Conceptual Dynamics in Multilingual Competence

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Mulitlingualism represents the capacity of linguistic communities and individuals to regularly use more than one language on a daily basis (Franceschini, 2011). Recently, mounting theoretical and empirical studies on multilingualism have emerged within the field of applied linguistics. Among such analyses, there has been much attention on the notion of *multicompetence*, which places a psycholinguistic/cognitive lens upon the study of multilingual minds (e.g., Bassetti & Cook, 2011; Brown & Gullberg, 2012). This piece will briefly explore *multicompetence* with regards to the influence of language(s) on the conceptual structures of multilingual speakers. In relation to this, a brief discussion on the *dynamic* nature of multilingual competence from the conceptual lens will also be provided.

In a mind with more than one language, *conceptual transfer* between the different languages known to a speaker, defined broadly as the type of crosslinguistic influence that occurs at the conceptual level, is bound to occur (Odlin, 2010). Crosslinguistic studies have identified important differences between languages, not only in terms of their linguistic structures, but also with regards to how speakers organize and interact with experience and reality (Lucy, 1996). A widely acknowledged position is that learning a language affects cognition (i.e., one's conceptual representations) *only* in terms of the grammatical and lexical elements that can be accessed in a language to encode experience, that is, from the *thinking-for-speaking* approach (Slobin, 1996). In other words, the language that we know can only influence how we view the world while we are processing it (i.e., while speaking, writing, reading, listening, gesturing and even translating). Within this approach, there has been increasing evidence of differences with regards to how speakers with knowledge of diverse languages place selective attention to grammatical and lexical aspects of, for instance, motion events, such as expressions of path and manner of motion (see Cadierno, 2010), gestures (Stam, 2010), spatial relationships (e.g., Coventry, Guijarro-Fuentes, Valdés, 2011), color features (see Athanasopoulos, 2011), boundedness and definiteness traits (see Han, 2010), among others. It is assumed that placing attention to these linguistic units also implies selectively attending to the conceptual units that they encode (Pavlenko, 2011). If differences in linguistic representations lead to differences in cognition among speakers of diverse languages, what happens to the minds and conceptualizations of people who know more than one language (Bassetti & Cook, 2011)? Within the process of learning additional languages, speakers may internalize different perspectives and, thus, restructure the thinking patterns they already have to describe events and scenes (Pavlenko, 2011).

The above refers to conceptual transfer and restructuring at the level of the individual as a psycholinguistic phenomenon. However, transfer or crosslinguistic influence can also be examined at the level of society (Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008), which within the context of multilingualism leads to the question of how a linguistic community manages to use two or more languages and potentially undergo constant conceptual restructuring. In other words, will a community with knowledge of diverse languages view the world differently based on the grammatical and lexical patterns of each language spoken, or will they maintain a common perspective on reality, despite their knowledge of dissimilar grammatical and lexical patterns?

These questions, among others, do not only occupy the agendas of researchers, but may also have significant implications for public policy (Lucy, 1996).

Focusing again on conceptual restructuring at the individual level, Bassetti and Cook (2011) proposed a systematic way of viewing concepts and their relationship to language in a multilingual mind. Specifically, a concept (e.g., *lunch*, as illustrated by the authors) may bear different labels given by the languages the speaker knows (e.g., *lunch* in English and *pranzo* in Italian). Each language represents the concept in different ways (e.g., *lunch* in English may trigger the conceptualization of a sandwich and a bag of chips, whereas *pranzo* would represent a plate of pasta and a main course of fish or meat). According to the researchers, when a person acquires both labels and their corresponding conceptualizations of *lunch*, the interplay between these labels and their representations may vary in different ways. For instance, there may be a *one-concept scenario*, where the concept of *lunch* is only represented by what the L1 label (or that of the L2) triggers, or a *one-integrated concept scenario*, where a speaker takes some parts of the L1 conceptualization and others from the L2 to create an in-between representation (e.g., the concept of *lunch* may be a plate of pasta and a bag of chips, whether the speaker is referring to it in the L1 or the L2). The various possibilities of conceptual and linguistic restructurings in multilingual minds clearly points to the dynamic nature of multilingual competence (Franceschini, 2011). In this sense, all of the languages that a speaker may know are constantly affected by one another and by the contexts to which the speaker is exposed. Consequently, even the first language is deemed dynamic and unstable, as seen in early studies, such as that by Seliger (1989, as cited in Cook, 1991), who describes a bilingual child whose L1 system of English relative clauses was gradually overrun by the L2 Hebrew relative system, which would also entail restructuring at the conceptual level. Studies have recently addressed the question of how much knowledge of an L2 is needed to generate changes in the L1 (see Brown & Gullberg, 2012). As Cook and Bassetti (2011) indicate, there may be effects of an L2 on an L1 at low levels of L2 knowledge and use and "even a smattering of knowledge of another language is enough to change from a monolingual's way of thinking" (p.144). Beyond second language acquisition and bilingualism, research has also yet to unveil the dynamic nature of knowing three languages or more, and how the various possibilities of conceptual restructurings may emerge given such ample repertoires of linguistic knowledge.

The discussion above with regards to multicompetence constitutes only a portion of the issues and concerns that may arise within the context of multilingualism. The research work recently carried out by Cenoz and Gorter (2011) has emphasized on the holistic nature of multilingualism from a sociolinguistic perspective as well as from the cognitive domain (Cenoz, 2013). This holistic understanding leans toward favoring a dynamic view of the development and use of each language, and "multilingualism shows it in a way one cannot easily elude" (Franceschini, 2011. p. 352).

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