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FORUM

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Interview with David Singleton

David Singleton is an Emeritus Fellow of Trinity College Dublin, where he was, until his retirement from that institution, Professor in Applied Linguistics. He also, thereafter, held the title of Professor at the University of Pannonia, Veszprém (Hungary) and at the State University of Applied Sciences, Konin (Poland). He served as President of the Irish Association for Applied Linguistics, as Secretary General of the International Association of Applied Linguistics and as President of the European Second Language Association. His publications range across a wide spectrum of topics – but focus mainly on cross-linguistic influence, the lexicon, the age factor in language acquisition and multilingualism. He is the founding editor and continuing co-editor of the Multilingual Matters SLA book series. In 2015 he received the EUOSLA Distinguished Scholar Award and in 2017 was awarded Honorary Life Membership of AILA.

This is the second interview with professor David Singleton published in the *Strani jezici* journal. The first one was published a little over twenty years ago (*Strani jezici*, vol. 31, 1-2) when he was interviewed by Marta Medved Krajnović on the topic of second language acquisition, the age factor and early learning of English as a foreign language. In the meantime, David has developed a close connection with Croatia and quite a few members of the Croatian applied linguistic community. In fact, he has touched the lives of many scholars with his readiness to share his knowledge and expertise in the most elaborate, generous and practical ways, and with his many humane qualities, sincerity, kindness, and empathy above all.

In this interview, the focus is on multilingualism, more specifically, his contribution to the field and his view of the field based on more than 50 years of academic work in applied linguistics.

1. On your website, there are well over 200 entries listing scholarly works such as journal articles, books, edited volumes, research reports and reviews you have written so far. Even though some may

associate you and your work with specific areas of study, such as the age factor, the list shows what a prolific author you are. The topics range from lexicology, curriculum/syllabus design to psycholinguistics, second language acquisition, and multilingualism. They also seem to be related to different languages, but three languages stand out in particular: English, Irish, and French. Where did your interest in languages come from?

My experience of life exposed me to instruction in and subsequently to the need to use a range of languages. The fact that I found enormous pleasure in such an experience probably accounts for my interest! I remember, for example, encountering French for the very first time as a young child, and I vividly recall expressing to my parents my desire to be able to “speak like that”! Later, I became an altar server at my local Catholic church – in the days when the liturgical language was Latin, a language which I absolutely loved rolling my tongue around!

2. In your research, you were tackling multilingualism in the broadest sense by questioning how competencies in different languages relate to each other, dealing with Irish as a minority language in Ireland, and looking into formal learning of additional languages, but you have also co-authored (with Larissa Aronin) some of the most popular introductory books on multilingualism such as *Multilingualism* (2012) and *Twelve Lectures of Multilingualism* (2018). What aspect of multilingualism are you most interested in?

What probably interests me most is the relationship “in the mind” between a multilingual’s different languages - on which my stance is closer to Werker’s than to García’s. I simply do not recognize the possibility of language systems being able to function without a degree (whatever the appearances) of autonomy. The fact that languages mingle in communication does not by any means necessarily indicate a pot-pourri of the relevant underlying competencies.

3. Looking at your published work one comes across intriguing titles such as “Applied linguistics: What exactly have we been applying?”, as well as those tackling “thorny issues” and “conundrums”. It is clear that you did not shy away from tackling hot potatoes, be that specific issues of the study focus or the field of study overall. I’m sure that many colleagues have been inspired by your critical reflections. What would you identify as some of the thorny issues in the field of multilingualism?

Probably, the issue I have just mentioned, that of the relationship between languages in the mind, is the one that I find most beguiling. Another area I find extremely interesting is that of the (sometimes quirky) developments that occur when multiple languages are used within a personal liaison or a family. About both of the above I have written. A mysterious area about which I have not published is that of cases where people seem able at any age to pick up a native-like proficiency in languages they encounter. Moyer recently wrote a most informative book about this phenomenon, but I suspect there is more to be said on the topic!

4. You have also addressed the issue of terminology related to multilingualism; the vexing definition of multilingualism, but also other associated concepts and constructs such as multicompetence and translanguaging. Can you tell me more about it?

Well, in the case of multilingualism, one question, for example, is how well does a person need to know his/her languages in order to count as a multilingual? Different people – in the academic world as well as in everyday life – give different answers to such a question! With regard to multicompetence and translanguaging, different definitions of these terms have different bases in regard to the model of the relationship between the languages involved. As I said earlier, there are different views on whether languages – “named” or otherwise – maintain their separate identity or, in some yet to be coherently explained way, “blend”.

5. How do you define multilingualism as a research field; how does it fit within the broader field of applied linguistics and how would you define it in relation to bilingualism?

There is, I think, a continuum between bilingualism and multilingualism. Oddly, that is, however, a controversial proposition in some quarters. Less controversial is the notion that people working on one topic certainly need to stay in touch with what is emerging with regard to the other. Certainly, both areas of study clearly belong to – and are integral parts of – the applied linguistics programme and scenario.

6. Do you think that the multilingual turn (May, 2014) is having an effect on language acquisition research and language teaching practice?

*Undoubtedly, and, as I have made clear, most of this effect is positive - as long as we keep in mind that many, many people in the world are not even **bilingual**. We certainly need to beware of “putting all our eggs in the multilingual basket”!*

7. Bilingual /Multilingual advantage has been widely debated as a construct. Are we ever going to be able to prove it?

We can always hope! The fact of having more than one language at one's disposal is already, of course, a social advantage. Demonstrating, however, that the acquisition of more than one language has psychological and/or health advantages beyond those deriving from any learning activity and those associated with the aforementioned social benefits is certainly not going to be easy!

8. You have recently published a book (co-authored with S. Pfenninger and J. Festman) on language learning across the lifespan. In more practical terms, why is it good to know more languages or to be multilingual?

The more languages one knows, to whatever degree of proficiency, the easier life can get in a practical sense and the more pleasure life may offer! Even knowing useful tidbits of a number of languages can enrich one's life. For example, I spend a fair amount of time in Poland. I don't speak Polish, but I know enough of the language to be able, for example, to say a room number, to apologize or to offer birthday wishes. Even such shreds of a language can make relations with another community smoother and more replete with smiles!

9. What would you suggest as a good approach to promoting multilingualism in countries such as Croatia where multilingualism is generally achieved through successive or simultaneous learning of foreign languages at school?

I think lessons may be learnable in Croatia from the situation where schools are not involved. Croatia is already highly multi-varietal and to an extent multilingual before education intervenes (as Cvikic showed in her plenary at our recent conference). It is not uncommon for Standard Croatian plus two non-standard varieties to be spoken in a Croatian home. There must be lessons for educators from this kind of scenario - a scenario that is replicated in countries where immigrants speaking various languages settle. In Ireland, for example, intermarriage between speakers of different languages (including English and Irish) is a real trend! I think we should really look closely at such situations and at what they may be able to tell us.

10. 1 Formal learning of the first foreign language in the first grade of primary school (at the age of 6/7) was introduced in Croatia almost 20 years ago. Next year, the Ministry is to launch a four-year pilot

project that introduces mandatory learning of a second foreign language into the primary school curriculum, more specifically, from the fourth grade of primary school, at the age of 9/10. You have been arguing and showing that socio-affective and contextual variables have a greater effect on language acquisition than age. What would be your recommendation to the language policymakers in Croatia?

I would urge them to focus their attention, their efforts and their propaganda on aspects other than proficiency, since study after study - going back more than fifty years - has shown that primary and secondary school foreign language learners are indistinguishable in terms of foreign language proficiency by the end of schooling. The Swedish researcher, Ekstrand argued long ago that evidence that older foreign language learners are superior to younger learners is not necessarily a reason for delaying the introduction of foreign languages in primary school – any more than the fact that secondary pupils demonstrate superiority in literary skills and mathematics would justify deferring instruction in reading, writing and arithmetic.

11. How do you envisage the future of learning languages other than English in education systems in Europe?

There is a real challenge in this question! English is indeed all-pervasive - even in China and South America, never mind Europe! Other languages will, however, need to be on curricula for cultural as well as practical reasons. The case for each curricular language will need to be made with intelligence and sensitivity as well as passion. I do not, though, envisage at this stage aggressive competition between English and other languages; they occupy different spaces and have different roles. I think by now that is understood!

12. Can you tell me about your most recent research related to the topic of multilingualism?

I have continued to work (with Leśniewska) on the age factor and on the lexicon, the relevance of both of which to multilingualism is obvious. I have also written recently (with Záborská) on learning other languages in adulthood and in the “third age”. Finally (with Flynn), I have explored the concepts of multicompetence and translanguaging. In all the above cases the treatments in question necessarily extend beyond second language learning into the domain of multilingualism.

Thank you, David!

The interview was conducted by Stela Letica Krevelj

