for all sorts of reasons. Let me enumerate a few.

First of all, the assumed standard of ‘perfection’ is, as always, monolingual. That is, multilinguals are expected to behave linguistically like several monolinguals tucked away inside one same body and mind, which is not so much funny as downright spooky.

Second, how do we measure the counterweight to, say, different French past tense forms in Mandarin, which has no past tense forms? Languages don’t map themselves neatly onto each other. If they did, learning a new language would be a simple matter of translating words, grammatical constructions and pragmatic uses.

Third, that languages pattern behave idiosyncratically means that languages are unbalanced, not their speakers.

Fourth, multilingualism is, by definition, unbalanced, which turns out to be a very positive term after all: it means ‘differential’. Nobody would be multilingual if different languages could all be used in the same way. A single all-purpose language would be enough.

Lastly, it is exceedingly funny to invent a technical label to describe the fruits of your fantasy: if you believe that there are balanced multilinguals in the real world according to the Wow criterion, you might as well expect to find unicorns in your backyard. ❖

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Coming in the next issue:

“Native-like user of language”