

Book Review

Bilingualism

Shahrzad Mahootian, 2020

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S. Moslemi Nezhad Arani, Foreign Languages
Department, Faculty of Tourism, Higher Education Complex of
Bam, Iran

And A. Atasoy, and Department of Turkish Language
Teaching, Education Faculty, Gaziantep University, Gaziantep,
Turkiye

In the realm of linguistics research, the topic of bilingualism and its intricate dimensions has been a subject of considerable interest, leading to a myriad of theoretical perspectives and empirical studies. Among the numerous contributions to this academic discourse, Mahootian's (2020) textbook on bilingualism presents a comprehensive narrative, charting bilingualism's multifaceted nature. Building on established linguistic theories and empirical evidence (Baker, 2011; Grosjean, 2010), the author strives to reconcile varied perspectives on bilingualism, ranging from individual linguistic competence to societal linguistics trends within six chapters, with the last one providing a summary. By doing so, the author imparts a broad-based understanding that reflects the complexities inherent in the study of bilingualism.

Mahootian's (2020) meticulous approach to presenting research strengthens the book's validity by providing a clear and comprehensive picture of key concepts related to bilingualism. Its well-organized structure and clear explanations offer a thorough introduction to the subject, making it particularly valuable for novice researchers and students. The foundational approach not only supports readers in grasping complex concepts but also encourages critical thinking and meaningful engagement with the material. Mahootian's work stands out as an excellent starting point for those new to the field. Mahootian's (2020) work is particularly timely and relevant given the burgeoning field of research exploring the cognitive implications of bilingualism. As evident in

¹ s.mosleminezhad@bam.ac.ir

Chapters 4 and 5, the book provides a much-needed synthesis of current research on topics such as language processing in the brain, the development of bilingualism in children, and the potential cognitive advantages (and costs) associated with navigating two languages. By directly addressing these key areas of inquiry, Mahootian (2020) offers readers a subtle understanding of how bilingual experience shapes the mind and brain. Furthermore, by engaging with ongoing debates and highlighting areas for future research, Mahootian (2020) ensures that her work remains relevant and thought-provoking for those at the forefront of this dynamic field.

In comparison to other works in the field, Mahootian's book provides a broad overview of bilingualism but does not delve as deeply into specific areas as some other texts. For instance, Grosjean's *Bilingual: Life and Reality* (2010) offers an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of bilingual individuals, while Costa's *The Bilingual Brain* (2016) focuses more on the neural mechanisms underlying bilingualism. Altarriba and Heredia's *An Introduction to Bilingualism: Principles and Processes* (2018) provides detailed theoretical frameworks and research methodologies. These books offer specialized insights and in-depth analysis in their respective areas, whereas Mahootian's work serves as a comprehensive and accessible entry point into the broader field of bilingualism. This makes Mahootian's book particularly suitable for undergraduate students who need a foundational understanding before delving into more specialized texts.

This work of Mahootian (2020) stands out for its interdisciplinary approach, effectively bridging insights from linguistics, psycholinguistics, neurolinguistics, and cognitive science. Unlike some books that focus narrowly on specific aspects of bilingualism, this text provides a holistic view, illuminating the interconnectedness of language, brain, and cognition. This approach aligns with a growing trend in scholarship that recognizes the value of integrating knowledge from diverse fields to gain a more comprehensive understanding of complex phenomena like bilingualism. By synthesizing research from various disciplines, Mahootian (2020) not only enhances the book's scholarly significance but also makes it a valuable resource for readers seeking a broader perspective on the multifaceted nature of bilingualism.

In Chapter 1 of her textbook on bilingualism, Mahootian (2020) offers a subtle understanding of the phenomenon, emphasizing that bilingualism extends beyond the mere usage of two languages to encompass capability and context. This rejection of a simplistic bilingual/monolingual binary lays the groundwork for her later exploration of the cognitive dimensions of bilingualism, a key argument throughout the book. Mahootian (2020) argues that numerous factors, including cultural, educational, and historical circumstances, shape an individual's journey toward becoming bilingual. Therefore, a comprehensive framework of bilingualism needs to account for varying fluency levels, different contexts of use, and the multifaceted influences driving bilingual behaviors. She highlights six core elements: age, manner of acquisition, sequence of acquisition, literacy skills, function, and fluency, all of which contribute to a more

delicate understanding of bilingualism. Ultimately, Mahootian (2020) highlights the need for a perspective that values bilingualism as an intricate phenomenon, moving beyond simple definitions to embrace the complexities of why, how, and when languages are used and learned.

Following the same chapter, Mahootian (2020) delves further into the complexity of language acquisition, challenging the traditional binary view of monolingual and bilingual followed by Edwards (2012a) and Hoffmann (1991) among others. Instead of a binary, she presents bilingualism as a varied spectrum influenced by a multitude of factors. For instance, the age of language acquisition, particularly the notion of a critical period during early childhood, plays a significant role, although its impact continues to be debated. Similarly, the learning environment and timeline significantly affect the speed and fluency of acquisition. Importantly, Mahootian (2020) distinguishes between language acquisition and literacy. While literacy is a significant educational feature, it is not a deciding factor in determining bilingualism itself. As Mahootian explains, literacy does not influence whether someone is bilingual, but rather it can shape the style or type of bilingualism. The functionality of each language in a bilingual individual's life is another highlighted aspect, reflecting both the status of each language within a society and the influence of context, such as setting, audience, and topic. Mahootian's (2020) analysis reveals the dynamic and multifaceted nature of bilingualism, shaped by a complex interplay of personal and social factors. Consequently, this comprehensive view promotes a more inclusive definition of bilingualism and enriches our comprehension of human linguistic abilities.

Chapter 2 investigates the societal impacts of bilingualism, examining its historical and linguistic dimensions. Mahootian (2020) underlines the ubiquity of multilingualism throughout history, from ancient eras to the present day. For instance, stone columns in Persepolis and reliefs on mountainsides in Kermanshah, Iran, dating back to 522–486 BC, feature inscriptions in Old Persian, Elamite, and Babylonian, all detailing the conquests of King Darius the Great. Similarly, the Rosetta Stone, from around 196 BC, bears inscriptions in three scripts: Egyptian hieroglyphs, Egyptian demotic script, and Greek, reflecting the languages used in different spheres of Ptolemaic Egypt (Mahootian, 2020). Within the same chapter, she challenges the misconception that monolingualism is the norm, highlighting the prevalence of plurilingual societies throughout history and today. However, she also acknowledges that not all citizens within multilingual societies are themselves multilingual. Mahootian probes the complexities of plurilingual societies, exploring how language shapes identity, unifies or divides communities, and can even lead to cultural endangerment, a theme she revisits throughout the book. She discusses two specific types of bilingualism, Stable +/- diglossic bilingualism and maintaining bilingualism, to illustrate how environmental factors, social domains, and the perceived value of each language influence both the prevalence and transmission of bilingualism across generations.

Mahootian (2020) further uncovers the profound impact of societal perceptions on bilingual individuals, particularly within immigrant contexts. Negative sentiments, often rooted in language differences, fuel prejudiced views and widespread misconceptions about the influence of bilingualism on the economy, safety, and intelligence. This societal outlook not only contributes to xenophobia but also potentially triggers language endangerment, particularly impacting indigenous languages with significant historical and cultural richness. However, Mahootian (2020) also emphasizes the vital role language plays in shaping individual and collective identities, ultimately leading to diverse forms of bilingualism. She advocates for a broader understanding of bilingualism that recognizes its historical continuity, global prevalence, and the often-unseen consequences of language contact. By elucidating the potential for linguistic diversity endangerment, she highlights the urgency of language preservation and the need to integrate a comprehensive understanding of bilingualism into modern linguistic studies.

In Chapter 3, Mahootian (2020) explores the phenomenon of code-switching, citing various studies (e.g., Auer & Dirim, 2003; Blommaert, 2005; Edwards, 2012b; Eversteijn, 2011; Mahootian, 2005; Scotton & Ury, 1977) to support her argument that code-switching is governed by social and grammatical rules. Auer and Dirim (2003), for instance, provide a foundational model that has been widely accepted in the field, but Blommaert (2005) offers a more detailed perspective, emphasizing the importance of context in shaping code-switching behaviors. While both sources are integral to understanding code-switching, Blommaert's focus on contextual dynamics adds depth to Mahootian's argument, suggesting that code-switching cannot be fully understood through grammatical rules alone. Mahootian (2020) explores the diverse functions of code-switching, highlighting its role in:

- **Signaling shifts in conversation topics or social dynamics:** For example, a speaker might switch to a different language to introduce a new topic or to signal a change in formality.
- **Enhancing social and political statements:** Code-switching can be used to emphasize a point, express solidarity with a particular group, or challenge existing power structures.
- **Revealing the speaker's identity and group affiliations:** Language choice can be a powerful marker of personal and social identity, reflecting a speaker's cultural background, ethnicity, or social class.

The same chapter highlights the dynamic interplay between language choice, code-switching, and the fluid concept of identity. The author argues that language is integral to shaping both personal and national identity, connecting individuals to their cultural heritage, signaling social standing, and influencing perceptions of power. She introduces the concept of "cultural code-switching," which encompasses not only language but

also shifts in behavior and communication style to navigate different cultural norms. For example, as argued by the author, many African American Vernacular English speakers feel obligated to switch to a “White” variety of English to gain acceptance, be taken seriously, and navigate racial dynamics. This forced codeswitching highlights the social inequalities linked to language, where one language variety is unfairly privileged over another. Mahootian (2020) acknowledges that multilingual communities often face prejudice and assumptions based on their language use, highlighting the need for greater understanding and sensitivity. She concludes by emphasizing that code-switching is a rich and complex phenomenon, deeply embedded within the social fabric of multilingual communities. As globalization brings diverse cultures into closer contact, recognizing and appreciating the nuances of code-switching becomes increasingly vital for fostering cross-cultural respect and effective communication.

Chapter 4 explores the intricacies of childhood bilingualism, meticulously addressing seven key areas to provide a comprehensive understanding of this complex topic. The author, begins by examining the various paths children take to becoming bilingual, exploring strategies like the “one person, one language” and the delicate balance between home and public languages, known as the “home language-public language method” approach. Maurice Grammont’s “one-person, one-language” approach, introduced in 1902, has evolved into the modern “one-parent, one-language” approach for raising bilingual children. This method encourages each parent to consistently use a different language with their child. While the terminology shifted to reflect its common use in families, the core principle remains: associating each language with a specific person to minimize confusion and support clear language development. The “home language-public language method,” or Minority Language at Home, promotes bilingualism by designating the minority language for home use and the majority language for public settings (Mennen, 2009). This approach, often favored by families, ensures consistent exposure to both languages. Using the minority language at home is particularly beneficial as it strengthens the weaker language (Grosjean, 2010; Hammer, 2013). While children may initially lag in the majority language upon entering school, studies show they catch up quickly with sufficient exposure. The chapter then shifts to the fascinating realm of bilingual cognition in infancy. Mahootian (2020) highlights research methodologies such as the high amplitude sucking procedure, visual fixation procedure, and habituation to illuminate how infants perceive and process two languages simultaneously. She tackles the question of language differentiation in bilingual children, evaluating competing theories like the unitary language hypothesis and the dual system hypothesis (Genesee, 1989; Vihman, 1985).

Addressing common concerns, Mahootian (2020) compares the developmental trajectories of bilingual and monolingual children. She explores whether bilingual upbringing significantly alters conventional language acquisition processes, considering factors like input quantity and developmental milestones. Importantly,

she presents evidence that bilingual children develop language skills on par with their monolingual peers, dispelling the myth of language delay (Paradis & Jia, 2017; Pearson et al., 1993). The chapter further investigates the cognitive implications of bilingualism, examining concepts like executive functions and metalinguistic awareness. The author explores whether navigating two languages from an early age confers cognitive advantages, such as enhanced attentional control or greater cognitive flexibility (Bialystok, 2007; Haft et al., 2019). Mahootian (2020) revisits the phenomenon of code-switching, this time through the lens of childhood bilingualism. She analyzes whether children's code-switching patterns differ from those of adults and whether they reflect a unitary or independent language system (Gaskins et al., 2019; Reyes, 2004). Finally, the chapter emphasizes the crucial role of language maintenance in a bilingual child's environment. The author stresses the importance of supporting the home language and highlights the contributions of both family and community in fostering bilingualism. Chapter 4 concludes by advocating for a research agenda that is both rigorous and unbiased, urging researchers to challenge unfounded fears about bilingualism and to address socio-political issues head-on. By presenting a nuanced and evidence-based perspective on childhood bilingualism, Mahootian (2020) encourages readers to embrace the richness and diversity of multilingualism.

Chapter five probes the cognitive implications of adult bilingualism, offering an exploration into how the dynamics of multiple languages impact individual language processing and the use of brain regions. The text distinguishes between early and late bilinguals' language processing and investigates the potential cognitive enhancements or costs bilingualism may impart. It also scrutinizes the mechanisms of language control in bilingual individuals and analyzes how these individuals adeptly blend codes to communicate effectively, encapsulating an all-encompassing understanding of bilingualism's cognitive aspects. The author's perspective is enhanced by a detailed historical overview of technological advancements in understanding the bilingual and monolingual brains. Before the 1990s, psycholinguists and neurolinguists mainly utilized timed observational experiments for their insights. However, the advent of technological developments over the past two decades, including non-invasive Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI), Positron Emission Tomography (PET) with radioactive tracers, and Event-related potentials (ERPs) measuring electrical stimuli responses, has expanded access to real-time brain activity information (Mulert et al., 2002; Mullins, 2018; Phan et al., 2002). In turn, this has significantly deepened our comprehension of language storage and processing in both monolingual and bilingual brains.

The author further illuminates various methodological challenges in bilingual research, including inconsistent participant pool characteristics and a simplified, binary representation of bilingualism, which is better depicted as a continuum. Small sample sizes, coupled with varying participant backgrounds, are critiqued due to the lack of reliable extrapolations, and the incorporation of cross-linguistic results

is identified as problematic due to variability inherent to different languages. The author correlates these factors to the ongoing diversification of research outcomes, yielding contradictory conclusions. Furthermore, Mahootian (2020) defines a range of psycholinguistic and neurolinguistic concepts such as executive functions, cognitive load, working memory, neural activation, semantic memory, and semantic networks. She explicates executive functions as cognitive processes which mediate several mental operations, cognitive load as mental energy expenditure during information processing, and working memory as a limited capacity system that retains short-term information. Neural activation refers to brain region activity in response to various stimuli, whereas semantic memory pertains to our lifelong accumulation of word and concept knowledge, and semantic networks denote the conceptual links interconnecting words and ideas.

Within the same chapter, Mahootian (2020) scrutinizes five key research areas in bilingual studies. The first question investigates whether bilingual languages are processed in different or overlapping brain regions. The author highlights the roles of fluency and age of acquisition in neural activation, suggesting more fluent or early bilinguals require less processing time for language tasks. However, the eventual verdict on the impact of bilingual language exposure on the brain's language processing necessitates further inquiry. Secondly, the author ponders the question: Can early exposure to two languages affect processing? Shreds of evidence linking structural brain changes and variations in grey matter amount with differences in language processing between monolinguals and bilinguals are discussed, pointing to bilingualism's potential role in modifying language processing regions and even nonverbal processing areas. Thirdly, the chapter queries if there is a cognitive advantage to bilingualism in adulthood. While monolingualism is conventionally seen as the norm, Mahootian (2020) posits that bilinguals or multilinguals globally outnumber monolinguals, and evidence suggests that bilingualism can lead to cognitive benefits, giving a tentative yes to the question. The discussions reflect a need for more robust scientific explorations into bilingualism's potential advantages and effects.

The other two areas of inquiry in this chapter are, first, the question of whether the languages of a bilingual individual are activated at all times. An array of reported studies infers some degree of continuous activation and interaction between a bilingual individual's languages, even in monolingual environments (Bartolotti & Marian, 2012; Schmid & Köpke, 2017). This is emphasized through the outcomes derived from priming tasks and lexical decision tasks. Secondly, the potential processing cost of switching between languages is considered. The literature is inconclusive; some research suggests switching involves executive functions, thereby increasing general executive processing time and demanding additional cognitive control (Garbin et al., 2010; Lehtonen et al., 2018). Despite the lack of certainty, it is also hypothesized that switching may enhance executive functions. The author accentuates that codeswitching is an intrinsic, systematic, and rule-governed part of bilingualism

exhibited as a dynamic behavior across bilingual speech communities. In reflecting on the author's approach in this chapter, there is an appreciated scientific impartiality. The author threads carefully in tracing the complexities of bilingual processes and the present understanding within academia, effectively portraying the map and terrain of bilingual studies. The author renders the landscapes of research and inquiry open-ended, which not only reflects the current state of research but also represents an invitation for future academic explorations of bilingualism.

Overall, Mahootian's (2020) work offers a significant contribution to the field of bilingualism by providing a comprehensive and accessible overview of key research and debates. The book's strength lies in its interdisciplinary approach, weaving together insights from psycholinguistics, neurolinguistics, and cognitive science to illuminate the complexities of bilingual language processing. By synthesizing research from diverse areas, the author clarifies complex concepts and highlights the dynamic interplay between language, brain, and cognition. This makes the book particularly valuable for students and researchers seeking a solid foundation in the field. Furthermore, the book goes beyond merely summarizing existing knowledge by actively engaging with current debates and controversies. For instance, Mahootian (2020) tackles the ongoing discussion surrounding the cognitive advantages of bilingualism, presenting a balanced perspective that acknowledges both the potential benefits and the methodological challenges inherent in this research area. This critical approach encourages readers to think deeply about the complexities of bilingualism and to engage with the nuances of the research findings.

Mahootian (2020) strategically structures her book to progressively guide the reader from broader societal and linguistic contexts of bilingualism towards the more intricate realms of childhood bilingualism and its cognitive implications. This approach is evident in the progression of chapters, beginning with definitions and societal implications, moving through language mixing and childhood bilingualism, and culminating in an in-depth exploration of bilingualism and the brain. Throughout the book, the author skillfully weaves together research findings, theoretical frameworks, and real-world examples to support her claims. She frequently cites key studies in psycholinguistics, neurolinguistics, and cognitive science, demonstrating a thorough understanding of the relevant literature. Moreover, her use of case studies and illustrative examples helps make complex concepts accessible to a wider audience, further strengthening her arguments and enhancing the overall clarity of the text. Upon reviewing the content and structure of Mahootian's (2020) book, it is evident that the text is well-crafted and achieves its objectives effectively. Given its comprehensive approach and the depth of analysis provided, the book does not necessitate further improvements at its current level. The detailed exploration and clear presentation of bilingualism make it a valuable resource for its intended audience.

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Authors

***Saieed Moslemi Nezhad Arani** is an Assistant Professor of TEFL at the Higher Education Complex of Bam, Iran. He holds a Ph.D. in Teaching English as a Foreign Language from Imam Khomeini International University in Qazvin, Iran. His educational background includes a Bachelor's degree in English Language Translation Studies from Payam-e-Noor University in Aran & Bidgol, followed by a Master's degree in TEFL from the University of Sistan and Baluchestan in Zahedan, Iran. He has made significant contributions to the field of TEFL through his published papers and active participation in conferences. His research interests primarily focus on language teaching, teaching methodology, computer-assisted language learning (CALL), mobile-assisted language learning (MALL), discourse analysis (semiotics), problem-based learning, affective filters, and the integration of AI with language teaching.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1295-0711>

Arzu Atasoy possesses an extensive academic background as an Associate Professor specialized in the field of Teaching Writing, based on her Ph.D. from Hatay Mustafa Kemal University, Türkiye. In addition, she has obtained a Bachelor's degree in Turkish Language Education from Erciyes University, followed by a Master's degree from Hatay Mustafa Kemal University. Dr. Atasoy's scholarly contributions include numerous publications in Writing Education studies, supplemented by her active participation in multiple conferences. Her areas of interest primarily encapsulate teaching and writing in the Turkish language.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7871-1713>