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THE INTERCULTURAL SEMIOSIS OF THE BILINGUAL SELF

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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INTRODUCTION

According to ten Thije, '[m]ultilingualism is accepted as the starting point for the linguistic analysis of intercultural communication' (2006: 2-3), where 'intercultural communication can be taken as the confrontation, overlap, or competition between, and sometimes as the extension or exclusion of, different pragmatic and cognitive systems' (ibid.: 3). Thus, intercultural communication is seen as a meaning-generating force (ibid.), a semiosis. Although '[i]n most cases […] intercultural communication takes place between speakers of different languages' and is possible also 'among monolingual speakers of the same language' (Lüdi, 2006: 11), what is especially interesting is how an intercultural contact is resolved within bilingual or multilingual people. Consequently, the goal of this paper is to examine the intercultural semiosis of the self, instigated by the cohabitation of different languages and its impact on self-perception and the construction of a bilingual identity. In order to achieve this aim, I shall first provide a summary of Menéndez's article 'on being a multilingual writer' to sketch out the starting points for further theoretical analysis of the case study. Secondly, I will apply the frameworks of otherization (Holliday, 1999) and perspectivizing (ten Thije, 2006) in the context of intercultural communication between the self and the other as Mead's *I* and *me*.

As a result, the study has drawn the following research questions:

1) What is Menéndez's perspective on multilingualism?
2) What are the consequences of being bilingual?
3) How does the semiosis of intercultural communication occur in bilinguals?

In view of the above stated, the research has set its enabling objectives:

1) to describe the situation under analysis;
2) to read and analyze the theoretical writings concerning the research subject;
3) to draw the methodological framework applicable to the research;
4) to analyze the research data by applying the research method selected;
5) to compile a comparative summary of the results;
6) to reflect the research data analyzed in the empirical part of the research;
7) to draw relevant conclusions.

Chapter 1 describes a multilingual perspective based on Menéndez's article, presenting her view on the issue and outlining the consequences of being bilingual.

Chapter 2 provides an analysis of the intercultural issues introduced by Menéndez, according to the theoretical frameworks developed by Holliday and ten Thije.

1. THE MULTILINGUAL PERSPECTIVE

Menéndez's article *Are We Different People in Different Languages?* is a blog essay on what it means to be a multilingual writer. Teaching creative writing to multilingual classes, she had observed that, though all of her students could express themselves 'beautifully' in English, they could hardly do so in their native tongues (2015: 1). The students' justifications for their struggling with the task shared a common perspective of otherization of the language they had been born with. Thus, Menéndez's Latvian student had seen his mother tongue as 'the sweet and innocent language of childhood' (ibid.: 2) whereas the Gujarati students had described their native language as 'the language of scolding' (ibid.: 4). Menéndez herself, being of Cuban Spanish origin, on the other hand, views 'language [...as] a kind of initiation into multiple realities' (ibid.: 5), an expansion of different perspectives.

Examining the reasons for such diverse attitudes, she comes to the conclusion that, although 'language exists [in the first place] in order to communicate', it also confronts with 'miscommunication, misunderstanding and the sense of mute inarticulateness' (2015: 9). As a result, bilingual people experience within themselves an intercultural communication, becoming the ground where, in Danticat's words quoted by Menéndez, 'two very different countries are forced to merge' (ibid.: 5). The language of the self and the language of the other meet within a single individual and negotiate the terms of coexistence. As Menéndez notes, because '[l]anguage is power and protest, inclusion and exclusion', it 'also communicates our deepest selves back to us', internalizing the 'politics of language and culture' (ibid.: 2). Thus, negotiation of meaning and dominance becomes a daily semiosis for those endowed with 'the gift of bilingualism' (ibid.: 5).

Although Menéndez lists a number of acclaimed multilingual authors and praises the benefits of multicultural perspectives, the fact remains that cognitive capacity of such a level of bilingualism as that of famous bilingual authors is 'simply unavailable to most people' (Edwards, 2004: 28) and, just like Menéndez's students, '[m]any of them [...had] left their homeland in their early teens and went on to write in the language of a new land' (2015: 7). Consequently, due to linguistic exclusion and lack of 'multilingual writing programs that can give students the encouragement and freedom to use their native languages' (ibid.: 9), what first begins with an effort to find a voice in a foreign tongue, often ends with a reversed situation in which the bilingual has lost connection with the mother tongue. So, while a multilingual experience equips bilinguals with 'several perspectives on the world' and 'an intercultural communicative competence' (Lüdi, 2006: 12-3), according to Lüdi, it does so at the expense of a homogeneous personality as 'the two language systems are separated in the

brain (ibid.: 26), resulting in a split 'social identity' (ibid.: 13) that may consciously or unconsciously otherize the language of the past in preference of the acquired hegemonic language (Menéndez, 2015: 4).

However, Edwards points out that though it might seem that 'bilinguals must have some sort of split mentality – two individuals in one' (2004: 24), in fact, the personalities stay uniform while their 'repertoire of possibility' is indeed expanded, therefore the tension results from a simultaneous allegiance to two different ethnic groups (ibid.: 25) which construct the social identity. Consequently, although '[b]oundaries are really crossed, cultural and linguistic sensitivities are really enlarged, and allegiances are both refined and broadened' (ibid.: 27), bilingualism, on Edwards's view, results in 'a unitary identity [that is] woven from several strands' (ibid.: 28). Nevertheless, as Edwards emphasizes, the bilingual identity is 'inevitably influenced by one language and culture more than by others' (ibid.) as it is hardly possible to utilize both/all languages at one's disposal to an equal degree. So, being bilingual comes with the benefits of personality growth and difficulties of finding the right balance between the two linguistic and cultural views.

2. THE SEMIOSIS OF THE BILINGUAL SELF

According to Edwards, '[t]he importance of being bilingual is, above all, social and psychological rather than linguistic. Beyond types, categories, methods, and processes is the essential animating tension of identity' (2004: 30). In order to explain the bilingual tension, Menéndez quotes Bakhtin, who states that 'language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between one's self and the other… The word in language is half someone else's' (2015: 5). Consequently, knowledge of the self is intertwined with the exploration of the other. However, as noted by Sonesson, '[t]o Bakhtin, in fact, only Alter [the other] is directly known, since only he can be seen as a complete, finished whole' whereas 'to Peirce, […both] Ego [the self] and Alter [the other] are constructions to exactly the same degree' (2012: 248), 'a stream of consciousness, which cannot be halted' (ibid.: 249) and can be cognized only 'through signs' (ibid.: 250), which, in the context of cultures, correspond to 'the different states […] within the "stream of consciousness"' (ibid.: 251). So, the tension between the self and the other inherent in bilinguals is prerequisite for the dialogic process of self-realization.

Also Kockelman reminds that '[a]s Mead (1934) noted, any "interaction" is a semiotic process' (2011: 166) during which 'one can "internalize" another's attitude (towards one's status)' or 'in cases of self-reflexive semiosis, where this other is oneself, one can self-sanction one's own behaviour as conforming or not with one's status' (ibid.: 176). As ten Thije, points out, in Mead's theory 'the individual [thus] has two possible perspectives towards himself, […] "I" and "me", where the latter represents the "generalised others"' comprised by a collection of presuppositions rooted in experience (2006: 101-2). As a result, Mead's 'me is the self as appropriating, having tak[en] into account others' attitudes towards its social and intentional statuses; and the I is the self as effecting, enacting social and intentional roles that change others' attitudes' (Kockelman, 2011: 177).

For the multilingual self, this means a set of *I* and *me* for each linguistic identity because, although the unitary personality of a bilingual enables a shared background knowledge for both linguistic entities, the fact that experience is acquired via separate languages leads to the division of the self and subjection to translation as a means of uniting the distinct linguistic experiences in a single language discourse. Thus, 'the struggle to understand and make one's self understood', described by Menéndez in reference to the feelings evoked by her assignment to 'translate a poem from a language of which [her students] have no knowledge' (2015: 10), occurs whenever different languages meet in the terrain of the multilingual self, necessitating a translation of experiences. Consequently, every

additional language both 'modifies the other, crossbreeds with it, fertilizes it' (Hoffman in Menéndez, 2015: 4) and, via heuristic projections of one linguistic entity as *me* or *the generalized other* also tends to institutionalize the other. Thus, the semiosis of the bilingual self evolves via cycles of otherization and perspectivizing.

2.1. Otherization

Holliday defines otherization as 'the process whereby the "foreign" is reduced to a simplistic, easily digestible, exotic or degrading stereotype' (1999: 203) characteristic to 'dominant large culture discourse' that might be unconsciously activated by 'the natural social forces of reification' (ibid.: 204) that 'takes place [when] the notion of culture […becomes] institutionalized' (ibid.: 199). Thus, as Holliday emphasizes, 'group members' statements *about* "culture" or "their culture" should be seen as products or artefacts *of* the culture', revealing how 'notions of large culture are reified, and dominant discourses of culture are set up' (ibid.: 209). Seeing an important distinction between a large and small culture, Holliday argues that 'large culture […] tends to be "other" or "foreign" directed' whereas 'small culture' focuses on the 'interpretive process, discovery of the stranger's own small culture, as it is aligned within the specificities of the wider mélange' (ibid.: 215).

As a result, the reasoning of Menéndez's students demonstrates that they have developed a stereotyped perception of their native identity and are unconsciously reifying a large culture discourse contrary to Menéndez's own approach to multilingualism as a creative force, fostering small culture perspectives. This might be the result of otherization inherent in a large culture view which defines one's belonging to a social group depending on 'a language variety' spoken (Lüdi, 2006: 22) because, as noted by Edwards, '[b]eyond utilitarian and unemotional instrumentality, the heart of bilingualism is belonging' (2004: 30). But, as Lüdi notes, although attitude towards multilingualism is being revised, 'the ruling groups of a society often reject multilingualism in general' (2006: 20) and, consequently, treat code-switching as 'shameful and even cursed' (ibid.: 21). Thus, language policy is turned 'into an instrument of power' (ibid.: 22) that, in line with 'a "monolingual" ideology', envisions 'more or less perfect […] competencies in single languages' (ibid.: 33) and might, in fact, encode bilinguals to side with either of the large culture language communities, as mixed identities and unintentional language transfer would be viewed as signs of their inferiority. As Menéndez notes, 'Sadly, none of this is ancient history. Just this year, Donald Trump chastised Jeb Bush for speaking Spanish and a broadcaster was attacked for pronouncing

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Spanish words a bit too correctly for the tastes of some of her English-speaking listeners' (2015: 2).

A good example of unconscious otherization is also Menéndez's citation of Hoffman's point of view on bilingualism. According to Hoffman, the conflict between two languages results due to the discrepancy between 'accumulated associations' and 'the radiating haze of connotation' that a signifier has in one language in contrast to another, which is why Hoffman 'chooses to write in English […] even if it's not the language of the self' (2015: 4). However, although Hoffman claims to be 'the sum of [her] languages' (ibid.), her identification of the self with the native tongue as opposed to the English other, simultaneously otherizing the acknowledged native self by granting public voice to the English other over the native self, indicates that, instead of treating both of her languages as equal tools of expression, Hoffman reifies English hegemony. Thus, due to their need for belonging and the inevitable dominance of one language over the other, bilinguals are subjected to feelings of otherization that can be surmounted only by conscious shifting of perspectives.

2.2. Perspectivizing

As an alternative to the otherizing approach of large culture discourse strategies, combining the epistemological and social-interactional concepts, introduced by Graumann and Mead respectively, ten Thije develops the framework of 'the *communicative apparatus of perspectivising*' (2006: 113). According to ten Thije, pragmatic 'monitoring […of] discourse' (ibid.: 114) and the application of a three-step strategy of '*generalising, perspectivising* and *contrasting cultures*' can result in 'intercultural understanding' between the interlocutors (ibid.: 117). Where communication of experience gained in different languages is necessitated within a bilingual self, the communicative apparatus of perspectivizing entails a conscious assessment of one's presuppositions of the two linguistic entities by constant shifting of perspectives between the separate linguistic sets of *I* and *me* in order to arrive at an objective understanding of the shared experience. According to Menéndez, 'To translate, one must really understand what is being said' (2015: 5). Thus, a bilingual or multilingual 'crawls inside a text [or experience like a translator] and inhabits it in a way not even the careful reader can' (ibid.).

Consequently, the semiosis of the bilingual self can be described as negotiation of meaning and interpretation of experiences and set attitudes via switching perspectives of *I* and *me* across languages. While generalizing is likely to lead to a sense of otherization,

perspectivizing allows the bilingual to juxtapose large and small culture approaches and become better aware of the presuppositions formed (see Figure 2.2).
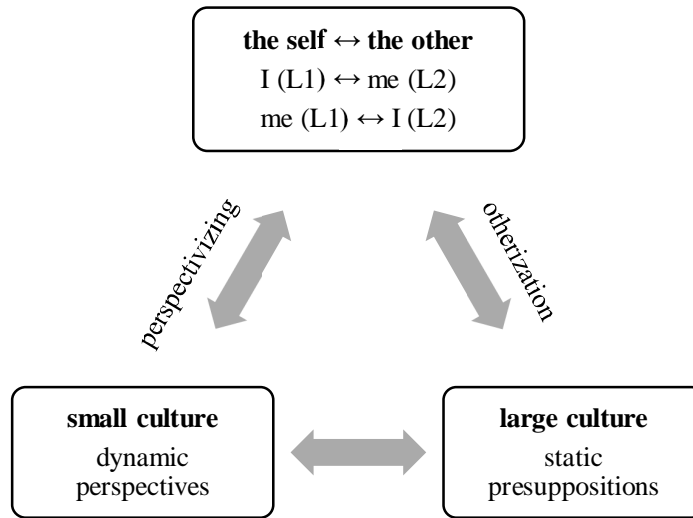
Figure 2.2 **Semiosis of the bilingual self**

As a result, as Edwards states, 'a link will often exist between bilingualism and a heightened awareness of, and concern for, identity' (2004: 29). Thus, as Lüdi emphasizes, 'translinguistic markers [in fact] announce a self-confident plural – multicultural and multilingual – identity' expressed, for example, via '"language mixing" in modern literature' (2006: 14). With the help of perspectivizing, both intercultural communication and attitude towards languages can be seen in a new light. As Menéndez puts it, 'what was true of the world was intimately tied, not to some platonic ideal, but to our way of expressing it' (2015: 5) therefore her approach to multilingualism is 'to concentrate mostly on the game, on language's ability to give us pleasure' (ibid.: 3).

CONCLUSIONS

In order to see how intercultural communication arisen due to bilingualism affects the bilingual's identity and attitude towards languages, Menéndez's article *Are We Different People in Different Languages?* was selected for a case study. The various perspectives expressed in the article were analyzed according to Holliday's framework of large versus small culture approach and ten Thije's communicative apparatus of perspectivizing. The study showed that the semiosis of the bilingual self undergoes cycles of shifting perspectives between the sets of *I* and *me* in each of the languages and that the otherizing attitudes towards native languages are unconsciously determined by large culture approach and the bilinguals' need to belong. However, as demonstrated by Menéndez, dynamic perspectives help resolve inherent tension and see both language and communication more objectively. Consequently, application of perspectivizing strategies is useful not only in intercultural communication between different people but also in understanding the semiosis of the bilingual self.

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