

LINGUISTIC KNOWLEDGE AND MULTILINGUALITY

R K Agnihotri
University of Delhi, New Delhi, India

Abstract

Linguists have until recently looked at the nature and structure of human linguistic competence from a monolingual and monocultural perspective. One is therefore not surprised that in spite of highly convincing demonstration of structural equity among different languages or varieties, 'dialects' and code-mixed varieties continue to be stigmatized among linguists and laymen alike. Multilingualism and multiculturalism has generally been examined as an 'object of wonder' which needs to be *explained* in a world where monolingualism and monoculturalism is considered to be the norm. It has rarely been appreciated that it is actually 'multilinguality' and 'multiculturality' that are really constitutive of being human. Even when linguistic variability is seen as an inherent feature of human language, there is an effort to systematize the variability in a monolithic framework ignoring possible fluid models of analysis. Howsoever rigorously we may structure the grammar of signifiers, the domain of the signified remains fluid and open to negotiation and hence influence the grammar of the signs. Our sociolinguistic competence is constructed through a dialogue with the 'Other' and the 'Other' speaks a different language, howsoever 'insignificantly' different it may be from ours. A sociolinguistic perspective on linguistic competence where fluidity rather than rigidity is the defining parameter may help us to conceptualize a world we really need, rather desperately. There is now increasing evidence that multilinguality correlates highly positively not only with scholastic achievement but also social tolerance and divergent thinking. This paper is an attempt to explore how multilingualism can be used as a resource, strategy and a goal in education and as a site for negotiating multiple identities.