PROBLEMS OF BILINGUALISM IN PAPUA AND NEW GUINEA*

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In those countries where bilingualism is a problem for education it is usually also a political, social and cultural problem. First I will outline the historical and cultural roots of the language problem in Canada and in Papua and New Guinea. In each country political considerations interact with a unique cultural and linguistic situation in the formation of national language policies and an educational system that is structured to implement these policies. Secondly, I will review some of the research that has been carried out on the psychological problems of bilingualism and apply some of these findings comparatively to Canada and to Papua and New Guinea.

Recent psychological research evidence seems to suggest that:-

a) Wherever contiguity of languages and cultures exists, bilingualism need not impede an individual's intellectual and educational development and may enhance it.

b) Socio-economic factors are as important for bilinguals in success or failure in school as they are for monolinguals.

On the other hand, where languages and cultures are historically and structurally disparate,

a) bilingualism may tend to limit vocabulary acquisition in both languages,

b) where the second language is the 'acceptable' and 'prestige' language used in the schools but to a much lesser extent elsewhere, bilingualism may result in an actual loss of ability to function verbally and may adversely affect the development of functional intelligence.

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* A comparison between the Educational Problems arising out of Bilingualism in a Society where the Languages and Cultures are historically contiguous, Canada, and in a Society where the Languages and Cultures involved are disparate, Papua and New Guinea.

It may be one of the ironies of Australia's effort in New Guinea that the introduction of English as the medium of instruction in schools, a programme which would seem to have so much potential for the intellectual liberation of the people and the creation of a nation state, may be for the vast majority, in reality, a stumbling block to intellectual growth and a means to keep them in political subjection to an English speaking elite. It is possible, however that linguistic - cultural pressures and, ultimately, political pressures, may, for different reasons, force changes in the language policies and the school systems and curricula that give effect to these policies in both Canada and Papua and New Guinea.

Before proceeding it is important to define what the term bilingual will be understood to mean here. A person is bilingual who has learnt two languages spoken in his society and who must habitually use these languages in alternate and appropriate linguistic and social settings. A society as a whole might only be described as bilingual where a large majority of the people speak and need to speak two languages. In general, the need to be bilingual is characteristic of minorities; large permanent cultural and linguistic minorities like those of the Soviet Union, Canada, Wales and Switzerland or smaller, more dispersed immigrant minorities that face eventual cultural and linguistic assimilation by the host society.

In Canada, the Quebecois, though forming a group far too large to be assimilated in the short term, fear eventual cultural and linguistic absorption into English-speaking Canada. Whilst few English-speaking Canadians speak French, it has become a necessity for political and economic reasons for the Quebecois to speak English - a necessity that is resented and which increases their sense of cultural vulnerability.

Under the Quebec Act of 1774, the French Canadians were permitted to retain their own legal system, and the position of the Roman Catholic Church in education was not changed after 1759. At Confederation in 1867, the rights of Catholics to separate schools throughout Canada was protected, though the language of instruction was not specified. Thus each province was able to legislate on the language medium to be used in its schools.

In Quebec, French language schools for the great majority are conducted by the Catholic church. English language schools for the English-speaking minority are conducted by Protestant churches, though some English-language Catholic schools operate. In the other eight provinces all instruction is in English. Only Manitoba allowed French-speaking schools to operate until 1916 when, to resist pressures from other groups for

minority language schools, the provincial government closed the French schools. Only in Quebec province and in 'Federal' matters does French have privileges accorded English throughout Canada. French-speaking people living in other provinces and who number over 1 million must face the prospect that their children will be absorbed into the English-speaking community.

In Papua and New Guinea it has been the declared policy of the Australian administration to work towards universal primary education and literacy in English. As a world language, English provides access to virtually any information. It is the language of the administering power which happens to be a rich neighbouring country which is likely to remain the best customer for New Guinea's products and the chief source of financial and technical assistance indefinitely. No local language could provide a similar access to knowledge or become an instrument of communication with as wide a range as English. It is believed that English is ideally suited as the medium of instruction in schools and the United Nations Trusteeship Council endorses the present policy.

The great majority of Papuans and New Guineas are bilinguals in their vernacular and in one or other lingua franca, most often Melanesian Pidgin. English has become increasingly important in contacts with Europeans for, as the expatriate population has increased rapidly over recent years, the proportion of Europeans able to speak a lingua franca other than English, has declined. However, even among Papuans and New Guineans with long school careers in English behind them, English is used only when another lingua franca is not common between two speakers - as might occur when a Papuan is speaking to a New Guinean. Whether English is best suited as the medium of instruction in the schools when so little English is met with outside the classroom by the vast majority of pupils and when its use seems to give unfair advantages to certain privileged coastal and urban groups, or whether Pidgin, spoken now by perhaps half the population of the country, would not be better suited, is a question increasingly asked.

David Ausubel, in his 1958 stock-taking of the theory and problems of child development summarized that to that date the weight of available evidence indicated that bilingualism in children was predominantly a retarding factor in language development.

> A bilingual environment apparently has little effect on the initial acquisition of language, but does lead to later confusion in idea - word relationships and in language structure and to less mature use of language. Bilingual Hawaiian children are retarded about three

> years at the time of school entrance and speak a type of pidgin English. Much of this language retardation reflects a loss of vocabulary in the first language that is not fully compensated for by a corresponding gain in the second language. (1)

Much of the evidence that Ausubel cites was gained in research on bilingual groups such as the Puerto Ricans of New York and the Hawaiians where many other important non-linguistic variables probably operated. He also quotes an early study by Jones (2) of the influence of reading ability in English on the intelligence test scores of Welsh speaking children that suggested that

> bilingual children suffer an actual loss in ability to function verbally that cannot be explained by test disadvantage or social class membership. (3)

Ausubel recognized, however, that there were 'major gaps' in our knowledge and that these conclusions were highly tentative. He suggested that researchers should investigate the importance of whether the two languages were learnt concurrently or consecutively, the relative dominance of the languages, and the role of affective attitudes held about each language. Since 1958, research has been proceeding along the lines that Ausubel foresaw. Much important work has been carried out by Wallace Lambert and his associates at McGill University, Montreal, where a department devoted to the study of the problems of bilingualism has been set up.

Lambert's conclusions can be summed up in the following way. He distinguishes between 'coordinate' bilingualism where the two languages have been learnt in entirely different contexts, and 'compound' bilingualism where the two languages were learnt in the same context or environment. There appeared to be less inter-lingual interference with coordinate bilinguals. In cases where semantic saturation (aphasia) occurred, compound bilinguals tended to suffer a more general language debility. (4)

In language learning, Lambert stresses the importance of the attitudes and stereotypes about the culture and community of the 'target' language held by the learner. He identifies the existence of cultural disorientation ('anomie') which commonly sets in and which takes the form of a revulsion towards the values and culture of the community possessing the target language that increases with competence and familiarity and which tend to inhibit progress beyond a certain point. Those with a desire to merge into the other cultural group, that is those with an 'integrative orientation', have more chance of

gaining a high level of competence in the second language than have those with merely a desire to use it or with only an 'instrumental orientation'. It could be expected that where cultural and linguistic disparity is greater the fear of loss of cultural bearings would also be more acute.

Finally, Lambert found that competent bilinguals (presumably those with an integrative orientation) not only did not suffer an intellectual handicap, but were 'far superior' to monolinguals on both verbal and non-verbal tests of intelligence, confounding thus much previous research. He is uncertain whether this bilingual advantage is peculiar to Canada (or to other areas where languages and cultures are contiguous) or to "good" bilinguals (5).

Jones's earlier study concluded that similar groups of bilinguals and monolinguals did not differ significantly in intelligence on the basis of non-verbal tests provided that they were also of similar socio-economic classes. His more recent survey of 10 to 12 year olds in Wales (6) indicated that bilingualism was not necessarily the source of any intellectual disadvantage, but that in a European context, at least, socio-economic factors and in particular, the father's occupational class, are far more important in an individual's intellectual development than whether he is bilingual or monolingual.

A tentative conclusion to be drawn from both Lambert's findings and Jones's more recent study is that where cultures are contiguous and where languages have had an historically parallel development and cross-fertilizing relationship in vocabulary and concepts, then bilingualism of itself need not impede intelligence growth or scholastic progress.

In Canada, the awareness among the English-speaking community that English is clearly the dominant language in North America, and that French is the language of a regional, cultural and religious minority until recently predominantly rural in occupation and outlook, economically poorer and politically difficult to 'get on with', will continue to mean that few English speakers will become bilingual. Among the Quebecois, fear of loss of cultural independence probably leads only to an instrumental orientation towards the learning of English. However, the cultural correspondencies are very numerous between English and French culture and a high level of communication can be achieved by bilinguals.

In considering Papua and New Guinea the still open question of whether or to what extent language, having formed and been formed by a particular cultural history, conditions and structures, perception and thought, must be asked. Are there linguistic universals determined by basic biological and psychological predicaments common to all men? Or is

it more significant that, as Sapir said, "language is heuristic ... in the much more far reaching sense that its forms predetermine for us certain modes of observation and interpretation." (8)

Basil Bernstein has developed a theory of social learning that attempts to account for different levels of educational performance in terms of the patterns and registers of language used by different social classes. He is not directly concerned with the bilingual situation but his ideas are challenging and suggestive for us. He maintains that the

> forms of spoken language in the process of their learning, elicit, reinforce and generalize distinct types of relationships with the environment and thus create particular dimensions of significance. Speech marks out what is relevant - affectively, cognitively, and socially - and experience is transformed by that which is made relevant ... Certain linguistic forms involve for the speaker a loss or an acquisition of skills - both cognitive and social - which are strategic for educational and occupational success, and these forms of language use are culturally, not individually determined. (9)

Important linguistic differences between social classes can be measured in articulation, in the length and complexity of utterances, and in the extent and precision of vocabularies. For the middle class child

> expressive symbolism will be such that finely graduated affect is employed to distinguish meanings within and between speech sequences. Simply, affect is transformed by the speech process, and the speech process offers the possibility of releasing individual differences through its structure ... A tension is created between the child and his environment to induce speech that is designed to characterize relatively precisely that which initiated the utterance ... An orientation to seeking, exploring, and stabilizing relationships is induced. (9)

Bernstein suggests that while the child from a working class background has control over only a 'public' register of language, the middle class child controls both a 'public' and a 'formal' register of language. He concludes that perception is patterned sociologically through language, that change in the mode of language used involves the whole personality, and that different social structures will emphasize or stress different aspects of language potential. These are not comfortable words even when considering a monolingual environment and suggest that linguistic and educational inequalities, and therefore socio-economic inequalities, tend to be self-perpetuating in any social system.

The Papuan and New Guinea child enters school already competent in his vernaculean

language and with radically different cultural equipment from that of a European child. He is required to begin to learn English immediately and to use it solely whilst at school. By the end of the primary school, that is after seven years, he will not have the competence in English that a native speaker has entering school at five years of age. His teachers will probably be all Papuans and New Guineans who have an imperfect mastery of English beyond the level of simple face-to-face communication; Bernstein would say that they possess a very limited 'public' register of the language.

The child's environment, especially outside the towns, provides few opportunities for practising English and very few good English speaking models. He is expected to acquire a considerable quantity of knowledge, skills and attitudes relevant to a Western European, capitalist and secular world view and way of life for which the traditional culture provides little support and, at present, little use, through a medium of instruction in which an appropriate level of competence is unattainable and which may restrict the development of verbal intelligence and an intellectual maturity. As an individual ages and becomes even faintly aware of the difficulties he faces in becoming bilingual and bicultural, it is not surprising that something akin to the 'anomie' Lambert describes is likely to afflict him. (10). His motivation for speaking English becomes entirely instrumental and he becomes unresponsive to pressures upon him to continue to improve his English at the same time as he may have reached a 'plateau' where so many accumulated inaccuracies and substitutions based on 'false' analogies have been internalized that further progress, in any case, becomes more difficult.

Using Lambert's dichotomy, it appears that while 'compound' bilingualism seems to be relatively frequent in the towns in Papua and New Guinea, outside - in the 'bush' schools, there is mainly 'coordinate' bilingualism; the home context for the vernacular and the school context for English are quite distinct. However, contrary to Lambert's conclusion for Canada, that coordinate bilinguals are superior to compound because they suffer less inter-lingual interference, it would appear in Papua and New Guinea and, by extension, in other areas where there is a high degree of linguistic and cultural disparity, that coordinate bilinguals may actually perform more poorly than compound bilinguals because of cultural and linguistic conflict and disparity. This is, of course, a preliminary assessment, and to the present, no research has been carried out in this country comparable with Lambert's. Even in rural areas, it is possible that Pidgin English causes inter-lingual interference creating a situation that could be more appropriately described as one of compound

bilingualism or multilingualism.

A widely held principle of language teaching is that literacy should be achieved in the vernacular before the second language is begun. In this way the languages can be expected to remain more functionally separate (and resistant to cross-interference?). In Papua and New Guinea, the unparalleled multiplicity of indigenous languages, many of which have never been described or given written form, make it impossible to implement this principle. If English has been disappointing as the medium of instruction, there remains only Melanesian Pidgin which might overcome some of the cultural and psychological difficulties that at present face English as the national language elect, and which could, with its vocabularies augmented when necessary from English, also be a language for technical use in national development. It is difficult, however, to be wholly sanguine even about Pidgin used as the medium of instruction. English would probably continue to remain a 'prestige' language spoken by an elite with a concentration of administrative and political power in its hands.

In Quebec, English is taught as a second language and the problem for the French Canadians is to gain language parity with English for French outside the province of Quebec through the establishment of French medium schools for the children of French-speaking parents in any province in which they wish to reside. Not to achieve this may, I imagine, lead to the eventual withdrawal of Quebec from the Confederation.

The educational problems of bilingualism are somewhat analogous to the problems within monolingual societies created by differences in the linguistic patterns of social classes. Where economic and cultural disparities between the two languages and cultures are greater, the educational problems are also proportionately greater. In communities where competence in a foreign language seems essential to economic development and desirable to social change, the second language may pose, paradoxically, a serious psychological and intellectual handicap for the individual. A simple solution to this problem does not seem available.

FOOTNOTES:

(1) Ausubel, David P. Theory and Problems of Child Development, New York: Grune and Stratton, 1958 pp. 530 - 531

(2) Ibid. p. 531 (This study was carried out in 1947)

(3) Ibid. p. 531

(4) Lambert, Wallace E., "Psychological Approaches to the Study of Language: Second Language Teaching and Bilingualism." Modern Language Journal, Vol. XLVII, No. 3, March 1963.

(5) Ibid.

(6) Jones, W. F., Bilingualism and Intelligence, Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1959

(7) As quoted in Bernstein, B., "Social Class and Linguistic Development: A Theory of Social Learning" in Halsey, Floud and Anderson: Education, Economics and Society. Glencoe: The Free Press, 1961, p. 288.

(8) Ibid.

(9) Ibid.

(10) Anomie was observed among students at Port Moresby Teachers' College in a survey carried out in 1967. The older a student was, the more reluctant he was to expose himself to stimulation by mass media. Exposure represented a potential threat to values the student had come to fall back on.