

CLARIFICATION REGARDING TYPES OF BILINGUALS

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1.0 Introduction

In this brief article, two sets of potentially confusing terms used in the scholarly literature on bilingualism are discussed and clarified with particular reference to Puerto Rico.

2.0 Elite vs. folk bilingualism

Classical *elite bilinguals* (Fishman 1977) include the members of the ruling classes of many countries schooled from an early age in foreign languages in order to take up positions in their families' multi-million dollar enterprises (e.g. the sons of oil barons of the United Arab Emirate who are sent to the U.S. to perfect their English and learn the cultural patterns of the American business people with whom they will have to negotiate in the future). It includes the members of the cosmopolitan *intelligentsia* (writers, opera singers, dancers, artists, etc.) who travel extensively and are in constant contact with their peers in other countries.

The category additionally subsumes the globally deployed executives of transnational corporations like the middle management Japanese employed by IBM who bring their families to live for a year or two in Westchester County in New York State and send their children to Japanese school on Saturdays so they can compete in the national exam system when they return home. It further covers "international families" like those of career military personnel as well as interethnic couples like the Korean-Japanese and American-Japanese marriages

described by Yamamoto (1995) in Japan. College students or scholars taking a year “abroad” would also fall into the “elite” category.

Typically elite bilinguals are the most influential in their societies. They make sure their children go to schools that are conducted entirely or partly in the languages of wider communication. They enjoy all the latest technologies and are exposed to many foreign influences in film, reading material, clothing, foods, and customs. They experience bilingualism as an *additive* phenomenon and derive great benefits from knowing more than one language. These are people who have chosen to have a bilingual life and will probably not be faced with the loss of their native language. Their social status will be further enhanced by their bilingualism.

Folk bilinguals, on the other hand, are generally working class individuals like the “guest workers” who flock to Germany, the Mexican “braceros” who cross the border into the U.S., the Romany who wander the back roads of Europe, and the Dominican and Haitian “boat people” who wash up on the shores of Puerto Rico. They have usually been forced to emigrate from their homelands for economic or political reasons and tend to set up minority enclaves in order to preserve their heritage and cultural ties. They usually do not have the same economic resources as elite bilinguals and have not really chosen to be surrounded by another language but feel they must learn the new language in order to survive, both physically and culturally. Although such a move could be termed a choice, it is generally experienced as a last alternative when no more

choices can be found. Folk bilinguals often experience *subtractive bilingualism* in which the new language displaces the native language over time.

The terminology is controversial because not all members of the first group of bilinguals belong to the elite or upper crust of society. Although most elite bilinguals are much better off financially than folk bilinguals, they still have real concerns caused by their decision to live with two languages. While the loss of their culture is probably not at stake, the likely preference of their children for the “outsider” language can indeed have considerable psychological consequences. In addition, one of the prices of being a “citizen of the world” is the loss of a strong identification with any one nationality or identity and the development of a sense of not belonging, known as social *anomie*.

3.0 Elective vs. circumstantial bilingualism

The elite/folk dichotomy is problematic and does not always match up well with the complex realities of living bilingualism (Guerrero, 2010). In order to get away from the classist connotations of elite vs. folk bilingualism, many scholars prefer to speak of elective vs. circumstantial bilingualism (Grosjean, 2010).

Elective bilinguals (regardless of social class) decide to learn another language for instrumental or integrative reasons and take steps to do so via travel abroad, special classes, purchase of books or videos, or deliberate cultivation of international friendships and relationships. *Circumstantial bilinguals* become bilingual because of social or economic circumstances that bring them into contact with the other language. They do not deliberately seek out those circumstances in order to better their language skills; their bilingualism comes

about as a natural development from the change in locale, employment, or even marital partner.

Generally, elective bilinguals are seen as adding to their own and their country's prestige and status, while circumstantial bilinguals are seen as presenting a problem or deficit that schools and other institutions need to address. Elective bilinguals are often viewed as *intrinsically motivated* to learn (i.e., learning for the sake of learning), while circumstantial bilinguals are frequently described as *extrinsically motivated* (i.e., learning to attain a personal goal).

In Puerto Rico, elective bilinguals would be foreigners who chose to live in Puerto Rico and learn Spanish as a "broadening" experience, American military families temporarily based on the island, upper class Puerto Ricans seeking to perpetuate their lives of privilege through bilingual or English-only private school education on the island and higher education in the United States, and middle class employees of the tourist industry who have knowingly chosen a field in which English is a given. Circumstantial bilinguals would be the return migrants or Nuyoricans who must "relearn" Spanish upon return to the island, the Haitian cleaning women who pick up basic Spanish in order to communicate with their Puerto Rican employers, and the Chinese restaurant workers who acquire just as much Spanish or English as is necessary to communicate with their clientele.

When Puerto Ricans move from the island to different parts of the U.S., they too can be classified in terms of the elective/circumstantial dichotomy. University students who participate in exchange programs, employees of large

corporations who apply for transfers in order to pursue advanced training, and teachers who participate in graduate studies or internships in the States can be considered elective bilinguals because they opt to displace themselves for reasons of personal development. On the other hand, children of Puerto Rican parents who are obligated to migrate in search of employment or better health services, or to reunite families are circumstantial bilinguals. They do not make the choice to leave but instead are taken by their parents and forced to adjust to a new culture and school system. They often end up in ESL or bilingual programs in the States, and their parents may also need to attend adult ESL classes, depending on their level of English proficiency. Finally, some Puerto Ricans may present characteristics of both elective and circumstantial bilingualism because their motivations for learning additional languages are mixed.

What kind of bilingual are you?

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