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Title

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Journal

Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society, 4(4)

ISSN

2377-1666

Author

Miller, Wick R

Publication Date

1978

Peer reviewed

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Author(s): Wick R. Miller

Proceedings of the 4th Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society (1978), pp. 610-616

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MULTILINGUALISM IN ITS SOCIAL CONTEXT
IN ABORIGINAL NORTH AMERICA

Wick R. Miller, University of Utah

Multilingualism is still an understudied phenomenon,¹ particularly so for less complex societies, such as those found aboriginally in North America. It is a phenomenon worth studying in its own right, as a sociological phenomenon; and also worth studying as a linguistic phenomenon, since it can shed light on certain aspects of language change, and since it can probably be seen as the mechanism most important for the spread of linguistic areal features.

Two aspects of the problem, which I will label the psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic, are not neatly divided from each other, but are rather polar end points of a continuum. The psycholinguistic study of multilingualism is concerned with such things as how the linguistic rules of two or more languages are learned and stored in the head of one person, and how the rules are sometimes merged or collapsed, leading to linguistic interference. I'll not consider this topic, as I see no reason to believe that people of different cultures and societies have their heads put together differently; that is, the psychological mechanisms involved should be the same among people of different societies.

The study of multilingualism in its social context is concerned with how the society promotes, retards, or otherwise influences multilingualism. In this case, there is every reason to believe that the nature of the society is important.

North America contained a rich variety of speech community types at the pre-state level of social organization. Unfortunately, their study must be limited to the interpretation of imperfect data collected at earlier times by untrained observers, and to extrapolations from the present-day situations. But this imperfect approach is worthwhile, since simpler societies are, all over the world, either disappearing or being transformed. Four areas are considered here, ranging from band societies in the Great Basin, tribal societies in California and the Pueblo Southwest, to weakly stratified societies in the Southeast.

Since productivity in the Great Basin is very low, population density was also very low. It was populated by nomadic hunting and gathering peoples. The largest permanent political unit was the family, with larger units being temporary and variable (Steward 1938). Most of the inhabitants spoke one or another closely related Numic language; the single exception, the Washo, centered around Lake Tahoe and present-day Reno, belongs to the Hokan family.

The Basin was not an area of high bilingualism, principally because there was not a great deal of language diversity. In the

heart of the Shoshoni speaking territory, for example, it was possible to go over 100 miles in any direction without leaving the Shoshoni speaking area, though the dialect would be different. But along the border areas, intermarriage led to whole populations being bilingual. For example, there was a strip up to 100 miles wide between the Shoshoni and Northern Paiute speaking populations that was bilingual. The bilingualism in this case was facilitated by the close linguistic relation between these two Numic languages, a fact recognized by the Numic speakers themselves. There is today, and probably was also in aboriginal times, a good deal of passive bilingualism between the closely related Numic languages (Miller, ms. [b]). But we also find that there was considerable bilingualism along the border of the unrelated Northern Paiute and Washo languages; there were groups that Downs (1965:5) labeled "half Paiute". In these transitional border cases, language did not signal cultural differences, and thus was not available as a symbol for cultural identity.

In addition to bilingualism, there was and still is a certain amount of bidialectalism. Travel and intermarriage often led to bidialectalism, but it did not guarantee it (Miller 1970).

The prevailing attitude toward language is casual. The ability to speak more than one language is admired, but not highly valued. Learning another language takes place if you are exposed to it, and this fact is not considered particularly eventful. No one language or dialect is considered more prestigious. Nor is the other fellow's language depreciated; it is considered different, nothing more and nothing less.

California contrasted with the Basin in a number of regards. First it was an area of considerable linguistic diversity, perhaps with the greatest linguistic diversity in the world (Sapir and Swadesh 1946). Second, it had a very high population density for hunting and gathering groups. Third, the rich and varied resources of California made it possible for a group to exploit a relatively small area, without the need for a wide ranging nomadic circuit. And fourth, this led to fairly stable villages often with well marked societal boundaries between them (Kroeber 1953 [1925]).

With this situation, it is not surprising to find that the area of greatest degree of multilingualism was California. Some of our best information on the aboriginal situation is provided by Powers (1877), a newspaper man during the last century. We find that the Karok and Yurok "usually learn each others language, and two of them will sit and patter gossip for hours, each speaking in his own tongue" (1877:44); "among the tribes surrounding the Hupa I found many Indians speaking three, four, five, or more languages, always including Hupa, and generally English" (1877:73); Powers further reports that most of the Pomo knew more than one Pomo language, and that boys were often sent to neighboring villages "to acquire the dialects there in vogue" (1877:150); and he also

tells of a Wappo that was said to have known 14 Indian languages and dialects (1877:198). Waterman says of the Yurok that "Inter-marriage between tribes especially near the tribal frontier, was so common that the Yurok, I presume like the Hupa and other tribes, are often bilingual. Marrying close at home, on the other hand, was looked upon as evidence of sloth and lack of spirit" (1920:224).

Not only was multilingualism common, but further it appears that it was valued. Apparently individuals sometimes went to some trouble to learn other languages. There is a hint that in some areas a particular language sometimes held a favored position; notice the comment above about Hupa. Further, with better defined societal boundaries, language could, and did, serve as a symbol for cultural identity.

The Pueblo region of northern New Mexico and Arizona displays linguistic diversity, but it cannot match California. There are today about 20 villages, speaking six languages: Hopi, Zuni, Keres, and three Tanoan languages, Tiwa, Tewa, and Towa. The Pueblo Indians live in settled farming villages, and have led a similar existence for well over a thousand years. Each pueblo consists of a single village, or a central village with satellite villages; each pueblo is a socially, politically, and ceremonially autonomous unit. Populations range from a few hundred to three or four thousand; earlier, the upper limit was probably much lower. In spite of almost 400 years of European contact, the Pueblos have been able to maintain their social and cultural identity, though there have been changes and influences from European societies.

Today most Pueblo dwellers are bilingual in their native language and English, and a considerable though increasingly smaller number also know Spanish. The most notable example of bilingualism between two Indian languages involves the few hundred Hano, who dwell among their numerically larger neighbors, the Hopi. The Hano are Tewa speakers who fled the Rio Grande region during the Spanish occupation. According to legend, the Hano were given the right to learn Hopi, while the Hopi were denied the right to learn Hano. And in fact, most Hano do know Hopi, and very few Hopi know Hano (Dozier 1954:292). Also, Navajo is known by a few people at Hopi and Zuni (Dozier 1954:297, 300; Stephen 1936:xxxvii).

It is, after almost four centuries of European contact, difficult to assess the degree of aboriginal bilingualism. The two examples cited above represent post contact phenomena, since the Hano are recent migrants to Hopi territory, and until this century the Navajo were an insignificant group in the Southwest. One example of a Tewa woman who learned the language of her Santo Domingo husband is mentioned by White (1935:80), and it is striking that the Santo Domingos found this case notable. Since neither Spanish nor English was available in Pre-Columbian times to mediate inter-pueblo contact, it is likely that bilingualism

was somewhat greater than today. But it is unlikely that it was ever a common phenomenon, because of the lack of extensive intermarriage, and because of the high level of ethnocentrism. If a neighboring pueblo has similar customs, or speaks a different dialect, or different but related language, it is assumed that the neighbor borrowed them, corrupting them in the process (White 1935:28-29). Such attitudes do not enhance the learning of the other fellow's language, but they do enhance the use of language as a symbol for self-identity.

The Creek Confederacy was located in the southeast, originally in and near Georgia, but they moved to Alabama soon after European contact, and remained there until their removal to the Indian Territory in Oklahoma in 1832. Creek was the dominant language, but other languages were represented: Alabama, Koasati, Hitchiti, Mikasuki, and Apalachee which are, like Creek, Muskogean languages; and there were also non-Muskogean languages: Natchez, Yuchi, and Shawnee. The towns were organized into a loose confederacy, with the Creek, along with their language, being the dominant group. Multilingualism was particularly high among the politically active men, with Creek being the most common second language (Haas 1945). While bilingualism was more common with men than with women, it was certainly not restricted to men (Swanton 1922:314).

The high level of bilingualism sometimes led to a town replacing their language with a foreign one. While most cases of language shift was to Creek, there were cases of replacement by other languages (Swanton 1922:12-31, 215). The shifting was probably an ongoing process, at various stages of development in various towns in the Confederacy. Thus the Yuchi, who seem to have been recent additions, reflected a more foreign culture, and a lower level of bilingualism with Creek (Speck 1909; Foreman 1930:120-121).

We have no information on the social context in which second language learning took place. Intermarriage may have been important, but clearly other factors must have been at work to account for the greater degree of multilingualism among men than women. Nor is there information about the attitude toward multilingualism, but the high level of multilingualism suggests that it was highly regarded.

The factors that influence the degree of multilingualism include (1) degree of linguistic diversity, (2) beliefs about learning a second language, whether it is considered hard or easy, and whether it is valued or not, and (3) the usefulness of learning a particular second language. Obviously, diversity is necessary for multilingualism, as is illustrated in the Basin by the relative lack of diversity and of multilingualism. But diversity is not enough, as the contrast between the Pueblo area and Creek Confederacy illustrates. One might expect that beliefs

about ease of learning, and the valuing of multilingualism, would go hand in hand, and probably they often do, but the Basin illustrates that it is possible to believe that it is easy to learn a second language, and still not value it highly. I suspect that usefulness is the least important factor, and is probably only a factor in stratified societies, as discussed below.

Societal level also plays a part, not so much in the degree of multilingualism, but rather in its expression. In our sample, it is only in the Creek Confederacy that we have what Gumperz (1962:34) has called societal bilingualism. In this case, all members or a segment of them speak a particular second language, to serve a particular purpose. In this case, most of the men found it useful to learn Creek, so that they could take part in the political life of the Confederacy. Contrasted with societal bilingualism is individual bilingualism, in which certain individuals learn certain second languages because of quirks in their personal history. This type of bilingualism is represented in all four of our sample cases, but reached a very high level in California. It appears to be the case that individual bilingualism is more common in unstratified and weakly stratified societies, namely the sort found in aboriginal North America, with a tendency toward decreasing frequency in more highly stratified societies. And societal bilingualism seems to be limited to stratified societies, such as those in the Creek Confederacy, and probably is still of greater frequency in more highly stratified societies.

Both types of bilingualism, individual and societal, can remain stable over long periods of time. In other cases, it is the first step toward language replacement. Individual bilingualism normally does not lead to replacement, but if levels are high, it is possible, as a number of cases in California and the Northwest Coast show (Boas 1891:584; Boas and Goddard 1924:40; Gayton 1948:56; McClellan 1953:58; Powers 1877:87; Rigsby 1969:73-75). Language shifts in these cases are never on a large scale, and are normally limited to a single village, but the effects over a long period of time can be cumulative, as Jacobs (1937) has shown. Language replacement is more common with societal bilingualism, and the Creek case cited above is an example. But the more striking cases, such as the wide-spread expansion of Latin, Arabic, and Aztec, are probably limited to societies more complex and more highly stratified than those typical of the Creek Confederacy.

Taking a look at the other end of the continuum, we find that in band societies, as represented by the Basin, sharp boundaries are typically lacking, since there is no political unit larger than the family. In place of larger units, there is a network of relationships over a wide area. Sometimes, when two very different cultural types of band societies adjoin, there is a sharp boundary (Northern Athabascan and Eskimo seem to be an example), but extended contact can blur such boundaries, as the Washo and

Northern Paiute demonstrate. In tribal societies, such as found in California and the Pueblo area, and in weakly stratified societies, such as in the Southeast, the boundaries of the speech communities are usually more sharply defined, and this in turn leads to the possibility (but not necessity) of greater linguistic diversity. And with greater diversity comes the possibility (but, again, not the necessity) of greater multilingualism.

A final note, concerning areal features. It is no accident that California, an area of considerable diversity and multilingualism, is also an area in which areal features are easily identified (Jacobs 1954; Bauman and Silver ms.; Langdon and Silver ms.). Contrast this with the Pueblos. Though the diversity is not as great as in California, nevertheless it is considerable. But the multilingualism appeared to be low, and here areal features are difficult to identify.

Notes

- 1 Much of the material in this paper is drawn from my "Ethnography of Speaking" (Miller ms. [a]) paper which, God Willing, will appear shortly.

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