

# PSYCHOLINGUISTIC AND SOCIOLINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVES

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**Abstract:** *despite large sociolinguistic differences among elite and folk bilinguals, research at the psycholinguistic level indicates a fundamental similarity in the cognitive and linguistic processes, such as in the cognitive consequences of bilingualism or the process of second language acquisition. Yet, the belief that bilingualism might be good for some but not for others is persistent, and different attributions often are made about someone who is bilingual by background (a folk bilingual) rather than by hard formal study (an elite bilingual). This discrepancy between the reality of psycholinguistic equity and sociolinguistic equity needs to be pursued. At the psycholinguistic level, work comparing bilingual processes in elite and folk bilinguals should be continued; at the sociolinguistic level, the basis of the beliefs among various groups (e.g., students, teachers, parents, school and community leaders) might be systematically addressed.*

**Keywords:** *psycholinguistic, sociolinguistic, bilingualism, behavior, monolingual.*

A psycholinguistic definition of bilingualism results from the question: what is the relative proficiency of the individual in the two languages? On the other hand, a sociolinguistic definition results from the question: to what speech communities does the bilingual individual belong?

The psycholinguistic perspective has resulted in the classification of individuals into compound vs. coordinate bilingualism [1], balanced vs. unbalanced bilingualism [2], and early vs. late bilingualism. Although each of these classifications result from different sociolinguistic experiences, they are thought to result in distinct psychological organizations that would have measurable consequences in psycholinguistic behavior. The compound vs. coordinate distinction has been subjected to considerable empirical scrutiny. According to this distinction, the lexicon is organized either as a single concept associated with the corresponding words in the two languages, or as separate concepts for each language. None of the evidence produced thus far validates the distinction. The null hypothesis holds, that if one is bilingual, it does not matter how one got there.

The sociolinguistic perspective has produced distinctions along the lines of the social status of the languages involved. These include elite vs. folk bilingualism, referring to whether bilingualism is a marker of elite or plebeian social status [3]; additive vs. subtractive bilingualism, referring to whether the second language enriches or threatens the native language [4]; and elective vs. circumstantial bilingualism, referring to whether bilingualism is a consequence of individual choice or an accompaniment of social reality such as immigration or annexation [5]. Such distinctions help account for whether bilingualism is valued and maintained or allowed to shift into monolingualism. They also explain the language policies adopted by the government and educational systems toward bilingualism.

Psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic dimensions of bilingualism are in principle separable from one another. For example, many individuals in the United States with proficiency in English and another language spend most of their lives as practicing English monolinguals [6]. In a sense, these individuals are psycholinguistically bilingual but sociolinguistically monolingual. This distinction is especially useful in understanding what is happening to the native language of minority communities in the United States and other immigrant countries. There is strong evidence of rapid shift toward preference of English among immigrants as indicated by census information. This shift, however, is not a psycholinguistic phenomenon, i.e., the result of individuals who lose their bilingual proficiency in the course of their lifetime. Rather, it is a sociolinguistic phenomenon where the low status immigrant language is no longer used, and then fails to be transmitted from one generation to the next [7]. The psycholinguistic perspective, then, tells us how languages are learned, but it is the sociolinguistic perspective that tells us how it is lost in the community.

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