

TRANSFORMING THE SELF AND SOCIETY THROUGH THE POWER OF LANGUAGE. A REVIEW OF *THE POWER OF LANGUAGE: MULTILINGUALISM, SELF AND SOCIETY* BY VIORICA MARIAN

Oana VOICHICI

Valahia University of Târgoviște

oana.voichici@valahia.ro

Abstract:

Viorica Marian's *The Power of Language: Multilingualism, Self and Society* is a scholarly yet accessible work that investigates the profound impact of multilingualism on the mind, identity and society. Relying on a wealth of empirical studies and personal experiences, the author, a distinguished psycholinguist, offers a compelling and richly informative perspective.

Keywords:

Language, multilingualism, neural plasticity, cultural identity, communication, society.

Viorica Marian's *The Power of Language: Multilingualism, Self and Society*¹ offers a comprehensive and insightful exploration of how multilingualism shapes cognition, personal identity and social structures. As a professor of communication sciences and psychology at Northwestern University, Marian draws on decades of psycholinguistic and neuroscientific research to present readers with a thesis that is both intellectually rigorous and remarkably accessible: acquiring and using multiple languages literally rewires the brain and alters our perception of the world.

Structured in two main sections, "Self" and "Society", the book navigates with remarkable fluidity through anecdotal case studies, laboratory experiments, sociological analyses and the author's own reflections as a

¹ Viorica MARIAN, 2024, *The Power of Language: Multilingualism, Self and Society*, Pelican Books Ltd., digital edition.

polyglot. This mixture of narrative and empirical evidence lends the text a persuasive power, turning often dry scientific facts into captivating stories.

In the opening chapter, “Introduction – or Welcome!”, Marian sets the stage for a re-evaluation of language’s role in human life. She begins with the myth of the Tower of Babel, illustrating how language has long been perceived as a force so potent it was deemed “*the key to reaching heaven*” (p. xv). This biblical tale highlights the dual capacity of language to unite and divide, to facilitate or hinder communication.

Marian emphasises that although language is a daily tool, few truly grasp its power. She likens this to possessing an object of immense value without understanding its worth. Language, she argues, can even shape our perception of objects: for instance, Spanish and German speakers describe a bridge differently depending on the grammatical gender assigned to the word in their respective languages. Through this introduction, Marian seeks to provide readers with a key to unlocking the hidden potential of the mind.

Part One: Self is devoted entirely to examining how the acquisition and use of at least two languages reshape the individual’s neural structures and mental processes.

From the first chapter, “Mind Boggling”, Marian challenges the notion, prevalent in monolingual societies, that speaking only one language is the natural state of human beings. She stresses that, generally, multilingualism is the norm rather than the exception:

“It may be a surprise to learn that the majority of the world’s population is bilingual or multilingual. More than 7,000 languages are spoken in the world today.” (p. 6)

She points out that much of psychological research has historically focused on monolingual populations, which led to a limited, incomplete and often inaccurate understanding of the human brain. This exclusion of linguistic diversity from research has had serious historical consequences, such as the use of English-based “intelligence” tests to justify discriminatory policies under the United States Immigration Act of 1924.

Chapter 2 extends the idea that the multilingual brain functions as a “parallel-processing superorganism.” Here, Marian introduces experimental evidence, such as eye-tracking and brain imaging, that reveal how bilingual individuals activate multiple languages simultaneously.

Contrary to the traditional hypothesis that speakers “deactivate” unused languages, research shows that all known languages remain co-active. This parallel processing is a survival mechanism, enabling the brain to remain prepared for any linguistic input and to respond more swiftly than if it had to “switch on” and “switch off” each language:

“This allows the brain to remain open to all possible mappings of sound to meaning, regardless of language, so that it is always ready for any language input, even in unpredictable circumstances, and can understand and respond faster than if it had to reboot a turned-off language.” (p. 25)

The chapter also reveals that this co-activation is not limited to similar or spoken languages but is also present in bimodal bilinguals (those who use both a spoken language and a sign language). One cited study shows that visual stimuli activate both languages in bilinguals even in the absence of verbal input. Marian concludes that the mind is not modular and that multilingualism influences not only the language system but also perception, attention and memory.

The following chapter, “On Creativity, Perception and Thought”, investigates the influence of multilingualism on creativity and perceptual processes. Marian argues that exposure to multiple linguistic and cultural systems stimulates novel neural connections, fostering a form of complex associative thinking that is essential for problem-solving, innovation and artistic expression.

Cited studies reveal that bilingual individuals consistently outperform monolinguals on tests measuring divergent thinking and cognitive flexibility, such as the *Alternate Uses Task*, which challenges participants to identify as many unconventional uses as possible for a common object. Bilingual children often exhibit advanced visual creativity, frequently producing imaginative and original drawings. Engaging with the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, Marian postulates that “*although language does not fully determine thought*” (p. 53), it shapes it in subtle yet significant ways, influencing how we perceive time, colour and spatial relationships.

Chapter 4, “The Word Made Flesh”, delves into the biological foundations of multilingualism. Marian presents persuasive evidence of neural plasticity, demonstrating that learning a new language is not merely a

cognitive function but a process of physical transformation within the brain. Neuroimaging studies show increased grey matter density and enhanced white matter integrity in bilingual brains, indicating more efficient use of neural resources.

Furthermore, Marian advances bold hypotheses, suggesting that multilingualism may alter cellular metabolic concentrations and potentially induce epigenetic changes, thereby influencing gene expression. Through this analogy with the biblical transformation of “the Word into flesh,” she raises a profound question about the nature of the interplay between abstract codes and biological matter.

Continuing her exploration, Marian maps the cognitive benefits of bilingualism across the lifespan in Chapter 5, “Childhood, Ageing and In-Between”. Comparing multilingualism to a network of alternative neural pathways (if one route deteriorates, others can be used to access information), she emphasises its role as a form of *cognitive reserve*, capable of delaying the onset of dementia and Alzheimer’s symptoms by an average of four to six years. According to her, multilingualism functions as a continuous mental exercise that requires no additional effort from the individual. As she eloquently puts it:

“The brain gymnastics needed to manoeuvre the languages you know changes your brain and increases your chances of staying sharper longer.” (p. 83)

Marian also dispels common myths about childhood bilingualism, demonstrating that early exposure to multiple languages does not lead to confusion or developmental delays; on the contrary, it accelerates the acquisition of metacognitive skills and is correlated with improved academic outcomes. She describes the phenomenon of *perceptual narrowing* in infants, showing that exposure to several languages prolongs this period of receptivity to the diverse sounds of the world.

A particularly moving aspect of the book is its exploration of how language shapes our emotions and identity, addressed in the final chapter of Part I, “Another Language, Another Soul”. Marian argues that for bilingual individuals, each language may correspond to a slightly different version of the self. A person might be more direct, more extroverted, or in contrast, more reserved, depending on the language they are using. This phenomenon,

known as *cultural frame switching*, arises from the fact that each language is intimately tied to a specific culture, with its own norms, values and attitudes.

The author emphasises that the mother tongue, being associated with formative experiences, carries greater emotional intensity, while bilinguals may use a second language to create emotional distance. She concludes by saying that:

“(...) each language is associated with somewhat different sets of experiences, memories, emotions and meanings, and their accessibility differs across languages. As a result, different aspects of one’s self come to the forefront depending on the language in use.” (p. 123)

Part Two: Society expands the discussion from the individual to the collective level, demonstrating that the power of language extends beyond the human psyche to profoundly influence society.

A fascinating chapter explores how language functions as the “Ultimate Influencer”, employed by politicians and the advertising industry to shape public opinion and behaviour. Marian provides examples of strategic labelling (such as “Death Tax” instead of “Estate Tax”) and the use of alliteration to craft memorable messages. She also shows that bilinguals are less susceptible to such manipulative tactics, as using a foreign language reduces emotional reactivity and enhances rational thinking. In this context, multilingualism becomes a tool for resisting misinformation.

The author also addresses the complex relationship between dialect and language, arguing that distinctions are often arbitrary and politically motivated. She cites the ironic definition by linguist Max Weinreich: “*A language is a dialect with an army and a navy.*” (p. 150) This is exemplified by the case of Moldovan, declared a separate language from Romanian by Soviet authorities, despite linguistic consensus that it is a dialect.

The discussion extends to linguistic stereotypes and their role in perpetuating social inequalities. Marian challenges the erroneous perception that languages or dialects such as African American English (AAE) are “defective” or “inferior”. In reality, AAE is a complex linguistic system with its own grammatical and phonological structures rooted in West African languages.

Chapter 8, “Words of Change”, broadens the analysis to the impact of language on social norms and prejudice. Marian demonstrates how

grammatical structures, such as gender or the animate/inanimate distinction, can shape cultural worldviews.

A significant portion of the chapter is devoted to linguistic diversity in education and healthcare, where Marian critiques diagnostic standards that rely exclusively on monolingual speakers. These standards often lead to over- or underdiagnosis of communication disorders in children from linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Chapter 9, “Found in Translation”, explores the role of translation in bridging cultures, highlighting its cognitive, cultural, and political dimensions. Marian claims that successful translation is not mere lexical substitution but a recreation of meaning and emotion, an art that demands deep understanding of both languages and cultures.

The chapter concludes with a reflection on the human capacity to learn languages, asserting that multilingualism facilitates the acquisition of new symbolic systems. One study shows that bilinguals learn additional languages more easily than monolinguals, a phenomenon attributed to the continuous exercise of *inhibitory control*, which enables them to suppress prior linguistic knowledge more effectively. Marian concludes: “*The mind’s potential for learning languages may be limitless*” (p. 201) – a capacity that opens new cognitive horizons.

Chapter 10, “The Codes of Our Minds”, deconstructs language into its various symbolic manifestations. Beginning with the decoding of hieroglyphs on the Rosetta Stone, Marian expands the concept of “language” to include mathematics and programming languages.

The author discusses the particular case of mathematics, “*a language in itself, (...) the closest thing we have today to a universal language*” (p. 219), which has evolved to enable us to describe and understand the universe. Citing recent studies, she suggests that bilingualism may improve mathematical performance by training the brain to use non-linguistic neural circuits more efficiently.

In Chapter 11, “The Future of Science and Technology”, Marian reflects on the fundamental question: “Which comes first, thought or language?”, acknowledging the difficulty of separating the two, noting that: “*we use language to assess thought.*” (p. 227) Looking ahead to the complex future of brain-computer interfaces, she suggests that as technology advances,

we may one day translate neural activity directly into language, though this development may trigger some ethical debates. Marian reiterates the crucial role of linguistic diversity in scientific progress, warning that the exclusion of multilingual populations from research limits discoveries:

“Leaving linguistically diverse populations out of research means an incomplete understanding of humanity and the stunting of scientific discovery and progress.” (p. 241)

Ultimately, Marian situates language at the intersection of biology and code, arguing that language is a generative code, like DNA, that enables us to create an infinite array of ideas and forms of life.

Marian concludes with a powerful and poetic statement: *“Multilingualism gives us a greater chance of finding the right key to the right lock.”* (p. 245) Languages, as symbolic systems, hold the keys to unlocking the mysteries of the universe, and multilingualism expands our capacity to do so.

In the final section of her work, “In Conclusion – or Happy Trails!”, the author offers practical advice for those wishing to learn a new language or raise bilingual children. She demystifies the concept of a “critical period” for language acquisition, asserting that while childhood may be the ideal time, the second-best moment is “now”.

Marian provides a list of learning strategies for adults, such as enrolling in classes, using language-learning apps, engaging in social interactions, as well as recommendations for parents, including ensuring rich linguistic input, high-quality interactions and family support. This is an empowering conclusion that transforms scientific theory into practical action, encouraging readers to embark on their own linguistic journeys:

“Exposure to more than one language, even if fluent multilingualism is not attained, provides an enriching experience likely to yield long-term benefits. It is never too early or too late to start learning another language. It may even be fun.” (p. 262)

Viorica Marian’s *The Power of Language: Multilingualism, Self and Society* is an essential read for anyone interested in how the human mind works and in the force that shapes us both as individuals and as a society. It is a call to understand and value multilingualism not merely as a useful skill, but as a fundamental human capacity. Marian elegantly dismantles popular

myths, replacing them with an evidence-based perspective that celebrates the complexity and adaptability of the bilingual brain.

This is an inspiring book, one that invites readers to reflect not only on how their native language defines them, but also on the potential each new language holds. It is a book about one of the primal forces of our existence – language – and how, when multiplied, this force becomes a superpower of the human mind.