A 1.1 Multilingualism

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Nowadays, being multilingual no longer means having a (perfect) command of several different languages. That understanding was for a long time supported by the academic community. Today, multilingualism is considered to signify being in contact with different languages. Both the boundaries between languages and the forms of linguistic contact have become fluid. We talk for example of *internal multilingualism* (Wandruszka 1979), meaning not only individual national languages but also the different varieties, registers, dialects or idiolects within a given language. This means, for example, that we speak differently in official contexts than in private contexts, that we speak to children differently from how we speak to colleagues, that we tend to use the standard language when dealing with the authorities or in hospitals, whilst we tend to use dialect with friends, and so on. All these different possibilities for individual language use are described in linguistics by the term "repertoire".

*"Das Repertoire wird als ein Ganzes begriffen, das jene Sprachen, Dialekte, Stile, Register, Codes und Routinen einschließt, die die Interaktion im Alltag charakterisieren. Es umfasst also die Gesamtheit der sprachlichen Mittel, die Sprecher\_innen einer Sprechergemeinschaft zur Verfügung stehen, um (soziale) Bedeutung zu vermitteln." ["Repertoire is understood as a whole, comprising those languages, dialects, styles, registers, codes and routines that characterise interaction in everyday life. It thus encompasses the totality of linguistic resources available to a community of speakers for conveying (social) meaning."] (Bush 2013, 21)*

Alongside this individually experienced *inner multilingualism* of *each and every* person, there is also what is currently known as *life-world multilingualism*. Life-world multilingualism describes the phenomenon of our increasingly coming into contact with different languages in our everyday lives. It covers not only the growing number of English words in other languages, but also the languages we encounter in public transport, when shopping and in education. Some are completely foreign to us, some we can recognise as a specific language that we can name, in some we can understand a few words, in some we can even say a few words or sentences, and in some we are able to hold conversations or understand song lyrics.

# Four myths about multilingualism

*Myth one: Each country has its own language and Austria is a monolingual country.*

This is incorrect. Multiple languages are spoken within most states in the world. For example, Wikipedia lists 500 for Nigeria and 99 for India, and there are 22 official languages in the various Indian states. Austria also has four other official languages apart from German: Slovenian, Burgenland Croatian, Hungarian and Austrian Sign Language. According to a survey by the Austrian Chamber of Labour, about 100 languages other than German are spoken in Vienna alone.[[1]](#footnote-1).

*Myth two: Being multilingual is the exception and being monolingual is the rule.*

This is also incorrect from a global perspective and does not even apply to Austria. Not only because, as mentioned above, in the vast majority of countries in the world, many different languages are spoken, but also because the image of what "multilingual" means has changed in recent decades.

*Myth three: You are only multilingual if you have a perfect command of two or more languages.*

This notion is linked to the concept of an "ideal" speaker-listener as defined by Noam Chomsky, a concept that is no longer applied in the same way today. Even so-called *native speakers* are now no longer automatically considered "competent" speakers.

*Myth four: Multilingualism is harmful.*

This idea was argued by the linguist Leo Weisgerber in 1966. Weisgerber believed that humans were by nature monolingual and that the different languages would confuse both mind and morals (de Cillia (n.d.), 1).

# In fact, being multilingual

* does not mean being two monolinguals in one person and being able to do everything equally well in all languages, but rather developing one's linguistic repertoire in a specialised and domain-specific way (domains are functional areas [of life] such as family/friends/private sphere, school/work, office/institution, education/research etc.) (Grosjean 1989).
* means that one's linguistic repertoire changes in line with one's life-world, and that a given language may sometimes be stronger and sometimes weaker depending on the intensity and quality of its everyday use.
* means experiencing how languages in one's own repertoire complement, influence and change each other (Jessner/Allgäuer-Hackl 2015).
* may mean having a smaller vocabulary in individual languages than monolingual people and experiencing a slight "slow-down" effect when formulating phrases in just one language as a result of having to suppress the others (Tracy 2014).
* means mixing languages as a communicative style if the person with whom one is communicating is also multilingual (code-mixing; code-switching).
* means learning metalinguistic skills and developing metalinguistic awareness, i.e. thinking about languages, their forms and their function and playing with linguistic forms and meanings.

# Holistic views of multilingualism

* consider multilingualism as a dynamic phenomenon that not only changes regularly over the course of a lifetime but also manifests itself in different ways in different situations.
* do not consider multilingual people as two monolinguals in one person and therefore do not expect them to have a perfect command of all their languages. Holistic views of multilingualism accept that there is no such thing as a perfect speaker who complies with the monolingual norm.
* see multilingualism as a quality that is more than the sum of individual languages.
* seek to enable multilingual people to employ their entire linguistic repertoire (García 2009).

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Judith Purkarthofer shows how staff can engage with multilingualism in schools together with pupils and colleagues without the need for significant time or financial resources, available online at

<http://heteroglossia.net/Schulsprachen.127.0.html>

1. https://www.vienna.at/internationaler-tag-der-muttersprache-wien-spricht-rund-100-sprachen/3496060 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)