

The Role of Metalinguistic Awareness in Multilingual Acquisition

Ji-Yung Jung

Teachers College, Columbia University

Multilingual acquisition is a nonlinear and complex dynamic process. The past several decades of research have revealed that a number of factors interact and influence the variability of the process, including, for instance, the type of third language (L3) learner, learner proficiency, linguistic domain, grammatical feature, and language (psycho)typology (e.g., Cabrelli Amaro & Rothman, 2010; Llama, Cardoso, & Collins, 2010; Cenoz & Valencia, 1994; Gallardo del Puerto, 2007; Gibson, Hufeisen, & Libben, 2001; Pittman, 2008; Ringbom, 2001). Yet another crucial factor to consider, especially from the recent perspective of the Dynamic Model of Multilingualism (DMM) (Herdina & Jessner, 2002), is the linguistic background of the learner in relation to their literacy in the second language (L2), and more specifically, their metalinguistic knowledge and awareness (De Bot & Jaensch, 2013).

The present brief discussion intends to call attention to the significant role of metalinguistic awareness in multilingual acquisition and offer critical suggestions for future research. First, a general review of relevant concepts is provided, centering upon the scope of research on multilingualism. Next, the roles and potential advantages of metalinguistic awareness in L3 acquisition is discussed, in comparison with those in first language (L1) and L2 acquisition. Finally and most importantly, several critical suggestions are provided for future research in the field of multilingualism.

Jessner (2008) defines *metalinguistic knowledge* as “the ability to focus on linguistic form and to switch focus between form and meaning” and explains that this knowledge is “made up of a set of skills or abilities that the multilingual user develops owing to his/her prior linguistic and metacognitive knowledge” (p. 275). The concept of metalinguistic knowledge/awareness in multilingualism literature, however, seems by nature to involve a slightly broader scope than that in second language acquisition (SLA) research. For example, the term from the multilingual lens is often investigated in relation to the use of communication strategies, communicative sensitivity, crosslinguistic awareness and sometimes even translation skills (e. g., Cenoz, 2003; Faerch & Kasper, 1983; James, 1996; Poulisse, Bongaerts, & Kellerman, 1987).

A strand of research on multilingualism suggests that some of the qualitative differences between monolingual, bilingual and trilingual acquisition can be ascribed to different levels of metalinguistic awareness. That is, L3 acquisition generally involves an increased level of metalinguistic awareness, even higher than in bilingual or L2 acquisition (Jessner, 2008; Peal & Lambert, 1962). Furthermore, the presence of metalinguistic knowledge/awareness in bilingual or L2 acquisition has beneficial, catalytic effects on trilingual acquisition (De Bot & Jaensch, 2013; Herdina & Jessner, 2002; Jessner, 2006; Kemp, 2001). In a similar vein, several researchers emphasize the importance of formal instruction because heightened metalinguistic awareness, derived from exposure to literacy in two languages, gives bilingual learners the capacity to focus on form and pay attention to the relevant features in the input (De Bot & Jaensch, 2013; Sanz, 2000; Thomas, 1988).

Despite the overall enriching findings, there seem to be insufficient grounds yet to fully explain the role of metalinguistic awareness in multilingualism. The main interest in multilingual

studies so far seems to lie in the impact of L1 and L2 on L3 (or oftentimes artificial language learning) and to a lesser extent the impact of L1, L2 and L3 on each other. As proposed by the DMM (Herdina & Jessner, 2002), however, languages develop in a dynamic interaction with each other, influenced by the aforementioned variety of factors. Also, unlike a number of linguistic and psycholinguistic studies that have suggested idiosyncrasy and independence of L3 processing from that of L1 and L2, more recent neurolinguistic research has shown that the same areas of the brain are generally activated during language use in proficient multilinguals (De Bot & Jaensch, 2013). Thus, the development of the individual multilingual system over time and the variability that might be found within and across the languages spoken as they evolve in the speaker's mind should rather be the core issue for research in multilingualism. After all, as the interactions between the languages (i.e., the multilingual system) change, so does the role of metalinguistic knowledge and awareness. This also has significant implications for the research designs to be utilized to investigate multilingual development, which involves the processes of not only acquisition but also attrition. As several researchers (e. g., Cook, 2003; De Bot, Lowie, & Verspoor, 2007; Jessner, 2003, 2008; Zipf, 1968) pointed out, language attrition or loss appears more frequently in multilingual than in bilingual contexts.

In addition, in order to attain further insight into the nature of metalinguistic knowledge in multilinguals and the effects of raising awareness in multilingual learners, future research is needed which concerns the approaches to multilingual awareness in the formal language learning context and the dynamic interactions between implicit and explicit linguistic knowledge, as proposed by Ellis (2005), as well as the implicit/explicit dichotomy (Jessner, 2008). At the same time, the field is in need of more replication studies because of its complex nature including the number of languages involved and the dynamic and idiosyncratic individual learner factors.

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Ji-Yung Jung is a doctoral student in Applied Linguistics at Teachers College, Columbia University, specializing in second language acquisition (SLA). Her research interests include classroom SLA, the roles of explicit/implicit Focus on Form, and the role of awareness/consciousness in second language (L2) learning.