
Review of Multi-Competence

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1. Introduction

Recently, in many countries including Japan the number of bilinguals, people who use or know more than two languages, has sharply increased. In 2020, a second language (English) will be a required subject from third grade at Japanese elementary schools.*¹ Cook (2002) asserted that ‘there are few places in the world where only one language is used’ (p. 2). This is the rationale for multi-competence. Since the concept of multi-competence was proposed, many researchers have acknowledged its validity and explored how our cognition could change, even if the degree of shift is slight, by using two or more languages.

2. History of multi-competence

2.1 Definitions of multi-competence

In the early 1990s, the term ‘multi-competence’ was first introduced to the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) by Cook, partly to contrast with the term ‘interlanguage’ from Selinker (1972). Cook (1991) originally defined multi-competence as ‘the compound state of a mind with two grammars’ (p.112). Cook (2016) emphasized the differences between ‘multi-competence’ and ‘interlanguage’ as follows. While interlanguage considers only effects from first language (L1), multi-competence considers that there is an interaction between component of L1 and a component of second language

*1 http://www.mext.go.jp/a_menu/kokusai/gaikokugo/__icsFiles/afieldfile/2014/01/31/1343704_01.pdf

(L2). Moreover, in the view of multi-competence the acquisition of a second language concerns the whole mind of the L2 user. He also observed that ‘there are two alternative ways of looking at people who speak more than one language’ (Cook 2016, p.1). One is the monolingual perspective and the other is the bilingual perspective. In the bilingual perspective, researchers try to account for the process by which L2 users use other languages or the solution for how languages symbiotically survive in multilingual communities. On the other hand, researchers taking the monolingual perspective mostly try to develop methods for how to speak like a native speaker of L1 in order to enable L2 learners to successfully acquire the new language.

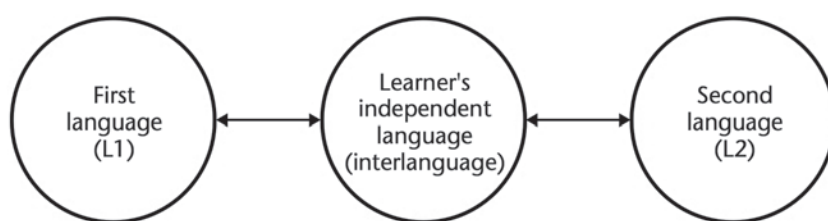


Figure 1.1. The learner's independent language (interlanguage)

(Cook 2008, p. 14)

Five years later, Cook redefined multi-competence as ‘the knowledge of more than one language in the same mind’ (Cook 1996). Some researchers, who were confused by the Chomskyan sense of grammar, mistakenly thought that multi-competence was limited only to syntax. To address this confusion, Cook changed the definition of multi-competence to ‘the knowledge of more than one language in the same mind or the same community’ (Cook 2012). These changes brought new meanings to the original definition: firstly multi-competence refers to the totality of the language knowledge and not only to syntax, secondly multi-competence works even when we use three or more languages, and thirdly multi-competence occurs not only within the psychological construct of the individual but also throughout the sociological construct of the community.

According to Cook's most recent definition, multi-competence denotes ‘the overall system of a mind or a community that uses more than one language’

(Cook 2015). Cook argued that we use other functions of mind when we use languages, that is, the language cannot be separated from the mind. Therefore, he replaced the term ‘knowledge’ with ‘overall system’.

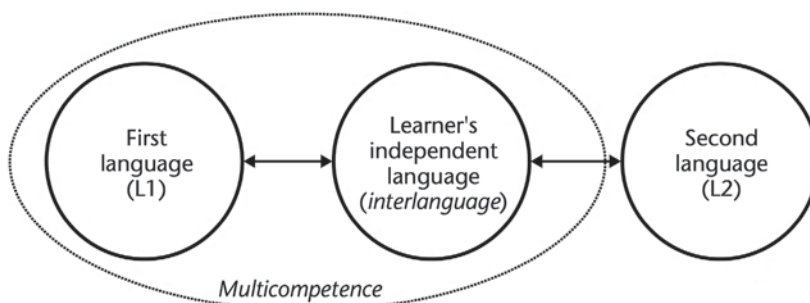


Figure 1.2. Multi-competence (Cook 2008, p. 15)

2.2 Concept of L2 user

Cook uses the term ‘L2 user’ to mean ‘people who know and use a second language at any level’ (Cook 2012). The majority of SLA researchers, language teachers and students consider the goal of acquiring a second language to become as close to a native speaker as possible. Consequently, they endlessly try to detect foreign accents or spelling errors, and most L2 learners feel that they fail to acquire the second language. This is the monolingual perspective. However, the definition of a native speaker is ‘a person who has spoken a certain language since early childhood’ (McArthur 1992 p. 682), and most L2 learners cannot change their childhood. Cook (2016) claimed that ‘it seemed better to treat people as users of a language whatever their level rather than as learners who would never be complete’. His idea of ‘multi-competence’ gives equal status to L2 users and native speakers.

Cook has observed several features that differentiate L2 users from monolinguals. In particular, he suggested that L2 users

- think more flexibly,
- have increased language awareness,
- learn to read more rapidly in their L1 and-
- have better communication skills in their L1.

(paraphrased from Cook 2010)

3. Influences of acquisition of a second language on the L2 user's cognitive-system

3.1 Positive evidence for multi-competence

Firstly, we consider how second language acquisition alters the L2 user's mind. Tokumaru (2002) examined whether L2 acquisition (English) influenced L2 users' word association or not, focusing on Japanese loanwords of English origin. She showed 16 Japanese loanwords one by one to three groups of study participants (main group: subjects living in U.K., sub-group: subjects studying English in Japan, and control group: monolinguals in Japanese). She asked them to write down as many associated words that came into their mind as possible in 20 seconds. Her prediction was that, when a test word such as 'bosu' in Japanese (from the word 'boss' in English) was shown, the participants having high proficiency in English would write words related with the English meanings of 'boss' such as 'office' and 'work' while those with less proficiency in English would tend to write words with the Japanese meaning of 'boss' like 'saru' ('monkey') or 'yakuza' ('gangsters').

The results showed a large influence in the main group while little effect occurred in the control group. Tokumaru concluded that knowledge of English influenced the L2 user's word association in Japanese loanwords and so the cognitive system of L2 users is different from that of L1 monolinguals. Other research has analyzed cross-linguistic influence related to not only lexicons but also phonological systems, pragmatic systems, and syntactic processes (See Cook et al. (2003), Brown and Gullberg (2011), Y. Murahata (2012) and Su (2016)).

As mentioned earlier, Cook (2012) assumed that multi-competence 'involves the whole mind of the speaker, not simply their first language (L1) or their second' (p. 3768). The following research supports to this assumption. Following Caskey-Sirmons and Hickerson (1977), Athanasopoulos et al. (2011) investigated the cognitive differences of color categorization between Japanese monolinguals, English monolinguals and Japanese-English bilinguals. Participants were shown 10 pairs of colors such as dark blue and cyan blue,

and then asked to judge “how different or similar these two colors are” with a 10-point scale.

Athanasopoulos et al. (2011) found that monolinguals in Japanese conceptually distinguish ‘ao/mizuiro’ into different color categorizations whereas English monolinguals recognize the colors as belonging to the single color categorization ‘blue’. Another interesting finding is that the tendency for Japanese-English bilinguals to categorize the colors depended on which language they use more frequently. These results imply that L2 lexical patterns influence L2 users’ cognitive patterns in color perception and categorization tasks. Athanasopoulos also compared cognitive categorization of color between speakers of English and Greek (See Athanasopoulos (2009) and Athanasopoulos and Aveledo (2013)).

3.2 Effects from language or culture?

In previous multi-competence research studies, most participants who belong to the bilingual groups were living in countries where their second language (English) is spoken as a first language. From this fact, some researchers suggested that the cross-linguistic differences might be caused by cultural or social factors of the second language, not by the language acquisition itself. Dewaele (2016) argued that ‘while the multicompetence perspective focuses on the effect of the new language rather than the new culture on the mind of the speaker, it is in fact quite difficult to separate these two entwined variables.’ (p. 463)

Murahata (2010) conducted a cross-linguistic investigation of Japanese elementary school students to explore the effects of early stage second language acquisition. Building on a study by Ji, Zhang and Nisbett (2004), he explored whether the amount of contact with English influences how L2 users categorize objects. The participants, 76 children from 10 to 11 years of age, were divided into three groups in accordance with the quantity of their exposure to English. The three groups are the Non-Ex group (negligible learning of English at school and outside of school), the Ex group (two hours of English learning a week at school but almost none outside of school) and

the EX-EX group (two hours of English learning at school and also some English learning outside school). Each subject was shown a picture of an object such as cow or monkey, and then they were given two more pictures, one related categorically and the other related thematically as shown in Figure 2. They were required to indicate which of the second two pictures best matched with the first one.

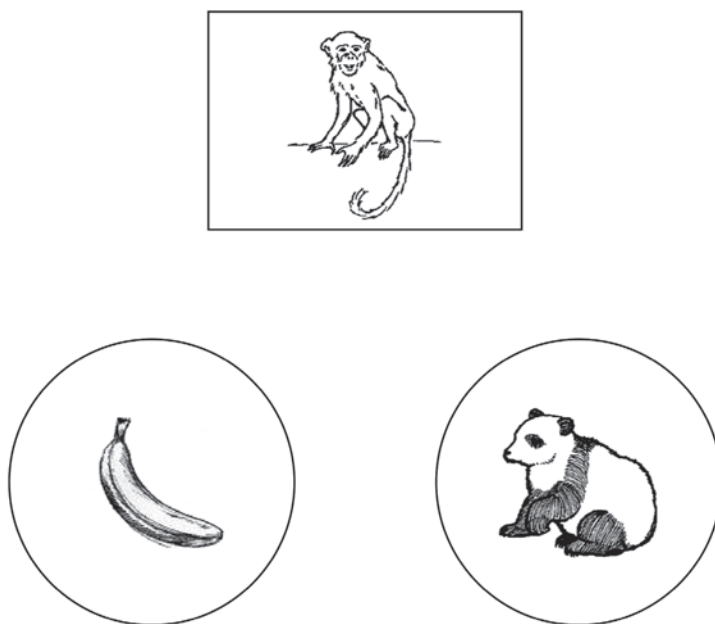


Figure 2. An animal entity trial

(Murahata G 2010, p. 138)

From this study, three significant findings were established. Firstly, Japanese monolinguals preferred thematic matches (the banana in Figure 2). Secondly, as L2 exposure increased L2 users shifted their matching preferences from thematic to categorical. Thirdly, L2 users who had more contact with L2 answered which of two pictures should best match the first one faster than L2 users whose L2 exposure was less.

This study shows that L2 users who have never stayed in an L2-speaking country still shifted their dispositions and that the shift was greater with greater English exposure. These results imply that second language acquisition

alone influences an L2 user's mind in some way. This is in agreement with Cook's claim that language cannot be separated from the rest of the mind or the community, but rather language influences the cognitive dispositions of L2 users including cultural and social aspects.

4. Conclusion

In this paper we have reviewed the framework of multi-competence. In addition, we should emphasize that in the multi-competence hypothesis a L2 user's cognitive system is expected to be "slightly" different from that of a monolingual. Murahata and Murahata (2016) confirmed that, while cross-linguistic effects on cognitive perception are not great, the degree of change in certain variables is statistically significant when comparing two groups have different levels of L2 exposure. Indeed, even though the effect is small, we have seen from the studies described here that L2 users look at words in a different way from monolinguals.

Multi-competence has often been equated with the Sapir-Whorf (linguistic relativity) hypothesis (1940, 1956): language forms the things what you see in a reality. Yet, as Dewaele (2016) observed, from studies done to date, it is difficult to judge which factors affect observed differences the L2 user's mind: the new language, the new culture or something else. We should increase the number of studies following people who live in the same community and therefore are not subjected to different cultural factors in order to establish the specific nature of the linguistic effect.

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