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OUR ATTITUDE TOWARD THE AMERICAN TYPE OF BILINGUALISM AND BICULTURALISM*

The American attitude toward bilingualism is fundamentally different from the Yugoslav one. Formerly, the immigrant children living in the United States had only the alternatives of "drowning and swimming," that is, either learning English in American schools or facing a downright existential downfall. In the mid-1960s the ethnic groups in America (including a sizable group of Yugoslavs) originated the idea that every single American was of a given extraction and that he/she had to be proud of his/her second identity. New groups of incoming immigrants could therefore make a decision about whether their children would be educated in their first language and learn about their original culture, or whether they would immediately enter English-language schools and start learning about the American culture. The bilingual program enabled the separation of grades comprising those students who called for the use of their mother tongue, i.e. the language of their extraction, but only until the possibility of a transfer to English-language grades was attained, that is, until their command of English was such that they could follow easily the classes conducted in the English language. In other words, the function of the teaching and learning of the language of extraction was ultimately the mastery of English. The proportion of the classes conducted in English to those conducted in the language of extraction varies from program to program. Some bilingual programs use the language of students' extraction 90% of the time, others have a ratio of 50:50%, while still others begin by using the language of extraction in all the classes, "advancing" gradually toward the complete use of English. Since the children are quick to learn English in the authentic English-speaking environment, this transitional period of teaching conducted in the language of extraction lasts only a few years.

Today, 287,000 children born outside the United States of America attend American schools; of these, 76% are from the Spanish-speaking areas. The preceding number of the children of foreign extraction incorporates, in addition, about 70 different languages and dialects. The basic idea underlying the American bilingual programs is to adapt immigrant children to the American society, that is, to socialize them. The bilingual programs have been severely criticized as low-quality unsuccessful programs, the main objection being that foreign bilingual teachers who have received a thorough professional and pedagogic training are too scarce and indeed difficult to find. Such critics claim that the students educated in the language of extraction who also speak only their language of extraction within their families, will never be able to learn English well enough to enter the technologically advanced American society.

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The fact remains that in New York's China Town only Chinese can be heard, that only Italian resounds nearby, in Little Italy, and that only Spanish can be heard in Spanish Harlem. The prospects of these people can be best illustrated by the data on the most numerous immigrant population, viz., that of the Spanish-speaking areas. There are 19 million such people in the United States, which equals 9% of the total population of the U.S.A. Of these, only 4% have completed any type of secondary school, while as many as 85% of those who have dropped out of school live in large urban districts. American investigations indicate that 27% of Spanish families are poor people, earning as they do less than 7,000 dollars a year. Thus it is hardly surprising that it is precisely such people who call for a better education of their children; that is, they want the bilingual programs to ensure their children a more successful and more prosperous existence as well as a better job.

The central question that remains is whether the bilingual programs, which underline the cultural and national pride, are able to teach successfully the skills of using English that is indispensable for achieving success in the American society. Answers to this question are different. The teacher of a bilingual class says the following: "The bilingual schools help the children born outside the United States gain the feeling of being welcome in the American society, and they keep them in the school, thus preventing them from wandering in the streets. They learn better in the case of a gradual transition to English, in which process they use their mother tongue in learning English and in learning the basics of such subjects as mathematics and other sciences. They begin to attend standard schools as soon as they learn to speak English fluently. Unfortunately, there are cases where this aim is never achieved."

The immigrant parent gives a different answer: "I do not want my child to forget all about his/her cultural origin. He/she must feel proud of speaking the language of his/her ancestors and of being familiar with the traditions of his/her people. Of course, he/she must speak English too, but that does not mean having to be deprived of one's ethnic identity."

The researcher in the field of education answers this question in the following manner: "We have monitored 150 schools and 11,500 students of many nationalities. It has been found that the bilingual programs do help children to learn subjects such as mathematics. Well, for example, children from the Spanish-speaking areas that attended the bilingual program have not, generally speaking, made better progress in learning English than those who speak Spanish in the monolingual classes." The government official argues as follows: "The Supreme Court and the Congress insist that non-English-speaking children be offered the same educational possibilities as the others. Both teachers and parents believe that the best way of doing it is through bilingual schools. This may well be very expensive and not always successful, but do we have any choice?"

Among the preceding answers, it is the view of the immigrant parent that comes closest to our own attitude toward bilingualism, because its effectively simple and parental phrasing points to the big truth, namely, that it is easier to be

bilingual than bicultural. A number of arguments supporting this view have been advanced in the fields of linguistics and sociology that have recently been integrated into sociolinguistics. This fact has been observed, among others, by Christina Paulson in her book **Teaching English as a Second Language** (p.58), citing as examples very uncomfortable situations she herself experienced in Sweden - her homeland, where she was born and where she grew up, yet representing a social milieu from which she felt separated after living many years in America. In spite of her excellent command of spoken Swedish, she often even fell into disgrace in those situations where linguistic constructions connoted specific Swedish interpersonal relationships. For language is an aspect of man's overall behavior and of man's orientation in life. That is why no book on sociolinguistics can be found in American that excludes questions of bilingualism. In the contemporary world, bilingualism is an important, vital part of linguistics. The sociological background of bilingual problems is today metaphorically symbolized in words by means of the expression "the boiling pot."

A question that often arises in the context of socio-bilingual discussions is that of assimilation or separatism, which subsumes the dilemma as to whether bilingual education unites or separates the people involved. Each of these two opposite poles has its fervent advocates both within linguistics and outside it, all of them advancing their arguments. They can be polarized into two classes as follows:

For Bilingual Education

- (1) The student who cannot speak English is unable to study in regular classes.
- (2) The use of the mother tongue helps maintain ethnic identity and ethnic pride.
- (3) The separation of children in special-teacher and special-program classes contributes to an improved attitude toward teaching material and fosters the development of interest.
- (4) Transitional classes are useful because the children first learn lessons in their mother tongue and then transfer to English.

Against Bilingual Education

- (1) The foreign child (student) must be urged to learn English so as to survive in the American society.
- (2) The use of the mother tongue prevents the students from becoming assimilated and from becoming full-dimensional members of the society.
- (3) Segregated classes make the children feel "different" from the others, i.e. from the majority.
- (4) Practice of this type should not be encouraged, because the students complete their schooling without having a good command of English, and it is on account of second-rate education that they have difficulties in getting jobs.

- (5) Almost 300,000 students in the U.S. cannot speak English. The Government must secure additional resources for their education.
- (5) Bilingual classes cost the Government twice as much as regular classes. They are expensive and unnecessary.
- (6) Let us help the national minorities in getting organized and in their fight for political rights.
- (6) Encouraging minority groups to strive for political rights and to obtain them may result in the breakup of the unity of the United States of America.

Those in the United States who favor bilingual education adduce the immigrant parents who instinctively feel that their children hardly have any educational possibilities without attending classes in which teaching is conducted in their mother tongue, whereas the opponents of bilingual education persistently point out its second-rateness. The latter claim that the students trained in languages other than English cannot gain the appropriate American education, because it is impossible to learn the language well without adopting the values and ideas of the culture that the language embodies. This is, in fact, also the reason adduced by the immigrant parents who do not want their children to become alienated from the culture of their original homeland. Thus the "boiling pot" is increasingly agitated and more and more dangerous. According to one view, bilingual schools represent a distinct advantage, while according to the other view they are but a detriment to culture and education offered to the children from immigrant families. In America, the absence of national commitment and the subculture of those who cannot speak English have been increasingly discussed. Given that considerable linguistic diversity can be found in many countries of the world, bilingualism is to be considered a political problem of worldwide proportions.

We can conclude that the English language is taught "instrumentally" - as a study tool or as a means for trying to find a better job - or "integratively," that is, in the function of an instrument of integration, whereby the children of immigrant parents are integrated into the American social and cultural life.

There is in this respect an important linguistic question: what are the differences between learning the first and the second language? According to the science of psycholinguistics, a child learning simultaneously two languages draws on similar linguistic and logical strategies. Such a process is in fact the learning of two first languages. This is the phase our children abroad pass through before starting to attend foreign nurseries and day-care centers; following this phase, the mother tongue is stagnant because of the influence of the other language, i.e. the language of the environment in which the child lives, the language which is sociolinguistically completely dominant during his/her future life. This happens in the period when the child's personality gradually becomes fully formed, hence in the period that is central to personality identification. It is right here that the

greatest danger lurks, and it is also this process which accounts for the loss of national identity in our children living abroad.

Children of the early preschool age display - to a surprising extent - the skill of differentiating the context of one language from that of the other language: they distinguish them perfectly and hence do not mix them up. Nevertheless, the process of acquiring two languages is somewhat slower than that of acquiring only one language, viz., the first language or the mother tongue. Wallace Lambert has proved that the learning of two languages at the same time does not cause the retardation of children or language, nor does it affect intelligence (Lambert, 1967, pp. 91-109). Moreover, such children even have an advantage because, as Lambert says, "They have language property, form their thoughts much more easily, and possess greater mental flexibility."

The foregoing account gives us grounds to offer a logical conclusion, namely, that the processes associated with second-language learning resemble the processes of first-language learning to an increasing extent with diminishing temporal "removal" of the two types of processes. Thus, if a child begins to learn the second language very early (during the third or fourth year of life), the process of learning will be similar to that of first-language learning, which means natural, rapid, and automatized. The greater the gap between first- and second-language learning, the more difficult the barriers to successful learning. As early as the tenth year of life, great psychological difficulties arise in the process of second-language learning. A number of investigations (Ravem, 1968; Milon, 1974; Natalicio, 1971; Dulay and Burt, 1972; Ervin-Tripp, 1974; and Hansen-Bede, 1975) have shown that linguistic and cognitive processes in the learning of two languages invariably give rise to the so-called interlingual strategy only in early childhood; in the course of later years, it disappears. For example, Hansen-Bede (1975) has investigated such linguistic matters as gender, word order, the formation of verbal forms, questions and negatives in three-year-old children from the English-speaking area who learned Urdu after settling in Pakistan.

Even though the differences between English and Urdu are great, no first-language interference was observed. Similar strategies and rules were at work in both languages. This means that the first language and the second language are learned by children through a creative process. Interference does not occur because the children have not yet acquired the logically constructed first-language repertoire to affect the second language. The more a person approaches adulthood, the fuller the first-language repertoire and the more inevitable the emergence of interference. The strongly consolidated nature of adults' first language is responsible for the very strong interference appearing in the course of their second-language learning.

Another fundamental factor is the relation between thought and language. They are firmly interrelated. Thought stimulates language, language clarifies thought. In this respect, the following question arises from the logical point of view: Does a bilingual's mind comprise one or two systems? In all probability, it is not made up of two systems, because the special thought mechanism "sorts out" new meanings in relation to the old ones,

automatically distinguishing meanings, thoughts, and concepts in each of the two languages. These automatisms are not identical with each other, though they are largely alike. What in fact emerges is a new system of conceptualization consisting of two similar but not wholly parallel systems.

All the theories of bilingualism in the U.S.A. search for the ways of utilizing the first language in the learning, as soon as possible, of English as the basis for existence in the U.S.A. However, we in Yugoslavia are interested in the reverse process - how to reintegrate with our linguistic and social environment our children coming back home from all over the world whose first (often the only) language is other than their mother tongue. This process differs totally from that in America; in principle, it is identical with the practice we have been developing in the education of the children - members of the nationalities.

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