Bilingualism: A Research Perspective

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Ⅰ. Introduction

With the recent acceleration of globalization and internationalization, the ability to communicate between people of different language backgrounds has become more important. The power of the major languages, especially English, has been getting stronger, and so people want to learn a major language. Also in Japan, more and more people have chances to go abroad for various reasons. They are very earnest to learn English. Moreover, the Ministry of Education and Science in Japan recently decided to make English education in elementary schools mandatory.

For the reasons mentioned above, the term "bilingualism" has been heard often these days. Many people would like to become bilingual. However, research involving "bilingualism" is very varied, involving not only linguistics but also sociology, culture, geography, education and social psychology. As a result, there are a lot of research studies exploring these various aspects. However, especially in Japan, it seems that people want to be "bilingual" without knowing what it really means. The term "bilingualism" seems to be used commonly in Japan, but sometimes with a different concept from what the majority of the world has.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the meaning of "bilingualism" from a broad overview. However, it would be impossible to cover all aspects of bilingualism in one paper. This paper will focus on "definitions of bilingualism and bilingualism in society".

Ⅱ. Definitions of Bilingualism

Ⅱ–1. Definitions based on competence

Researchers such as Skutnabb-Kangas (1981) and also Baker (2001) point out that bilingualism should be discussed as both a characteristic of an individual (individual bilingualism) and as a phenomenon in a society (societal bilingualism), and most

definitions have to do with the former.

It may seem that "bilingualism" is a homogeneous and well-defined term, but as Skutnabb-Kangas (1981) indicates, "there are almost as many definitions of bilingualism as there are scholars investigating it" (p.81). This means that researchers use the definition of bilingualism that best suits their own inquiry and their research aims. In this sense all definitions are arbitrary. Skutnabb-Kangas also indicates that definitions of bilingualism depend on which aspect of bilingualism a researcher uses as a criterion.

Linguists and psychologists are often more interested in children who are originally bilingual, from the very beginning…i.e., they use *origin* as a criterion. Linguists often do this, too, but their definitions of bilingualism are more often based on the linguistic *competence* of the bilingual, the way she masters her two languages. Sociologists are more often interested in what one does with the languages, what they are used for or can be used for. They define bilingualism in terms of the *function* the languages fulfill in or for the bilingual individual or in a bilingual community. Sociologists and also interested in what one does with the languages, social psychologists (and demographers) are also interested in the way in which the speaker and the people among whom she lives react to the two languages. They then define bilingualism in terms of *attitudes*. Some definitions make an attempt to combine at least two aspects, often those of competence and function. All definitions can in principle also be broadened to accommodate multilingualism. (p.81)

As above, there are definitions from various points of view. First of all, definitions by competence, which seem to be the most common, will be discussed as the issue that most often occurs in the definition of bilingualism. The main aspect of this definition is how well the person can control the two languages. In the past, the most often quoted definitions were the following:

1. Bloomfield (1933): "native-like control of two languages" (p.56)
2. Haugen (1953): "the speaker of one language who can produce complete meaningful utterances in the other language" (p.7)

Bloomfield's (1933) strict definition was the classic one. An equally rigorous one is by Braun: "active, completely equal mastery of two or more languages" (1937, p.115, cited in Haugen, 1968). Some definitions exclude any interference by L1 in this category. Oestreicher's definition, "complete mastery of two different languages without interference between the two linguistic process" (1974, p.9), can be considered one of these. In these demanding definitions, someone who has equal competence in two languages in various contexts is termed an *equilingual* (Baker, 2001), or *ambilingual* (Halliday, Macintosh & Strevens, 1964, p.141), or most commonly, a *balanced bilingual* (Baker, 2001). In their field, balanced bilingualism is an idealized concept. Fishman (1971) argues that rarely can anyone be equally competent in two languages across all situations (Fishman, 1971; Hakuta, 1986; Azuma, 2000).

This kind of rigorous definition or concept of being bilingual, however, is now rarely used and considered obsolete. In particular, Bloomfield's (1933) "native like control" has been subject to attacks. In the first place, when it comes to defining "native-like competence," how do you define "native-like"? Wouldn't numerous elements such as a person's age, sex, education, social status, and so on have to be considered when deciding whether that person has native-like competence?

Azuma (2000) argues that even if there were a person who could control two languages with the same proficiency, determining this would be very difficult.

Away from these very demanding definitions, we may look at Haugen's (1953) much quoted definition above. His definition is much less rigorous than those discussed so far. With the same leniency, some researchers require no more than "at least some knowledge and control of the grammatical structure of the second language" (Hall, 1952, p.14).

A recent trend in the field is to use a broader definition, that is, one that "incorporates a developmental perspective, bringing the entire process of second-language acquisition into the domain of bilingualism" (Hakuta, 1986, p.4). That is to say, in the whole learning process of L2, any competence of L2 plus L1 is to be called "bilingualism." This broadens the scope of the definition to include even the initial stage of bilingualism, at which a speaker merely understands the foreign language without being able to speak it. In this view, "bilingualism" is not a certain reaching point but a broad continuum. Marha & Yashiro (1991) suggest that Haugen's (1953) definition can be interpreted as the starting point of being bilingual (as "Hello! How are you?" can be a "meaningful utterance"), and Bloomfield's (1933) as the end of it.

Researchers point out that still in Japan, most people believe that being bilingual means "someone with native-like competence of another language (most often English) in wherever the situations are." They say in broad definitions, bilingual education is synonymous with a foreign language education (Marha & Yashiro, 1991).

These spectrum definitions seem fine, but there are some problems to consider. Definitions of bilingualism are required to compare bilingual individuals and to evaluate clearly the results of teaching or to distinguish individuals who can be described as sufficiently bilingual for various occasions (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1981). When there are many reasons for measuring bilingual competence, clearer definitions of bilingualism are required.

Measurement of bilingualism, however, is another big, controversial issue and many researchers state it is almost impossible. By what criteria can a person be judged bilingual or not? Grosjean (1985) says it is dangerous to use a "monolingual" as a means of comparing proficiency of someone bilingual and it is not comparing the same two kinds of things. The problem is too big to discuss here, therefore the issue will be discussed on another occasion.

Skutnabb-Kangas (1981) claims that definitions of competence are either too narrow or too broad, so almost nobody is bilingual or everybody is. If a definition either includes or excludes everybody, it is useless in practice, as it does not discriminate in any way. According to Baker (2001), Bloomfield's (1933) definition, "native-like control" is too extreme and can be called maximalist. The other end is minimalist definition, as in Diebold's (1964, cited in Baker, p.6) concept of "incipient bilingualism". Baker insists "The danger of being too exclusive is not overcome by being too inclusive" (p.6).

Is there an appropriate middle point in between the two extremes? Here we must not forget that it is dangerous to make an arbitrary cut-off point in order to decide who is bilingual and who is not. Baker (2001), who concludes deciding who is bilingual or not is impossible after all, suggests as one alternative moving away from proficiency levels of various aspects of languages to a portrait of the everyday use of the two languages by individuals, therefore, shift the discussion in terms of "functions," which will be done in the next section.

Another issue that should be discussed is, when we talk about definitions of bilingualism, which skill(s) should we consider? Should we discuss all four skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing)? Are receptive skills enough, or should we include productive skills as well?

Is a person bilingual if s/he understands what people say even though s/he cannot say anything him/herself? Is a person bilingual if s/he can write or read a language even without being able to speak it? Is a person bilingual if s/he can speak it, even though s/he cannot read or write it? Besides, when we look at the whole world, most of the languages are not read and written — either they have no written form at all, or they are rarely written by only few people (Ferguson, 1977). The problem of which skill(s) to consider, has been largely debated (Lado, 1961; Mackey, 1965; Macnamara, 1969; Oller, 1979; Carroll, 1980; Beasmore, 1986).

Even the most rigorous definitions did not consider these subsidiary areas of language. Therefore again, attempts to categorize people as bilinguals or monolinguals are mostly too simplistic. Baker (2001) summarizes the problem:

The four basic language abilities do not exist in black and white terms. Between black and white are not only many shades of gray; there also exist a wide variety of colors. The multi-colored landscape of bilingual abilities suggests that each language ability can be more or less developed. Reading ability can range from simple and basic to fluent and accomplished. Someone may listen with understanding in one context (e.g. shops) but not in another context (e.g. an academic lecture. These examples show that the four basic abilities can be further refined into sub-scales and dimensions. There are skills within skills, traditionally listed as: pronunciation, extent of vocabulary, correctness of grammar, the ability to convey exact meanings in different situations and variations in style. However, these skills tend to be viewed from an academic or classroom perspective. Using a language on the street and in a shop require a greater accent on social competence with language.... (p.5)

For some reason in Japan, the skill of "speaking" and subsequently "listening" ability that is necessary in order to speak seem to be considered the most important skills. Therefore in Japan, a somewhat limited definition of "bilingual" would be: "a person who can speak another language (usually English) with native-like (any native) fluency (any content)." When teaching English, instructors must convey the narrowness of this concept to the students and try to deepen conceptions regarding the intricate nature of bilingualism.

II–2. Definitions based on function

As discussed above, in the past, research on bilingualism often focused on definitions based on competence, measured mainly in terms of grammatical purity. Only later was quantity brought into the domain of definitions. The first definitions of bilingualism based on function had already appeared by the early 1950s, and by the beginning of the 1960s, researchers started paying more and more attention to "purity" in the grammar and quality of the bilingual individuals. Only later was quantity brought into the domain of definitions. The first definitions of bilingualism based on function had already appeared by the early 1950s, and by the beginning of the 1960s, researchers started paying more and more attention to functions of language. Interest shifted from a description of the languages more to their users (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1981).

The definitions by function are not so different from each other as are the definitions by those by competence. The classic definition based upon the use of languages is by Weinreich (1967): "The practice of alternately using two languages will be called bilingualism, and the person involved, bilingual" (p.1). Mackey's (1970) definition is similar: "The alternate use of two or more languages by the same individual" (p.555). Oksaar's (1971) definition is also quite close to theirs, except that she adds the requirement that a speaker should be able to switch codes automatically. In her definition, a bilingual is someone "who in most situations can freely use two languages as means of communication and switch from one language to the other if necessary" (p.172). Rivers (1969) makes a definition similar to Oskaar's (1971) and suggests we "consider the child bilingual as soon as he is able to understand and make himself understood within his limited linguistic and social environment (that is, as is consistent with his age and the situation in which he is expressing himself)" (p.35-36). Mackey summarizes the function-oriented view of bilingualism: "Bilingualism is not a phenomenon of language; it is a characteristic of its use. It is not a feature of the code but of the message. It does not belong to the domain of *langue* but of *parole*" (p.554).

It seems that the definitions by function partly counterbalanced the very narrow and complicated notion of linguistic competence in the definitions of bilingualism, especially compared with those used by theoretical linguists, particularly in the early years of the flourishing era of transformational-generative grammar (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1981). Noam Chomsky (1965) stated that "linguistic theory should concern itself primarily with the investigation of a speaker's competence, and he saw competence as the speaker/hearer's knowledge of his/her own language, and distinguished this from

performance" (cited in Skutnabb-Kangas, p.86). Also, Chomsky's ideal speaker/hearer was someone who lived "in a completely homogeneous speech community, had a perfect command of its language, and was not affected by any grammatically irrelevant factors, such as limitation of memory, distraction, shift of attention or error (momentary or characteristic) in making practical use of her knowledge." (Chomsky, 1966, cited in Skutnabb-Kangas,p.86). Later it was found that there are reasons for objecting to a linguistic theory and for irrelevant factors to exist in terms of actual human communication even in monolingual situations (see Canale & Swain, 1980). Skutnabb-Kangas criticizes the theory of theoretical linguistics mentioned above, saying "(their) viewpoint comes to be even more peripheral as objects of investigation than 'non-ideal' monolinguals" (p.86). She also states that what differentiates bilinguals from monolinguals in any narrow definition of competence mostly belongs to the domain of performance and therefore exists outside the domain of grammar in such a strict sense.

She emphasizes that the task of formal grammatical analysis in transformational-generative grammar was trying to portray all the rules and principles that the native speakers instinctively creates as the result of his/her competence and linguistic knowledge. Their focus is the creative aspect of language — the native speaker's ability to produce, with the help of knowledge of grammar rules, an infinite number of sentences that s/he has never even heard before.

The attempt to refine the concept of competence and the distinction between competence and performance steered the research field of linguistics in a more sociolinguistic direction (communicative competence), and created the concept of Selinker's (1972) "interlanguage." In a sociolinguistic view, the role of grammar is not only to organize rules in order to produce accurate sentences, but also to describe what is "acceptable" in different social aspects.

In Canale and Swain (1980), which is very often quoted, they defined communicative competence in four areas and referred to the relation and interaction between grammatical and sociolinguistic competence. In these cases, performance means the actual use of a foreign language in a real situation.

II–3. Different kinds of bilingualism

Skutnabb-Kangas (1981) divides bilingualism into three categories: natural bilingualism, school bilingualism, and cultural bilingualism.

First of all, the term natural bilingual refers to a person who has learned two

languages without formal education but in his/her everyday life as his/her means of communication. The reason s/he can learn two languages may be internal, for example s/he naturally picks up languages in his/her family, or external-social, as in case where the community speaks a different language from the family. Bilingual competence for such people is something they must acquire to manage their daily lives. School bilingualism is the result of learning a foreign language at school and the learner does not have many chances to use the language as a natural means of communication. Such bilingualism is often not something vital but a desirable extra, something they might use in their future or when they come into contact with native speakers of the language.

Cultural bilingualism is almost the same as school bilingualism, but it refers to adults who learn a foreign language for reasons of work, travel, and so on. It comes from the older ideal of "educated person," someone who could control one or two of the "major" European languages, which were considered "languages of culture."

Here, the issue is the distinction between natural bilingualism and school bilingualism (including cultural bilingualism). Some people insist only natural bilinguals are regarded as bilingual, and school bilinguals and cultural bilinguals have only a good command of a foreign language. Malmberg (1977) defines bilingual this way: "A bilingual is an individual who, in addition to his mother tongue, has acquired from childhood onwards or from an early age a second language by natural means (in principle not by formal instruction), so that he has become a fully competent member of the other linguistic community within the sphere, the occupational or social group, to which he naturally belongs" (p.134-135). Malmberg also states: "A knowledge of a second language laboriously acquired does not result in bilingualism. This then establishes an acceptable boundary between bilingualism and a knowledge of foreign languages" (p.135). In Malmberg's view, the bilingual should be able to function in both linguistic communities "naturally, and with no greater effort in the one language that in the other (with a certain exception made in the case of vocabulary, and with some allowance for differing levels of education in the two languages)" (p.135). This problem has to do with a distinction between informal language *acquisition* and more formal language *learning* (Krashen, 1981, 1982, 1985).

If we adopt a broad definition of bilingualism, which is most supported now, that bilingualism is to be considered as a continuum that includes the entire process of learning a second language, the viewpoint that only natural bilingualism is bilingualism

contradicts the definition above. However, in Japan, this view is overwhelmingly prevalent.

II−4. Semilingualism

Bilinguals tend to have a dominant language over the other. This tendency can change in the course of the bilingual's life. Bilinguals can always lose competence of one language or even both for many reasons. "Semilingual" has a negative connotation meaning one of the languages of a bilingual is not perfect.

Hansegard (1975, cited in Baker, 2001) describes semilingualism in terms of six deficiencies of language competence: vocabulary, accuracy of grammar, language processing, creativeness, thinking skills, and expressing emotions. In Japan, also, some people worry that if bilingual education fails or the situation of natural bilingualism does not work, the person ends up being "semilingual" (Marha & Yashiro, 1991).

The notion of semilingualism has received much criticism (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1981; Wiley, 1996; MacSwan, 2000). Baker (2001) suggests there are six problems. First, the term semilingual has a negative connotation, especially when it is used to describe immigrants, as it could place a negative label on them. Second, if bilinguals' language(s) are relatively underdeveloped, the cause is not the bilinguals themselves but the economical, political, and social environment that surrounds them. Third, most bilinguals use the two languages for different purposes and circumstances. A bilingual may be competent in some contexts but not in others. Fourth, the tests that are often used to measure language proficiencies may be insensitive to the qualitative aspects of languages and to the big range of language competences, as language tests measure only a small part of bilinguals' overall language ability. Fifth, deciding the cut-off point of who is semilingual and who is not can be arbitrary and lacks trustworthy evidence made by subjective observation. Finally, the comparison with monolingual is not fair. We have not yet determined that bilinguals are "naturally" different from monolinguals both quantitively and qualitively.

These criticisms raise serious doubts about the value of the term "semilingualism," and when "a language deficit" is perceived, a better approach may locate the causes in, for example, the type of tests used, lack of materials, or the quality of language education rather than in language itself (Baker, 2001).

Ⅲ. Bilingualism in Society

The bilingual population of the world is growing as globalization advances. Bilingual individuals usually exist in networks and form communities, and sometimes regions. This section focuses on groups of bilinguals, and what the meaning of bilingualism is in society from a sociolinguistic perspective.

Quite surprisingly from the ordinary Japanese point of view, Skutnabb-Kangas (1981) declares that bilingualism has often been associated with a negative image, and the group of bilingual people are oppressed ones. Bilingualism is on the halfway in the process of transition from monolingualism, low status minority language, via bilingualism in the low status mother tongue and the high status majority language, to a final monolingualism in the majority language.

Let us examine how bilingualism is perceived in society in the world in general. The term "bilingualism" is usually used to refer to an ability to control two languages by an individual, but when the focus shifts to two languages in society, the term often used is *diglossia* (Ferguson, 1959), although originally the term was used to differentiate two varieties of a single language — a "high" and "low" variety, depending on the situation, and the term has been expanded to refer to the two languages of the bilingual situation (Fishman, 1971, 1980). Ferguson's original description that distinguishes between a high language variety and minority language within a country was applied to a new version of diglossia in using two languages within a country. It is a rather discriminatory distinction.

Where diglossia exists, languages tend to be used according to the situations, with the low variety of the language being used in informal, personal situations and the high variety being used in more formal, official contexts.

Also, in such an environment, one language is put in a more prestigious position in relation to the other. The majority language usually enjoys higher status and the high variety is often considered to be a sign of success and being educated.

Fishman (1980) combines the terms bilingualism and to describe four language situations where bilingualism and diglossia exist with or without each other.

The first situation is a language community that has both bilingualism and diglossia. In such a community, most people can use both high and low varieties of language and use either one according to the situation they are in.

The second situation is diglossia without bilingualism. In such a case, there are

two languages within one geographic area. One group of people speaks one language, and the other group speaks another language. Those who speak both languages fluently are rare (Andres, 1990). In many cases the group with ruling power speaks the high language variety, and less powerful group speak only the low language.

The third situation is bilingualism without diglossia. In this situation, almost everyone is bilingual and they do not switch languages in accordance with functions. Either language may be used for almost any function. Fishman (1971) says such communities tend to be unstable and the majority language will someday take over the minority language and the minority language will disappear. Hakuta (1986) describes an interesting example. Although the United States has been host to more bilingual people than any other country in the world, the rate of decline of non-English languages in the United States was phenomenal. He states that when it would take 350 years for the average nation to experience, the same amount of loss of languages as that was seen in just one generation in the United States. He states that it is a deep mystery, but this is a situation — bilingualism without diglossia — that made English a dominant language. (Although in recent years, the Spanish-speaking population has been increasing rapidly).

The fourth situation is where there is neither bilingualism nor diglossia. A typical example is a situation in which a society with different languages has been forcibly changed to a monolingual society, often for a political reason.

Looking at Fishman's (1980) descriptions, it shows that bilingualism in society involves various aspects, mostly power struggle, political problems, etc., and Skutnabb-Kangas's (1981) assertion that being bilingual has a negative connotation now can be understood.

IV. Conclusion

In this paper, definitions of bilingualism based on competence and by function, kinds of bilingualism including semilingualism, and bilingualism in society have been reviewed. As a result of reviewing the literature, surprising findings were encountered. First of all, it is difficult to define bilingualism based on competence and there are many various definitions and they end up either too narrow or too broad. However, the ones that are currently most supported are very broad and they are far from what Japanese people usually think, and balance on the extreme definitions could

be achieved by considering definitions by functions.

Second, Japanese people are not familiar with the idea that "school bilingualism," that is, L2 *learned* by instructions, and is not *acquired*, can also be bilingualism is usually not the common idea between Japanese. It does, however, coincide with the definition that bilingualism includes all the learning stages of L2.

Third, semilingualism, may be a concept that is not very unfamiliar, but giving the term to this problem has clarified the concept. It seems to be another controversial issue, and more research is needed.

Fourth, in contrast to what most Japanese people might think, the term bilingualism has had a complicated social background and can have a negative connotation in society if we look at the whole world. By adding the idea of "diglossia," complex situations have become clearer.

As stated in the introduction, bilingualism is a huge area in linguistics that includes so many elements and almost all divisions of linguistics including the entire field of SLA (Second Language Acquisition). Thus there are countless aspects to do research on. The purpose of this paper was to look at the area on the macro-level and grasp the concept of bilingualism as a whole, but potentially there must be other approaches. Further, this is just the first step to the vast area of study of bilingualism, therefore it would be interesting to do more research in depth.

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