

# **Multilingualism and Creativity**

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# **Multilingualism and Creativity**

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To my son Ariel



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# Preface

In 1992, I left Russia and started a long journey of higher education. During this journey, I resided in several countries through which I acquired several languages and multicultural experiences. Moreover, all these years, I have been actively involved in creative writing. Therefore, when the time was ripe to select a topic for my dissertation in experimental psychology, it seemed clear that I should focus on the one that directly grew out of my personal experience: multilingualism and creativity. This work initiated a longitudinal project, which constitutes the core of this monograph.

To my surprise, I soon found out that the relationship between multilingualism and creativity received little attention in the scientific community. In about 40 years, this theme had been explored in only 40 studies. Ricciardelli (1992b) presented an overview of the empirical investigations on this topic that had been conducted in the 1970s and 1980s. Although these studies were all more than 20 years old, there had been virtually no scientific investigation conducted thereafter. In his chapter on bilingualism and creativity published in 2008, Simonton (2008: 150) rightly put it: 'Almost no research directly relevant to this topic has been published since then, making its results still pertinent to the present discussion.' This book makes an attempt to resuscitate this theme and provides a solid theoretical framework supported by contemporary empirical investigations of the relationship between multilingualism and creativity.

Changing realities in the modern world have an impact, especially on the human sciences. Vastly increased human mobility, communication technologies, and the accelerating integration of the global economy have increasingly abolished geographic boundaries and brought together people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The close interaction of people speaking different languages emphasizes the phenomenon of multilingualism as never before. New scientific research reflects on these tendencies and provides a rapidly growing body of empirical investigation into the phenomenon of multilingualism. During the past few decades, research in the area of the cognitive development of bilinguals has made tremendous progress. There is convincing evidence that speaking more than one language extends rather than diminishes individuals' cognitive capacities (see Bialystok, 2005, for an overview). This book extends this view and presents evidence that multilingualism also contributes to individuals' creative potential.

Although multilingualism is well elaborated in scientific investigation, researchers still debate about the definition of this phenomenon. Multilinguals rarely have equal fluency in their languages. They usually acquire and use these languages for different purposes, in different domains in life, and with different people (Grosjean, 1998). There was a long lasting discussion in the literature about limiting multilingual study to the so-called true multilinguals – those equally skilled in all their languages (cf. Peal & Lambert, 1962). However, there are indications that such individuals are extremely rare. For example, by this strict definition, out of 238 participants in my dissertation study (Kharkhurin, 2005) who indicated that they spoke both English and Russian, only seven could be considered ‘perfectly balanced’ or ‘true’ bilinguals. What about the rest of the sample? They were not ‘perfectly balanced’ for their command of both languages was not identical. At the same time, they were representative of the majority of multilingual population for individuals speaking several languages rarely display equal command of these languages. Thus, while it might be conceivable to limit one’s experimental sample to perfectly balanced multilinguals, this would greatly sacrifice the generalization to the multilingual population at large. Therefore, it is prudent to consider multilingualism in a broader sense including not only individuals who are fluent in all their languages but also individuals who actively use, or attempt to use, more than one language, even if they have not achieved fluency in all of them (Kroll & de Groot, 1997).

As a reader might have already noticed, I have brought into play two terms to refer to the phenomenon of speaking several languages: bilingualism and multilingualism. Throughout this book, these terms are used interchangeably, the former generally refers to an ability to speak two languages, whereas the latter refers to the ability to speak more than two languages. As literature indicates, most research in the field has been conducted with bilinguals. This could be due to the fact that a large majority of the studies have been carried out in North America. Historically, the overwhelming part of the population in the United States speaks only one language, English, and has little incentive to acquire any foreign language. The rest – primarily the migrants of Latino or Asian origins – had to acquire English in addition to their native tongue in order to integrate into mainstream society. Once they reached mastery in English, they had weak inducement to learn any other foreign language. Therefore, this country presents a clear pattern of monolingual/bilingual dichotomy. To the North, Canada is divided into English and French speaking provinces, and the population either speaks only the language of the province or both English and French. Therefore, this country replicates the pattern of monolingual/bilingual distinction. Thus, the studies conducted at the dawn

of multilingual research in North America were focused primarily on the bilingual population.

In contrast, Europe presents a different pattern of language distribution. For example, a survey *Europeans and their Languages* (2006: 8) reports that '56% of EU citizens are able to hold a conversation in a language other than their mother tongue and 28% state that they master two languages along with their native language.' Moreover, European migrants to North America also changed the pattern of language distribution on this continent. For example, 53.70% (58 out of 108) of the immigrants from the former Soviet Union who participated in my dissertation study mentioned above indicated that they were exposed to languages other than Russian and English. I have revealed a similar tendency with language distribution in the Middle East. That is, 31.76% (303 out of 954) of participants who participated in various studies that I have conducted between the fall 2008 and the spring 2010 indicated that they speak more than two languages. These figures suggest that multilingual practice is prevailing around the globe. Similar observations encouraged researchers to initiate scientific investigations of multilingual individuals – those speaking more than two languages. These studies, however, are thin on the ground and are still outnumbered by bilingual research. Thus, although this monograph uses the terms bilingualism and multilingualism interchangeably, it acknowledges the potentially critical differences. The past research conducted with participants speaking only two languages is referred to with the term bilingualism, whereas, if I believe that processes observed in the bilingual mind could also be expected to occur in the multilingual mind, I use the term multilingualism.

Once the first term in the title of this book has been brought to the stage, I move on to introduce the second one. Creativity is a broad and versatile construct that encompasses a variety of theories, models, and definitions. There are dozens of monographs, edited volumes, and handbooks presenting creativity from a perspective of a product, an individual or a process. This monograph refrains from any attempt to provide an overview of the creativity research. Rather, it constructs a particular theoretical framework in which multilingualism is claimed to have impact on creative endeavors. In this framework, individuals' practice with multiple languages is argued to influence specific cognitive processes that in turn may lead to an increase in their creative performance. Creative capacity, therefore, is perceived as a continuation of human cognition; that is, cognitive processes that are involved in everyday human activity may also lead to activity that is considered as creative thinking. This approach is termed creative cognition; it stipulates that variations in the use of specifiable cognitive processes may result in production of creative outcomes and even achievement of extreme levels of

accomplishment. Thus, in this book I focus on those cognitive mechanisms that on one side might benefit from multilingual practice and on the other side could facilitate creative thinking.

The monograph opens with Chapter 1 introducing the reader to a cognitive perspective in creativity research – creative cognition. It proceeds with a discussion of major cognitive models of creativity and pays particular attention to two processes that are generally accepted as the key components of creative thinking: divergent and convergent thinking. The purpose of Chapter 2 is to sketch those aspects of multilingual cognitive functioning that in my opinion play a crucial role in creative functioning of multilingual individuals. It reviews the research focusing on the relationship between bilingualism and the cognitive and linguistic performance of children and adults, and specifies possible reasons for bilingual cognitive advantages. Furthermore, it elaborates on an individual's experiences with different linguistic systems and cultural settings. These factors are presented as key components in multilingual development, which presumably play a crucial role in multilingual cognition. Finally, the chapter presents a model of bilingual memory, and discusses the effect of multilingual developmental factors on an individual's cognitive performance in terms of this model. Chapter 3 introduces the core topic of the monograph, namely, the relationship between multilingualism and creativity. It reviews the historiometric and psychometric research of this relationship, and presents a theoretical framework for multilingual creative advantages. After reviewing the existing empirical studies in the field, it provides a critical analysis of the methodological issues that impose serious limitations to the reliability of this research. I made an attempt to overcome these limitations and initiated a project that investigated a relationship between multilingualism and creativity using improved scientific strategies. In contrast to most studies in the field, I have compared the creative performance not only of bilinguals and monolinguals but also of bilinguals with different histories of linguistic and cultural experiences. Moreover, I attempted to empirically identify cognitive mechanisms underlying creative thinking that could benefit from multilingual and multicultural practices. Chapters 4 and 5 present a brief description of the studies in this project, and discuss the results of these studies in the context of multilingual creative development. The last two chapters tap into potential implications of the findings in multilingual creativity for creativity research and education, respectively. Chapter 6 elaborates on two distinct creative capacities – generative and innovative – identified in my research, and discusses them in light of another dichotomy accepted in creativity research, divergent/convergent thinking. Furthermore, it makes an argument that a widely utilized definition of creativity emphasizing the novelty and appropriateness of a creative product reduces the scope of this

complex and versatile phenomenon. In this chapter, I provide an alternative four-dimensional construct that in addition to novelty and utility includes aesthetic and authentic functions. Based on this extended construct, I propose an alternative model that claims to encompass different approaches to creative thinking. Chapter 7 picks up on one of the widely discussed topics in both multilingualism and creativity research that comes from pedagogical considerations. After discussing evidence supporting and criticizing existing multilingual and creative educational endeavors, it proposes a new program that combines strategies from both fields. The purpose of the program is to enrich traditional school curriculum with methods and techniques enhancing foreign language learning and fostering creativity. To accomplish this goal, the program utilizes the holistic approach, which combines cognitive, personal, and environmental factors in education. The chapter sketches the essential attributes of a bilingual creative education program. The concluding chapter specifies the future directions for the research in multilingual creativity.

Having thus introduced the aims and the organization of the book, I would like to end with a few words of thanks. I am deeply indebted to James Sater for his faithful friendship and numerous illuminating discussions on scientific and other matters, which facilitated completion of this book. I am grateful to Jeanette Altarriba, Viorica Marian, Richard Gassan and Angela Maitner for having reviewed parts of the manuscript at various stages. I also thank the editors at Multilingual Matters as well as the anonymous reviewers for their very helpful comments on earlier drafts. Special thanks go to my colleagues and students at Brooklyn College, Moscow State University and Azadi Psychiatric Hospital who provided invaluable help with data collection. Finally, I would like to thank Amir Berbic for designing the cover image for this book.