



LANGUAGE CONTACT

"One language sets you in a corridor for life. Two languages open every door along the way."
Frank Smith

LEARNING OUTCOMES

- Explain what language contact is and explore its causes and outcomes.
- Define multilingualism, identify its causes, and discuss its benefits.
- Describe what code-switching is and its various functions in communication and social interaction.
- Define language borrowing and explore the reasons behind it.
- Define diglossia and explain how it functions within a community.
- Explain the differences between pidgins and creoles, and understand their development and significance in linguistic studies.
- Discuss the concepts of language maintenance, shift, and death, and their implications for preserving linguistic diversity.

KEY QUESTIONS AND ISSUES

Language is a fundamental aspect of human society, constantly evolving through interactions and influences. When speakers of different languages come into contact, it can lead to significant linguistic changes and developments. This phenomenon, known as **language contact**, raises several intriguing questions: What are the primary causes and outcomes of language contact? How does **multilingualism** arise, and what benefits does it offer? In what ways do speakers navigate multiple languages through **code-switching** and **language borrowing**? Furthermore, how do communities manage the coexistence of different language varieties, as seen in **diglossia**? What distinguishes **pidgins** from **creoles**, and how do these languages develop and gain significance? Finally, what are the implications of **language maintenance, shift, and death** for linguistic diversity? Exploring these questions helps us understand the dynamic nature of languages and the factors that influence their survival and transformation.

WHAT LANGUAGE CONTACT?

Language contact occurs when speakers of different languages interact regularly, leading to various linguistic phenomena. According to Thomason and Kaufman, "*language contact is the use of more than one language in the same place at the same time*" (1988). This interaction can result from migration, trade, colonization, and the influence of technology and media. It occurs when speakers of different languages interact regularly, leading to various linguistic phenomena. The following are the primary causes

- Migration is a significant cause of language contact. When people move from one region to another, they bring their languages with them, leading to interaction with the local languages. For example, the migration of Spanish speakers to the United States has resulted in widespread bilingualism and the incorporation of Spanish words into American English. As Thomason and Kaufman state, "migration is one of the most common causes of language contact, leading to the coexistence of multiple languages within a community" (1988).

- Trade necessitates communication between different linguistic groups, often leading to the development of pidgins and the borrowing of trade-related vocabulary. For instance, the Swahili language in East Africa developed as a trade language, incorporating elements from Arabic, Persian, Portuguese, and other languages. According to Holm, "*trade has historically been a powerful force in bringing different language communities into contact*" (2000).
- Colonization often imposes the colonizer's language on the local population, resulting in language contact. The spread of English during the British Empire is a prime example, where English became a dominant language in many parts of the world. As Mufwene notes, "*colonization has played a crucial role in the spread of European languages globally, leading to significant language contact and change*" (2001).
- The advent of technology and global media has facilitated communication across linguistic boundaries, bringing diverse languages into contact. The internet, in particular, has allowed for the rapid spread of English terms into other languages. For example, the term "email" is used universally, even in non-English-speaking countries. Gramley observes, "*technology and media have accelerated the process of language contact, making it easier for linguistic features to spread across the globe*" (2020).

Language contact leads to a variety of outcomes that significantly shape linguistic landscapes. Multilingualism and bilingualism emerge as individuals and communities adopt multiple languages for communication, enhancing cognitive abilities and cultural exchange. Code-switching becomes a common practice, allowing speakers to alternate between languages within conversations to convey nuanced meanings or adapt to different social contexts. The development of pidgins and creoles illustrates how simplified languages can evolve into fully developed languages with native speakers, often in response to the need for a common means of communication. Diglossia highlights the coexistence of high and low language varieties within a community, each serving distinct functions in formal and informal settings. Over time, communities may experience language maintenance, where efforts are made to preserve a language, or language shift, where a community gradually adopts a different language, potentially leading to language death if the original language loses its last native speakers. These outcomes underscore the dynamic nature of languages and the importance of understanding and preserving linguistic diversity.

1) MULTILINGUALISM

Multilingualism refers to the use of multiple languages by an individual or community. It can arise from historical and social factors such as colonization, migration, and trade. Educational policies promoting multiple languages in schools and cultural diversity also contribute to multilingualism. As Grosjean notes, "multilingualism is a natural phenomenon that has existed for centuries" (2010). A person who can speak multiple languages is known as a *polyglot* or a *multilingual*.

Multilingualism can be categorized in various ways based on how individuals acquire and use their languages:

- **Individual Multilingualism:** Refers to a person's ability to use multiple languages. For example, a person who speaks Arabic, French, and English is individually multilingual.
- **Societal Multilingualism:** Refers to the presence of multiple languages within a community or country. For instance, Switzerland is a multilingual society with German, French, Italian, and Romansh as official languages.
- **Simultaneous Multilingualism:** Occurs when a person learns multiple languages from birth or early childhood. For example, a child growing up in a bilingual household where both Spanish and English are spoken.
- **Sequential Multilingualism:** Occurs when a person learns additional languages after their first language is established. For instance, someone who speaks Mandarin at home and learns English at school.
- **Receptive Multilingualism:** Involves understanding multiple languages but not necessarily speaking them fluently. For example, someone who understands Italian and Portuguese but primarily speaks English.

- **Productive Multilingualism:** Involves both understanding and speaking multiple languages fluently. For example, a person who can read, write, and converse in French, German, and Japanese.
- **Balanced Multilingualism:** When a person has roughly equal proficiency in all their languages. This is relatively rare and often seen in individuals who use multiple languages regularly in different contexts.
- **Dominant Multilingualism:** When a person is more proficient in one language than the others. For example, someone who speaks English fluently but has a basic understanding of Spanish and French.

Multilingualism arises from various factors, including migration, where people move to new regions and adopt additional languages to integrate; education systems that promote learning multiple languages; cultural exchange through trade, tourism, and media; and historical influences such as colonization and conquest, which introduce new languages to different regions. Additionally, economic opportunities and globalization encourage individuals to learn languages that enhance their job prospects and social mobility. These factors collectively contribute to the widespread phenomenon of multilingualism, enriching societies with diverse linguistic capabilities.

Multilingualism offers numerous advantages across cognitive, cultural, social, and economic domains:

- **Enhanced Cognitive Abilities:** Multilingual individuals often exhibit better problem-solving skills, improved memory, and greater mental flexibility. For instance, studies have shown that bilingual children perform better on tasks that require switching attention and multitasking. Additionally, multilingualism can delay the onset of dementia and other age-related cognitive declines.
- **Cultural Awareness and Empathy:** Knowing multiple languages allows individuals to access and appreciate different cultures, fostering empathy and understanding. For example, a person who speaks both French and Arabic can engage deeply with the cultural nuances of both French-speaking and Arabic-speaking communities. This cultural awareness can enhance personal relationships and professional interactions.
- **Economic Opportunities:** Multilingualism can significantly enhance job prospects and career opportunities. In the global job market, employers often value language skills. For instance, a multilingual employee in an international company can communicate with clients and colleagues from different countries, making them a valuable asset. This can lead to better job positions and higher salaries.
- **Social Benefits:** Multilingual individuals can communicate with a broader range of people, enhancing social interactions and relationships. For example, someone who speaks Spanish and English can easily connect with both Spanish-speaking and English-speaking communities, broadening their social network and fostering inclusive environments.
- **Academic Advantages:** Multilingual students often perform better academically, particularly in areas such as reading and mathematics. Learning multiple languages can enhance overall academic achievement and cognitive development. For instance, students in multilingual education programs tend to have higher literacy rates and better academic outcomes.

2) CODE SWITCHING

Code-switching is the practice of alternating between two or more languages or dialects within a single conversation or context. This phenomenon is common among bilingual or multilingual speakers and can occur at various linguistic levels:

- **Intersentential Code-Switching:** Occurs between sentences or clauses. Example: "I can't go to the party tonight. Tengo que estudiar para el examen."
- **Intrasentential Code-Switching:** Occurs within a single sentence or clause. Example: "I'm going to the tienda to buy some groceries."
- **Tag-Switching:** Involves inserting a tag phrase from one language into another. Example: "It's a beautiful day, verdad?"
- **Intra-word Switching:** Occurs within a single word, often at the morpheme level. Example: "Unbelievablemente" (a blend of "unbelievable" and the Spanish suffix "-mente").

Code-switching serves various functions in communication, especially among bilingual or multilingual speakers:

- **Expressing Identity:** Code-switching can signal a speaker's cultural or social identity. By switching languages, individuals can align themselves with a particular group or community, emphasizing their belonging and shared heritage.
- **Clarification and Emphasis:** Switching languages can help clarify a point or emphasize a particular part of the message. This can be especially useful when a concept or term is more easily expressed in one language than another.
- **Contextual Appropriateness:** Different languages or dialects may be more suitable for different social contexts. For example, a speaker might use a formal language in a professional setting and switch to an informal dialect when with friends or family.
- **Filling Lexical Gaps:** Speakers often switch languages when they cannot find an appropriate word in one language. This helps maintain the flow of conversation and ensures that the message is conveyed accurately.
- **Affective Functions:** Code-switching can convey emotions or attitudes more effectively. For instance, switching to a native language can express affection, anger, or other emotions more naturally and vividly.
- **Quoting Someone:** When quoting someone who spoke in a different language, speakers might switch to that language to maintain the authenticity of the quote.
- **Topic Shifting:** Switching languages can signal a shift in topic or a change in the direction of the conversation. This helps listeners follow the flow of the discussion more easily.

3) LANGUAGE BORROWING

Language borrowing is the process by which one language adopts words, phrases, or other linguistic elements from another language. This often occurs due to cultural contact, trade, migration, or technological advancements, reflecting the dynamic interplay between different communities and their languages.

Cultural Contact: Interaction between different cultures often leads to the exchange of words and phrases. For example, Arabic has borrowed the word "pizza" from Italian.

Trade and Commerce: Trade introduces new products and concepts, necessitating new vocabulary. For instance, the Arabic word "بنك" (bank) is borrowed from the Italian "banco".

Migration and Colonization: Movement of people brings languages into contact. For example, the Arabic word "قهوة" (coffee) has been borrowed into many languages, including English.

Technological and Scientific Advances: New inventions and discoveries often come with new terminology. Many scientific terms in Arabic are borrowed from other languages, such as "تلفزيون" (television) from the French "télévision".

Prestige and Social Influence: Languages perceived as prestigious often lend words to other languages. For example, during the Islamic Golden Age, many Arabic words entered European languages, such as "algebra" from "الجبر" (al-jabr). Examples of Borrowed Words from Arabic

Alcohol (from "الكحل" al-kuḥl)

Cotton (from "قطن" qutn)

Algorithm (from "الخوارزمي" al-Khwārizmī, the name of a Persian mathematician)

Sofa (from "صُفَّة" ṣuffa)

Coffee (from "قهوة" qahwa)
Zero (from "صفر" ḥifr)

Sugar (from "سكر" sukkar)

4) DIGLOSSIA

Diglossia serves several important functions within a speech community. It helps maintain social stratification by associating the *High (H) variety* with prestige, education, and formal settings, while the *Low (L) variety* is linked to everyday life and local identity. This functional distribution ensures clear communication and social cohesion, with each variety used in specific contexts. Diglossia also aids in language maintenance, preserving the H variety for formal and cultural purposes while allowing the L variety to evolve naturally. Additionally, it reinforces cultural identity, with the H variety evoking tradition and the L variety fostering community. Exposure to both varieties enhances cognitive flexibility and pragmatic competence, enabling speakers to navigate different social situations effectively. Examples include the use of Modern Standard Arabic (H) and regional dialects (L) in Arabic-speaking countries, and Standard German (H) and Swiss German dialects (L) in Switzerland.

5) PIDGINS AND CREOLES

Pidgins and creoles are both types of languages that develop in multilingual environments, but they have distinct characteristics and functions:

→ A **PIDGIN** is a simplified language that develops as a means of communication between speakers of different native languages. It typically arises in contexts such as trade, colonization, or labor migration where people need to communicate but do not share a common language.

- ✓ *Simplified Grammar:* Pidgins have a basic grammatical structure with reduced rules and minimal inflection.
- ✓ *Limited Vocabulary:* They use a small set of words, often borrowed from the languages involved.
- ✓ *No Native Speakers:* Pidgins are not spoken as a first language; they are learned as a second language for specific purposes.
- ✓ *Functional Use:* Primarily used for basic communication and practical needs, such as trade or work.

→ A **CREOLE** is a fully developed language that evolves from a pidgin when it becomes the first language of a community. This typically happens when children grow up learning the pidgin as their native language.

- ✓ *Complex Grammar:* Creoles develop a more complex and stable grammatical structure.
- ✓ *Expanded Vocabulary:* They have a larger lexicon, incorporating words from the parent languages and new creations.
- ✓ *Native Speakers:* Creoles are spoken as a first language by a community.
- ✓ *Full Language Functions:* They are used in all aspects of daily life, including education, media, and government.

6) LANGUAGE MAINTENACE

Language maintenance refers to the efforts made by communities or individuals to continue using their native language despite external pressures to shift to another language. This process is crucial for preserving linguistic diversity and cultural heritage. Key strategies for language maintenance include implementing bilingual or heritage language programs in schools, producing media in the native language, and encouraging its use in community events and at home. For example, in Wales, Welsh is taught in schools to ensure that children grow up bilingual in Welsh and English, while Indigenous communities in Australia use social media platforms to share content in their native languages.

Government policies and documentation efforts also play significant roles in language maintenance. Supportive language policies, such as Canada's official bilingualism policy, promote the use of minority languages in public life. Additionally, recording and documenting languages, especially those that are endangered, helps preserve them for future generations. Linguists working with Native American tribes to document and revitalize their

languages exemplify this effort. Maintaining a language not only preserves cultural identity and heritage but also contributes to global linguistic diversity, which enriches the cultural fabric of societies and provides cognitive benefits associated with bilingualism and multilingualism.

7) LANGUAGE SHIFT

Language shift refers to the process by which a speech community transitions from using one language to another over time. This shift often occurs due to various factors, including economic opportunities, social mobility, political pressures, and cultural influences. For instance, many indigenous communities adopt the national language to access better education and job prospects. Government policies can also promote the use of a dominant language, sometimes at the expense of minority languages, as seen during colonial periods. Additionally, the influence of global media and popular culture can lead communities to prioritize languages like English over their native tongues. Intermarriage and migration further contribute to language shift, as children in such families often grow up speaking the dominant language.

The consequences of language shift are significant. The loss of a language often means the loss of cultural heritage, including traditions, stories, and knowledge embedded in the language. This contributes to a decline in global linguistic diversity, impacting cultural richness and human knowledge. Language shift can also affect community cohesion and individual identity, as language is closely tied to a sense of belonging and cultural pride. Examples of language shift include the decline of Gaelic in Scotland due to economic and social pressures and the endangerment of many indigenous languages in the Americas as communities shift to Spanish, Portuguese, or English. Understanding language shift is crucial for developing strategies to support language maintenance and revitalization, preserving linguistic and cultural diversity for future generations.

8) LANGUAGE DEATH

Language death occurs when a language loses its last native speakers and becomes extinct. This process can happen gradually or rapidly, often influenced by factors such as globalization, cultural assimilation, and economic pressures. When a dominant language becomes more advantageous for social mobility, education, and economic opportunities, speakers of minority languages may shift to the dominant language, leading to the gradual abandonment of their native tongue. Over time, as younger generations stop learning and using the language, it falls out of daily use and eventually dies. This phenomenon is particularly prevalent among indigenous and minority languages worldwide.

The consequences of language death are profound. Each language carries unique cultural knowledge, traditions, and worldviews. When a language dies, the cultural heritage and identity of its speakers are significantly impacted. The loss of linguistic diversity also means the loss of valuable linguistic data that can contribute to our understanding of human cognition, history, and social structures. Efforts to document and revitalize endangered languages are crucial in combating language death. These efforts include creating educational programs, recording native speakers, and promoting the use of the language in various media. By preserving endangered languages, we help maintain the rich tapestry of human culture and knowledge for future generations.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

- ⦿ How do economic factors drive language contact and influence language shift? Can you provide examples where economic incentives have led to the adoption of a dominant language?
- ⦿ How do educational systems in multilingual societies address language contact?
- ⦿ What are the benefits and challenges of implementing bilingual or multilingual education programs?
- ⦿ How can policies support both the dominant and minority languages in a community?