

AP Capstone

The Multi-Faceted Benefits of Bilingualism

Languages have always been a fundamental cornerstone of human society. From the simple grunts of neanderthals to the complex and ever changing diction present in today's internet epoch, humans have found refuge in language to complete everything from daily tasks to solving the world's most complex theorems. However, languages have evolved significantly over time, a path correlating with the degree of transportation available to mankind. Starting from Marco Polo and Columbus in the age of exploration, with the advent of faster transportation mediums such as ships and planes the amount of contact between languages and language groups has skyrocketed. Thus, this immense growth in the spread of languages has led to an enormous growth in the number of individuals learning languages opposed to their mother tongue. This growth in globalization and bilingualism impacts numerous international perspectives. As globalization has raised international levels of bilingualism, completely changing social and intellectual dynamics across the globe in the process, the world economy has boomed as it shifts towards a knowledge based economy as a result of the intricate web of international connections

formed by an increasingly close knit international community that will only grow closer in the future.

Globalism has increased levels of bilingualism through the increased level of cultural diffusion following the increase in transportation rates since the beginning of the 14th century. From ancient explorers who set out to find new cultures and new languages in order to spread cultural awareness while making economic transfers to the average teenager in any nation today who can connect with a speaker of nearly every language of this planet in a few seconds over the internet, as the degree of globalization increases through transport and communication the spread of languages increase at an equal rate. Globalization however is not a fairly new concept as many historians tend to explain. It has slowly but steadily occurred for over 700 years. As soon as the Silk Road grew into a transnational and transcultural highway, cultures began the long process of exchanging languages. Before these supranational trading links were conceived, the thought of learning a language apart from one's native tongue was revolutionary. But now, as important political, economic, and social links had to be forged with individuals who spoke many different languages, those who wanted to obtain power and make a living had to adjust and learn the important languages of the day such as Arabic, Chinese, and Latin. Thus as the numbers of positions requiring the knowledge of multiple languages swelled, so did the percentage of individuals who could now classify as a bilingual. In addition to the necessity of bilingualism for occupations, the synthesis of multiple languages due to the increase of connections between different cultures from globalization led to the creation of new languages related to the strongest languages in terms of number of speakers. However this globalization of languages comes with a

cost. Research now suggests that languages with low numbers in terms of speakers may suffer from extinction due to globalization. Eric Garland suggests that “the increasing mobility of people, goods, and information has driven a powerful trend toward cultural uniformity and the extinction of local languages. Globalized economics and media are changing the face of culture around the globe, reducing the number of languages that humans speak” (Garland 1). Over the past 500 years, as nationstates developed and became more centralized, regional dialects and minority languages have been dominated by the centrist dialects of the ruling parties. This globalization puts a strong focus on the select languages that are dominating the global economy such as English, essentially shutting out other minor languages. Herve Delhamue states that “it’s clear that globalization is making English especially important not just in universities, but in areas such as computing, diplomacy, medicine, shipping, and entertainment. No language is currently being learned by more people — there may soon be 2 billion actively doing so — and the desire to learn it reflects a desire to be plugged into a kind of ‘world brain.’ To many people, then, the spread of English seems a positive thing, symbolizing employment, education, modernity, and technology. But to plenty of others it seems ominous. They hold it responsible for grinding down or homogenizing their identities and interests. It tends to equalize values and desires, without doing the same for opportunities” (Delhamue 1). Thus, globalization brings a completely new purpose in terms of the massive impact it has on languages, in both nurturing new languages as to foster bilingualism to becoming the sole reason behind the extinction of a language.

As globalization fostered by the growth in transportation and the spread of trade routes increases the number of bilinguals across the globe, it in turn raises the overall level of global intelligence. Intelligence can be measured in two ways; one is the one measure in schools through the learning of various facts while the other is cognitive intelligence measured in IQ tests. The spread of languages assisted by globalization contributes to the growth of global intelligence in terms of both categories of measuring intellect. For the first category, the spread of languages in fostering bilingualism brings together many cultures which in turns leads to the exchange of information from multiple regions all across the globe. This exchange of information helps foster the growth of intellect awareness as factual information gets passed on between individuals of different cultures as the distance between locales gets smaller due to the strength of globalization. For example the Silk Road was one of the earliest areas in which the growth of globalization and the subsequent exchange of languages with the growth of bilingualism foster a massive transfer of intellectual property and factual data. “The ancient Silk Road contributed greatly to the cultural exchange between China and the West. From the second century BC to the fifteenth century AD, splendid civilizations among China, India, Greece, Persia and Rome were exchanged along this famous trade route, making the route a great ‘Cultural Bridge’ between Asia and Europe” (Travel China). The cultural exchange that often comes with the spread of languages in relation to globalism brings together a pool of intellect that increases global knowledge as whole. In addition to factual intellect, bilingualists have been proven to have stronger cognitive intellect than individuals who speak just one language. Cathy Price, a neuroimaging researcher, declares that “when one learns more language, ones posterior

supramarginal gyrus will get a workout, and be stimulated to grow... when one looks at the images, there is more gray matter density with more than one language spoken” (Berube), Price’s observation on the human intellect confirms the hypothesis that bilingualism stimulates intellectual capacities within the brain. There is however a major opposing viewpoint on this statement. Some researchers indicate that bilingualism actually does not have as significant of an impact on intelligence and cognitive development as some detail. Price details again that “quite a few studies explicitly draw a parallel between bilingualism and a high IQ score, but researchers are quick to point out that such a relationship is not perfect. One of the IQ tests is a vocabulary test, and in general, researchers might expect bilinguals to do slightly worse on a [vocabulary] test in one language than if it was their only language. The reason for this vocab disparity is that bilinguals learn and use each language ‘for different purposes, in different domains of life’”(Berube). Thus in an increasingly globalized world as children are exposed to multiple languages from an early age their intelligence in terms of two constructs are likely to increase. Consequently, as globalization nurtures more and more young bilingualists, the overall intelligence of the world will grow.

With a combination of an increase in knowledge and an immense exchange of information, the increase in bilingualism across the planet has a positive impact on the world economy and will only continue to have an even greater impact in the future. The two major ways that bilingualism impacts the world economy is by providing a means of business

connections and by increasing overall global knowledge. Ever since the age of trading and exploration, bilingualism has been a merchant's greatest boon as it allows one to conduct business with multiple partners in multiple regions of the world. This thus allows for maximum revenue as it allows for the forging of vital relationships with powerful traders and fellow businessmen who may not speak one's mother tongue. In addition to the ability to broaden the sphere of influence, the advantages that bilingualism has extend to the locale of knowledge. A new and rising economic theory that has slowly crept into the economies of several first world nation is the knowledge economy theory. The knowledge economy theory essentially states that economies should be built upon a bank of knowledge rather than having to rely on manual labour and unskilled labour to form the foundation of a nation's economy. Statistics show that a knowledge-based, rather than a resource-based, economy is ultimately more beneficial to the citizenry, and more sustainable, since innovation is an infinite resource. As the world gears towards the development and nurturing of knowledge as opposed to unskilled labour, the knowledge economy theorem will begin to play a more significant role in the global economy in the future. Yogan Sharma explains the knowledge economy in terms of the future growth predicted specifically in Asian nations by stating that "countries that score higher on knowledge economy indicators have higher levels of economic development, according to the World Bank. Its Knowledge Economy Index, or KEI, includes measures of economic incentives for using new and existing knowledge, a highly educated and skilled population, an efficient system for innovation adoption – including research centres – and the use of information technologies. Major advanced countries in the OECD, where more than 50% of gross domestic product is

estimated to be knowledge-based, made the transition to knowledge economies decades ago. But Asia also has the potential to take the lead globally, according to the ADB” (Sharma). Thus, as globalization brings bilingualism across the globe, it helps to facilitate global trade and foster knowledge which in turns plays a significant role in the foundation of the knowledge economy, which economists predict to be the economy of the future.

Bilingualism is a major factor of global perspective in terms of the sheer impact that it along with language in general has on the world. Globalization has played a massive role in the cultivation and development of both phenomena. As the world gets increasingly connected, the spread of language it seems cannot be stopped. However, as the internet and other technological advances develop out, it seems that non-major languages seem heading towards extinction. Nevertheless, the advent of technology plays a huge role in the position that bilingualism plays in today’s world. Bilingualism has shown to lead to a more educated and cognitive world which in turns leads to a stronger economy and a happier society. So as the future progresses, expect a time to be reached when every individual in the world will have proficient understanding of at least two world languages. Until then, bilingualism will grow bringing about a more economically developed society and a smarter one at that too.

Bibliography

AMNH. "SciCafe: Mapping the Evolution and Spread of Languages." *AMNH*. American Museum of Natural History, 21 Dec. 2012. Web. 15 Mar. 2015.

Delhumea, Herve. "Language and Globalization." *HERVE DELHUMEAU*. Herve Delhumeau, 22 July 2011. Web. 15 Mar. 2015.

Garland, Eric. "Can Minority Languages Be Saved? Globalization vs. Culture." *Omniglot*. Omniglot, July-Aug. 2006. Web. 13 Mar. 2015.

"Mapping the Bilingual Brain" by Chris Berube, Radiolab.org, Dec. 12, 2012, <http://www.radiolab.org>.

Sharma, Yojan. "Can Asia Lead the Future Global Knowledge Economy?" *RSS*. University World News, 12 Sept. 2014. Web. 15 Mar. 2015.

Travel China. "Silk Road Culture Exchange: Religion and Technology Introduced into China via the Road." *Travel China*. Travel China Guide, 3 June 2012. Web. 13 Mar. 2015.