

# UNIT 1



# MULTILINGUALISM

Multilingualism is the act of using polyglotism, or using multiple languages, either by an individual speaker or by a community of speakers. Multilingual speakers outnumber **monolingual speakers in the world's population. Multilingualism is becoming a social phenomenon governed by the needs of globalization and cultural openness. Owing to the ease of access to information facilitated by the Internet, individuals' exposure to multiple languages is becoming increasingly frequent thereby promoting a need to acquire additional languages. People who speak several languages are also called polyglots.**

## Definition

The definition of multilingualism is a subject of debate in the very same way as the definition of language fluency. On one end of a sort of linguistic continuum, one may define multilingualism as complete competence and mastery in another language. The speaker would presumably have complete knowledge and control over the language so as to sound native. On the opposite end of the spectrum would be people such as tourists who know enough phrases to get around using the alternate language.

Because of the lack of any true definition for multilingualism, it is very difficult to define an individual as being multilingual. Having no specification of how much knowledge of a language is required for a person to be classified as bilingual makes it difficult for

language teaching institutions to teach languages to students to the point of fluency. As a result, since most speakers do not achieve the maximally ideal level, language learners may come to be seen as deficient and by extension, language teaching may come to be seen as a failure.

Since 1992, Vivian Cook has argued that most multilingual speakers fall somewhere between minimal and maximal definitions. Cook calls these people *multi-competent*.

## Definition of language

There are variations in what it means to “speak a language”. A tourist who can handle a simple conversation with a waiter may be completely lost when it comes to discussing current affairs or even using multiple tenses. A diplomat or businessman who can handle complicated negotiations in a foreign language may not be able to write a simple letter correctly. A four-year-old French child would **usually be said to “speak French fluently”, but it is possible that he cannot handle the grammar as well as even some mediocre foreign students of the language do and may have a very limited vocabulary despite possibly having perfect pronunciation.** On the other hand, it is quite common that even very highly accomplished linguists may speak the language(s) of which they are experts with a distinct accent and to have gaps in their active vocabulary when it comes to everyday topics and situations.

Because the development of spoken fluency requires prolonged exposure to a given language, claims of extensive polyglotism must generally be understood to refer to the mastery of basic communicative skills along with the grammatical rules and (possibly) an extensive vocabulary in the target languages, rather

than a near-native level of spoken fluency. In historical times prior to audio and video recordings which can be used to facilitate artificial language exposure, quite unusual circumstances would have been needed for an individual to achieve highlevel spoken fluency in several languages. Although it is possible to learn the grammatical rules and vocabulary of a language from books alone, such an individual might not be able to communicate in the language at all, neither understanding the language as it sounds spoken out loud nor being able to produce the sounds him- or herself.

**In addition there is no clear definition of what “one language”** means. For instance, scholars often disagree whether Scots is a language in its own right or a dialect of English.

As another example, a person who has learned five different languages such as French, Spanish, Catalan, Italian and Portuguese, all belonging to the closely related group of Romance languages, has accomplished something less difficult than a person who has learnt Hebrew, Chinese, Finnish, Navajo, and Welsh, none of which are remotely related to another.

Furthermore, what is considered a language can change, often for purely political purposes, such as when Serbo-Croatian was assembled from South Slavic dialects, and after the breakup of Yugoslavia dissolved into Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian and Montenegrin, or when Ukrainian was dismissed as a Russian dialect by the Russian tsars to discourage national feelings.

**Many small independent nations’ schoolchildren are today** compelled to learn multiple languages because of international interactions. For example in Finland, all children are required to learn at least two foreign languages: the other national language

(Swedish or Finnish) and one alien language (usually English). Many Finnish schoolchildren also select further languages, such as German or Russian. In some large nations with multiple languages, such as India, school children may routinely learn multiple languages based on where they reside in the country. In major metros of Central, South and East India, many children may be fluent in four languages (the mother tongue, the state language, and the official languages of India, Hindi and English.) Thus a child of Gujarati parents living in Bangalore will end up speaking his or her mother tongue (Gujarati) at home and the state language (Kannada), Hindi and English in school and his or her surroundings.

## Multilingual individuals

A multilingual person, in a broad definition, is one who can communicate in more than one language, be it actively (through speaking, writing, or signing) or passively (through listening, reading, or perceiving). More specifically, the terms *bilingual* and *trilingual* are used to describe comparable situations in which two or three languages are involved. A multilingual person is generally referred to as a polyglot. *Poly* (Greek: πολύς) means “many”, *glot* (Greek: γλώσσα) means “language”.

Multilingual speakers have acquired and maintained at least one language during childhood, the so-called first language (L1). The first language (sometimes also referred to as the mother tongue) is acquired without formal education, by mechanisms heavily disputed. Children acquiring two languages in this way are called simultaneous bilinguals. Even in the case of simultaneous bilinguals one language usually dominates over the other.

In linguistics, first language acquisition is closely related to the **concept of a “native speaker”**. According to a view widely held by linguists, a native speaker of a given language has in some respects a level of skill which a second (or subsequent) language learner can hardly reliably accomplish. Consequently, descriptive empirical studies of languages are usually carried out using only native speakers as informants. This view is, however, slightly problematic, particularly as many non-native speakers demonstrably not only successfully engage with and in their non-native language societies, but in fact may become culturally and even linguistically important contributors (as, for example, writers, politicians, media personalities and performing artists) in their nonnative language. In recent years, linguistic research has focused attention on the use of widely known world languages such as English as lingua franca, or the shared common language of professional and commercial communities. In lingua franca situations, most speakers of the common language are functionally multilingual.

## **Cognitive ability**

Bilinguals who are highly proficient in two or more languages are reported to have enhanced executive function and are better at some aspects of language learning compared to monolinguals. Research indicates that a multilingual brain is nimbler, quicker, better able to deal with ambiguities, resolve conflicts, and resist **Alzheimer’s disease and other forms of dementia longer**.

There is also a phenomenon known as *distractive bilingualism* or *semilingualism*. When acquisition of the first language is interrupted and insufficient or unstructured language input follows from the second language, as sometimes happens with immigrant children, the speaker can end up with two languages both mastered

below the monolingual standard. Literacy plays an important role in the development of language in these immigrant children. Those who were literate in their first language before arriving, and who have support to maintain that literacy, are at the very least able to maintain and master their first language.

There is, of course, a difference between those who learn a language in a class environment, and those who learn through total immersion, usually living in the country where the target language is the exclusive.

Without the possibility to actively translate, due to a complete lack of any first language communication opportunity, the comparison between languages is reduced. The new language is almost independently learned - like the mother tongue for a child - with direct concept-to-language translation that can become more natural than word structures learned as a subject. Added to this, the uninterrupted, immediate and exclusive practice of the new language reinforces and deepens the attained knowledge.

## Receptive bilingualism

Receptive bilinguals are those who have the ability to understand a second language but who cannot speak it or whose abilities to speak it are inhibited by psychological barriers. Receptive bilingualism is frequently encountered among adult immigrants to the U.S. who do not speak English as a native language but who have children who do speak English natively, usually in part because **those children's education has been conducted in English. While the immigrant parents can understand both their native language and English, they speak only their native language to their children. If their children are likewise receptively bilingual but productively Englishmonolingual, throughout the conversation the parents will**