

# Plurilingualism<sup>1</sup>

Plurilingualism and pluriculturalism stress the dynamic use of multiple languages/varieties and cultural knowledge, awareness and/or experience in social situations. Plurilingualism/pluriculturalism is not at all a new phenomenon; it has been a feature of very many societies since ancient and probably prehistoric times. It has been present throughout history in Africa, South America and Polynesia (Canagarajah 2009) as well as in South Asia (Rabbi and Canagarajah 2021). It was a planned characteristic of many ancient empires (e.g. Babylonian, Hittite, Assyrian, Persian) and more recently was common in the Austro-Hungarian empire (Dacrema 2012) and central Europe more generally (Schröder 2018).

Plurilingualism and pluriculturalism aim to capture the holistic and dynamic nature of the individual language user/learner's linguistic and cultural repertoire as it develops through life: "Plurilingual and pluricultural competence ... is not the superposition or juxtaposition of distinct competences, ... but rather the existence of a complex or even composite competence on which the user may draw" (Council of Europe 2001: 168). "Plurilinguals have a single, inter-related repertoire that they combine with their general competences and various strategies in order to accomplish tasks" (Council of Europe 2020: 30). This plurilingual repertoire reflects the user/learner's ongoing lived experience (Busch 2017), their biography of intercultural encounter (Byram et al. 2009).

Thus plurilingualism is "an uneven and changing competence (Council of Europe 2001: 133, emphasis added), in which the user/learner's resources in one language or variety may be only partial and very different in nature to those in another. "The plurilingualism sought is not that of an exceptional polyglot but rather that of ordinary individuals with a varied linguistic capital in which partial competences have their place. What is expected is not maximum proficiency but a range of language skills and receptiveness to cultural diversity" (Coste 2014: 22). In this action-oriented perspective, users/learners seen as social agents draw upon all sorts of resources in their linguistic and cultural repertoires and further develop these resources in their trajectories. Plurilingualism and pluriculturalism focus on interconnectedness of different languages and cultures rather than on their differences and stress the importance of evolving profiles that value even the most partial competences in and awareness of languages and cultures. The theoretical and pedagogic implications of plurilingualism are well summarised as follows:

"Plurilingual competence is defined as the ability to use a plural repertoire of linguistic and cultural resources to meet communication needs or interact with people from other backgrounds and contexts, and enrich that repertoire while doing so. The repertoire consists of resources which individual learners have acquired in all the languages they know or have learned, and which also relate to the cultures associated with those languages ... The plurilingual perspective centres on learners and the development of their individual plurilingual repertoire, and not each specific language to be learnt". (Beacco et al, 2016: 20)

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<sup>1</sup> This text is an extract from Piccardo, E. and North, B. (in press), "Enriching the scope of language education: The CEFR Companion Volume", Chapter 1 in North B., Piccardo E., Goodier T., Fasoglio D., Margonis R. and Rüschoff B. (eds.), *Enriching 21st century language education: The CEFR companion volume in practice*, Council of Europe Publishing, Strasbourg.

The distinction between plurilingualism and multilingualism and between multiculturalism and pluriculturalism was introduced to language education in the CEFR (Council of Europe 1996, 2001, 2020) and an accompanying study (Coste, et al. [1997] 2009)<sup>2</sup>. This distinction aims to facilitate understanding of two very different views of linguistic and cultural diversity. Multilingualism / multiculturalism considers languages and cultures as separate and somehow static entities that co-exist in societies or individuals.

The prefix 'multi' suggests the addition of a series of different elements, like with a multiplication table, or with a multitude of people. Multiculturalism often manifests itself as different communities living in adjacent areas of cities who may not have much contact with, or interest for, each other. The prefix 'pluri,' on the other hand, emphasises plurality, suggesting a network of dynamic interrelationships between the linguistic and cultural elements that build individuals' trajectories and the tapestries of increasingly diverse communities (Piccardo 2018, 2019). Plurilingualism brings to the fore a more holistic way to consider how languages – and cultures – constantly interact at the cognitive, emotional and social level. In relation to classrooms, a multilingual classroom suggests a classroom in which children have different mother tongues – perhaps being given heritage language classes after school – whereas a plurilingual classroom is one in which the linguistic diversity present is embraced and exploited in order to leverage communication, subject learning, plurilingual/pluricultural awareness, and the learning of new languages.

Not all applied linguists have adopted this useful distinction. However, in order to emulate the flexible, creative, holistic characteristic of an individual's plurilingual repertoire, those who have not adopted the term tend to modulate 'multilingualism' with adjectives to achieve a similar effect, in for example: a dynamic model of multilingualism (Herdina and Jessner 2002) a holistic approach to multilingualism (Cenoz 2013; Cenoz and Gorter (2011), an inclusive multilingualism (Backus et al. 2013), an active multilingualism (Cummins 2017) or an integrated multilingual model (MacSwan 2017).

Since the introduction of the term plurilingualism in the CEFR, a number of scholars have also invented other terms to capture creative translanguaging practices. Piccardo and North relate these terms to the description of the characteristics of plurilingualism used to introduce the term in the CEFR in 2001 and in 2020.

Plurilingual competence involves the ability to call flexibly upon an interrelated, uneven, plurilinguistic repertoire in order to:

- a) switch from one language or dialect (or variety) to another; [related to: code switching, code alternation, flexible bilingualism; translanguaging];
- b) express oneself in one language (or dialect, or variety) and understand a person speaking another; [related to lingua receptiva; intercomprehension];
- c) call upon the knowledge of a number of languages (or dialects, or varieties) to make sense of a text; [related to translanguaging as a pedagogic scaffolding technique in a language or CLIL class];
- d) intercomprehension; [related to lingua receptiva];
- e) recognise words from a common international store in a new guise; [also related to intercomprehension; lingua receptiva];
- f) mediate between individuals with no common language (or dialect, or variety), even with only a slight knowledge oneself; [= cross-linguistic mediation];
- g) bring the whole of one's linguistic equipment into play, experimenting with alternative forms of expression in different languages or dialects, exploiting paralinguistics (mime, gesture, facial expression, etc.) and radically simplifying their use of language; [related to translanguaging; code crossing; code mixing; code meshing; polylingualism; metrolingualism].

(Council of Europe 2001: 4-6; 2020: 30; Piccardo and North 2020: 284)

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<sup>2</sup> The term plurilingualism itself appears in earlier publications (e.g. Coste and Hébrard 1991; Di Mauro, 1977) but its conceptualization has developed from the distinction made in relation to multilingualism in the CEFR project in 1996/1997.



The new CEFR descriptors for plurilingual and pluricultural competence come in three descriptor scales, which were developed principally in relation to the points listed above: 'Building on pluricultural repertoire;' 'Plurilingual comprehension; and 'Building on plurilingual repertoire'. To these could also be added the scale placed under mediating communication 'Facilitating pluricultural space.' Indeed, as suggested in the previous subsection, mediation is at the core of all the descriptors of plurilingual and pluricultural competence. Embracing a mediational perspective allows us to move from language as an entity to language as a process (linguaging) (Piccardo 2021). Plurilingualism manifests itself in the dynamic, creative process of languaging across the boundaries of language varieties.

In terms of mediation and languaging, in the scale 'Building on plurilingual repertoire,' for example, the learner/social agent mobilizes their repertoire in different languages:

- for a purpose, to explain a problem or ask for clarification (A2);
- to facilitate comprehension with between third parties (B2), acting as a linguistic and cultural mediator;
- to create the conditions for others to use different languages (B2), that is role modelling openness to linguistic plurality.
- to facilitate communication by using all their agency in a multilingual context, in which they alternate between languages and also employ different forms of linguistic/textual mediation (C1)

Both mediation and plurilingualism are also very present in online, digital interaction.

The concept of plurilingualism has become increasingly popular over the last decade, particularly since the so-called multi-/plurilingual turn in English-medium literature (Conteh and Meier 2014; May 2014; Piccardo and Puozo Capron 2015; Taylor and Snoddon, 2013). There is an increasing amount of experimentation with plurilingual methodologies (e.g. Bernaus et al. 2011; Candelier et al. 2013; Choi and Ollerhead, 2019; Lau and van Viegen, 2020; Prasad 2015; Prasad and Lory 2018; Spinelli 2019). A Routledge handbook of plurilingual language education (Piccardo et al. 2021) gives a detailed account of the theoretical inputs and the way the concept has further developed as well as an overview of current practices.

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