Multilingualism, the Linguistic Landscape of Fiji

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Abstract

Multilingualism is a worldwide phenomenon in today's multicultural World. There are about thirty times as many languages as there are countries. Nearly half of the world's population speaks more than one language. This article examines the causes of multilingualism, whether it is advantageous or disadvantageous for individuals and the nation. Consequently, it will cover the linguistic landscape of Fiji and explain its causes. Ultimately, one will find that multilingualism has more benefits than setbacks.

Keywords: multilingual, multilingualism, language, bilingual, Fiji.
Introduction

Fiji is a country which is blessed with various cultures; the lives of many people are bound by the values of their traditions which establish their identity (Goundar, 2015). It is an independent nation located in the middle of the Southwestern Pacific, about 2500 km northeast of the nearest point in Australia, on the Queensland coast (about 3,100km from Sydney and 2,000km north of New Zealand (Mangubhai, F., & Mugler, F. 2003). Furthermore, while Fiji is a microstate in terms of population and land size, the archipelago of over 300 islands covers 18,376 square km (7078 sq. mi.), and its size and location make it the hub of the region, with an important economic and political role in the South Pacific.

Fiji is a pluralistic society with one of the reasons being the indenture system (1879-1916), which brought the Indians to Fiji for employment on sugarcane farms. In addition, the three main universities in Fiji (The University of the South Pacific, The University of Fiji and Fiji National University) have intakes from almost 14 Pacific Island Nations as well Asia and Europe which adds to the diversity of language spoken in the country.

According to the 2007 census (Figure 1.0), the country comprises of 7 ethnic groups. The data shows that when the census was conducted post-independence that is in 1881; there were 588 citizens under the Indian ethnic group. However, the Indian population increased by 99.81% in 2007 to 3131,798. This increase encompasses a multiplicity of Indian languages: Hindi, Gujarati, Punjabi, Urdu, Telegu, Tamil, Malayalam (Mugler, 1996).

Furthermore, according to Figure 1.0, in 1881 the Chinese population was non-existent but 126 years later, in 2007 the population stood at 4,704. This brings the Mandarin Chinese language to the list of languages that presently exist in Fiji. Another key increase can be noted for the Part-European ethnic group which had 771 people in 1881. In 2007, the population reached 10,711 which showed an increase of 92.8%.
Census Population of Fiji by Ethnicity (Figure 1.0)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic group</th>
<th>1881 Number</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>2007 Number</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>iTaukei</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>90.</td>
<td>475,739</td>
<td>56.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>588</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>313,798</td>
<td>37.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European</td>
<td>2,671</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>2,953</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-European</td>
<td>771</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>10,771</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4,704</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All others*</td>
<td>8,708</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>29,306</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>127,486</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>837,271</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* For 2007 Census, All Others is inclusive of Rotuman and Pacific Islanders.


Factors contributing towards Multilingualism

There are a number of factors which cause multilingualism. These include: migration, education and culture, religion and border region.

Firstly, let us focus on migration. The movement of people from one country to another is one of the sturdiest causes of multilingualism. Fasold (1987) illustrates, when immigrants arrive to another country speaking their native language, they add their National Language to the language situation in the host country fostering bilingualism or multilingualism. At the same time, they learn the language of the host country, rendering themselves as bilinguals who usually communicate with each other in their National Language, and with citizens of the host country in the language of that country.

If we look at Fiji’s example, the indentured laborers arrived from India in 1889 and brought with them more than half a dozen different languages such as Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Malayalam, Nepali, Punjabi, Tamil, Telugu and Urdu. As time went on, some of these languages gained the influence of the Fiji accent.

People in the South Indian community can speak Hindi as well as Tamil or Telegu together with English. Therefore, some of the descendants are multilingual, speaking Shudh Hindi, Fiji Hindi, Tamil, and English.
Secondly, people learn or acquire a foreign language due to the need of another language which will help them in their field of education and culture. For example, if a Japanese-monolingual person desires to know or study the culture of an English-speaking country, that person will have to learn English first. Many students travel to other countries to pursue their studies and thus they need to learn the languages of these countries. For example, France, Germany, Australia, Britain and the United States of America have a large number of foreign students in their colleges and universities.

Mackey (1967) explains that “in many countries around the world, to be educated means to be multilingual”. In the modern age where most sciences are written in English, the learning of English for people whose native languages are different, is becoming a necessity.
Furthermore, the border regions/areas cause multilingualism. Every country has geographical boundaries which are often shared by another country or countries for example countries in the Europe such as Norway, Sweden, Germany, and Austria. The usual situation in border areas, especially if there is a direct contact between citizens from two neighboring countries, is the creation of a group of bilingual people from both countries. The other important point to be mentioned here is that in locations near border areas, it is common to find people who are citizens of one country, but they are members of a sociocultural group based in the other. For example in Fiji people living in Sigatoka and Nadi (Figure 2.0) can speak the Nadroga and Nadi dialects. Fasold (1987) explains the reason for this by indicating that sociocultural groups do not always select their residence area, but sometimes it is just imposed on them. Another example among many of this phenomenon is the presence of French-speaking people in the northeastern states who live in the USA, but are ethnically closer to the Canadian province of Quebec.

Moreover, the last important motive for multilingualism is religion. Researchers pointed out that religion may be tied to a specific language, and the spread of the religion will make its new followers learn the language of that religion, thus enhancing multilingualism. For instance, a lot of Muslim inhabitants from non-Arabic speaking countries such as Iran, India, Pakistan, and Turkey have become bilinguals in their native languages as well as Classical Arabic because they had to learn Arabic as a religion-related language. Thus, nearly all the Muslims living in non-Arabic-speaking countries are to some degree considered multilingual. This is the same for Indian priests in Fiji who have to learn Sanskrit or South Indian Languages such as Tamil, Telegu to perform at South Indian religious functions.

**Weaknesses of multilingualism**

Many people will agree that there are number advantages of multilingualism on an individual or a nation but at the same time it does have some disadvantages. The most important of these is that learning more than one language confuses children and lowers their intelligence. The claim that multilingualism confuses children and lowers their intelligence, as stated by Kandolf on the Bilingual Families website, supported by research studies conducted in the United States on the differences between bilingual/ multilingual and monolingual children in their language performance.

Research has also shown that multilingualism is responsible for delaying the linguistic development of multilingual children. It is based on the concept that multilingual/bilingual children's brains have a more processing load than their monolingual peers due to the idea that in multilingual children, the processing system is handling two or more languages at the same time whereas in monolingual children that system is handling only one language. For example, sometimes in Fiji classrooms when teachers ask a question, it has been observed that students tend to listen and repeat the questions asked by the teacher in order to get the
answer; their brain starts to process the question in the language it was asked, this shows the cognitive process at work.

Lastly, another belief related to multilingualism is that it causes the child to develop a sense of split personalities; that is, the child feels that he or she has two different personalities. Each personality is associated with each language. Some people go to the extreme by claiming that this sense seriously affects the child's loyalty to the native language and culture (Al-Mansour, 2009). However, this idea of role assumptions does not in any way mean that the multilingual child has two diverse personalities and that he or she should be locked in a mental house. This phenomenon should be understood with ease and relaxation; that is, it is a normal behavior that only means that the multilingual child has more cultural knowledge and flexibility than his or her monolingual peer. When the author was growing up, if he gave his opinion in matters at home then his aunt would say; “tho-ra englis jan-ne hai toh ba-t ka-re hai” which mean “he knows a little English so he wants to talk more”. It was a bit difficult for her to understand his point of view.

Benefits of Multilingualism

Through research, it was found that the benefits of multilingualism can be grouped into four major categories: personal, cognitive, academic and societal. This paper will focus on two in detail which are personal benefits and societal benefits. The personal benefit of multilingualism is firstly that the person has an access to two different languages and cultures, and hence to more people and resources. This undeniably enriches the life experience of the multilingual person simply because he or she will be able to communicate more with different people than the monolingual person.

Secondly, personal benefit is when the multi-lingual’s parents are from two different languages and cultures, knowing the language of each parent will give the multilingual child a sense of identity and belonging toward both parents and members of the extended family.

Next is the societal benefit; we live in the age of globalization where the whole world is just like a small village (Al-Mansour, 2009). To make this globalization possible, people should be able to speak languages other than their native ones. That is the value of multilingualism because multilingual people in a society are the ones who connect better to the international market. Thus, multilingual knowledge is a strong asset to the society.

Furthermore, the Fiji Island Education Commission (2000) highlights that those who are trained in multicultural ethos and effective in more than one language have a distinct advantage over those who are monolingual and monocultural. It then focuses on the advancement of learning:

Multilingual and multicultural education reinforces the main objectives of advancement of learning and the fullest development of human potential. The advancement of learning occurs when we learn to know our social, cultural and physical world better; the fullest development
of human potential implies that all our faculties are allowed to grow simultaneously. (Fiji Island Education Commission, 2000.pp296)

Other advantages of multilingualism are that people will develop a greater vocabulary size over age and they have a better ear for listening and have sharper memories (Cook, 2001). For example, people in Fiji can understand from one word of another language the meaning in correspondence with the situation, such as an iTakuei (Fijian) child was playing with Fijians of Indian descent students and he started scratching his hands and said “kha-ju-awe” which means itchy. The students could understand what he was trying to imply from a single vocabulary.

Foreign “language learning enhances children’s understanding of how language itself works and their ability to manipulate language in the service of thinking and problem solving” (Cummins, 1981). In Fiji the native Fijians (iTaukei) are able to speak fluent Hindi and they are able to solve communication problems whether it be getting a fish from the market or explaining something at a bank.

Conclusion

This article has discussed the important issues that are the causes of multilingualism. It starts by pointing out important factors such as; migration, education and culture, religion and border region with the inclusion of the linguistic landscape of Fiji and explains its causes. Thereafter, it highlights some of the disadvantages and advantages of multilingualism. Charlemagne (742/7 – 814), King of the Franks writes “To have another language is to possess a second soul” indeed it is true; one has to agree as times change the value of learning another language shows gradually.
References


