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Imported Bilingualism: Revising The Typology of Bilingualism

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Introduction

In this paper, I propose the introduction of a new concept: Imported Bilingualism, which also highlights the need to introduce Academic Monolingualism as a common consequence of Imported Bilingualism. These concepts are grounded in my previous research (Mehmedbegovic, 2009, 2011, 2017a, 2017b; Mehmedbegovic-Smith, 2022) and insights gained through consultancy work on bilingual education practices.

Imported Bilingualism extends the typology of bilingualism by focusing on bilingualism acquired through foreign language learning. It frames bilingualism as a resource, an asset, and a form of capital. Recognising bilingualism in this way highlights the inherent value of all languages and all forms of bilingualism. This perspective gains particular importance in contexts where affluent families invest in private bilingual education programme or paid foreign language instruction. I have been working with international schools in Dubai since 2021. I am a governor of a school in Dubai where 90 percent of students are from local families, who choose to pay for private education in English instead of local schools where the medium of instruction is Arabic. Such efforts suggest a recognition of linguistic capital as valuable and, hence of importable interest. At the same time, this new concept is a wake-up call for migrant parents and communities to view their home/heritage languages through the same lens—as an asset worth having, maintaining, and passing on to the next generations.

The second concept, Academic Monolingualism, arises from exploring the consequences of immigrant families choosing not to engage with bilingual education programmes, where available and accessible. It highlights a critical limitation of the “speaking the language at home is enough” approach commonly used by bilingual families to justify selecting English-only programmes. While everyday conversational fluency may be achieved by speaking a heritage language at home, fostering the academic language proficiency only happens through structured engagement with the suitable academic content, namely in full-time or complimentary schools.

The aim of this paper is to argue that positioning languages as a form of capital and a desirable import can help challenge and transform deficit models of bilingualism linked to migration and disadvantaged communities. In my study on attitudes to bilingualism in England and Wales

(Mehmedbegovic, 2011), I explored in depth deficit models of bilingualism. One of the statements I used for my participants to comment on came from a Bengali-speaking 14-year-old boy in a London school who stated: “Bengali has no value. Employers want French and Spanish.” This statement encapsulates how language hierarchies shape deficit models of bilingualism. Another example of deficit models of bilingualism is the marginalisation of Arabic in the education system evident in the Gulf states, as a consequence of prioritising English rather than bilingual models of teaching and learning (Mehmedbegovic-Smith, 2022).

Evolution of the New Concepts

A personal trigger

During a recent tutorial with a doctoral student working on her thesis proposal, the need for a new concept emerged. Her focus was on families who are not bilingual themselves but deliberately raise their children bilingually, for which she was using the term “non-native bilingual families.” However, I challenged this term due to its negative framing and association with deficiency, which is counterproductive in education. I challenged myself to offer a precise term suitable to define her focus.

In exploring relevant literature, I encountered Garcia’s (1984) distinction between “natural” and “learned” bilingualism. While useful in the U.S. context, where “natural” bilingualism is tied to immigrant groups and often devalued, and “learned” bilingualism is seen as enrichment, these concepts are problematic. For instance, immigrant parents often make significant efforts to help their children maintain and develop literacy in their home language, yet success is not guaranteed. A recent visit to UCLA, during my sabbatical in 2023, revealed that students from former Yugoslav immigrant families were learning their heritage languages *ab initio*, despite growing up in conditions which Garcia identifies as suitable for natural bilingualism. This shows that “natural bilingualism” often fails to develop, especially when children are immersed in the dominant language through education and social activities.

Moreover, “natural bilingualism” is age-sensitive. Young adults and working-age immigrants with well-developed home languages may successfully acquire a second language through formal or informal learning. However, older adults often struggle, even when motivated. Thus, the term oversimplifies the complexities of bilingual experiences, particularly in immigrant contexts.

“Learned bilingualism” also has its limitations. It implies bilingualism can be “learned” rather than achieved through the sustained use of two languages. While it describes language acquisition in formal settings, it does little to advance the understanding of bilingualism as a dynamic and hierarchical phenomenon.

Another concept, “intentional bilingualism,” as proposed by Hurajova (2022), offers a closer fit by focusing on bilingualism as a deliberate parental strategy. However, it lacks specificity, as it also applies to individuals choosing bilingualism later in life, such as heritage language learners in the United States.

To address these gaps, I propose the term “Imported Bilingualism” to define parental choice and agency in making it a family language policy to raise children bilingually, not out of necessity (e.g., migration) but as a proactive choice. This concept captures better the essence of the phenomenon where families view languages as a type of capital and a resource. By framing bilingualism as a form of capital, the term challenges low-value attitudes often associated with bilingualism arising from

migration or poverty. This shift in perspective can help redefine how bilingualism is understood and valued, particularly in underprivileged communities.

Relevant previous international research

In 2016, I was invited by the leadership of an international school in the United States to spend a week on their campus, gaining insights into their practice and advising the leadership team on the next steps regarding their English-Spanish bilingual programme. I was also tasked with providing professional development sessions for teachers and advisory sessions for parents and governors in regard to their English-Spanish bilingual programme. In agreement with the leadership team, opportunities were organised for me to engage with the students directly in focus discussion groups and to interview several governors and parents, as a way of consulting key stakeholders to inform my recommendations.

This private international school in a predominantly Spanish-speaking U.S. community was founded in the 1980s to celebrate linguistic and cultural diversity while fostering bilingualism. The school offers an English-Spanish bilingual programme from early years through to Grade 12, accessible to all regardless of prior Spanish exposure. Additionally, it supports other home languages like—Arabic, Dutch, Korean, and Portuguese—through a Heritage Language Program and online resources. In the consultations conducted, I identified a unique phenomenon: contrasting values attached to the same languages, English and Spanish, in the same school community.

Monolingual English-speaking parents enthusiastically enrolled their children in the bilingual programme, despite their own lack of Spanish proficiency. They employed creative strategies, like watching Spanish TV with subtitles or reading bilingual books, to integrate Spanish into their family dynamics, recognising bilingualism as an asset for cognitive, academic, and career benefits. These families viewed Spanish as an opportunity to "import" linguistic and cultural practices, in order to enhance their children's education and development.

Conversely, many Spanish-speaking immigrant parents opted for English-only education, fearing bilingual education might reinforce cultural Latino stereotypes or hinder English acquisition. They believed conversational Spanish at home was sufficient, prioritising English as the key to academic success and social mobility. This parental choice reflects what I term "Academic Monolingualism," where children, though conversationally bilingual, lack opportunities to achieve academic proficiency in their home language.

Academic Monolingualism I define as living bilingual/multilingual lives in terms of exposure, comprehension, and oracy, but due to only having opportunities to study in one language, which is usually the national language of the country they live in or in English if attending international schools, all subject-specific vocabulary and registers acquired through academic learning are only existent for such learners in one of their languages. They cannot easily transfer and use the knowledge they have in Maths, Science, Humanities, and other academic subjects because they have not been given the opportunity to develop the academic domain of their home language, as illustrated above. This process will then stop them from taking exams in their home language, acquiring qualifications, and later employments that require general biliteracy and academic biliteracy. Speaking a language at home can never be enough to take exams in that language. Therefore, the potential convertibility of the language capital into economic capital (after Bourdieu, 1991) is made redundant for learners who academically develop as monolinguals despite having two or more languages in their everyday lives.

This dichotomy highlights broader societal attitudes: monolingual parents embrace bilingualism as a mark of privilege and opportunity, while some bilingual families, influenced by sociocultural pressures, undervalue their home language in formal education. The absence of academic proficiency in Spanish deprives these children of the ability to gain credentials like the Seal of Biliteracy which recognises full proficiency in two languages and limits career prospects requiring bilingual skills.

These findings underscore the need for schools to advocate for the benefits of bilingualism among all stakeholders, addressing misconceptions and fostering policies that support academic development in multiple languages. Programmes like the school's Heritage Language offerings exemplify best practices, but broader societal shifts in how bilingualism is valued, beyond privilege or necessity, are essential to reverse trends of linguistic deficit framing.

Academic Monolingualism, as a concept that needs to be discussed alongside Imported Bilingualism, has surfaced while exploring the consequences of families opting out of bilingual programmes and in order to understand that "speaking a language at home" is not enough. As has been outlined previously, it is not enough to gain the Seal of Biliteracy, but it is also not enough in the long run, in terms of career opportunities and using bilingualism for academic and professional purposes. By opting out of bilingual programmes, where they exist, parents choose Academic Monolingualism for their children and consequently disadvantage them. This is best illustrated by a quote from a 12-year-old boy in an international school in Dubai:

When I go back to Egypt, I want to help my little brother with Maths, but I can only do Maths in English not in Arabic. Miss, could you ask our headteacher, if we could have one lesson a week of Maths in Arabic, so that I can help my little brother in the future? (Mehmedbegovic-Smith, 2022, p. 534)

This boy who is a confident user of everyday Arabic, has very clearly illustrated what it means to be living a bilingual life but suffering from Academic Monolingualism. Bilingual children and adults need opportunities to acquire academic proficiency and skills in both languages they use. The view that "speaking a language at home is enough" needs to be challenged by examples like this one. This quote speaks volume, since we can clearly see that a 12-year-old child fully understands the problem he is facing and has identified the only way it can be remedied—being numerate in English and Arabic and doing Maths in both of these languages can only happen by studying Maths in English and in Arabic. My ambition is to make that possible through my Healthy Linguistic Diet approach in all contexts I work in.

The importance of having the opportunities to use one's home language in education is also underpinned by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), Article 30, which states that every child has a right to use their own language. I would like to argue that in education that needs to be interpreted as: every child needs to be given opportunities to develop academic literacy in their home language too.

Redefining bilingualism: Developing new concepts to counter deficit models of bilingualism

The deficit model of bilingualism has long dominated the UK, perpetuating the view of bilingualism as a hindrance to academic success and inclusion, particularly for children from disadvantaged and immigrant backgrounds. This perception, entrenched in public discourse, is exemplified by David Blunkett's controversial comment in 2002 urging parents to speak only English at home to avoid "schizophrenia" in generational relationships (as cited in Mehmedbegovic, 2011). Such rhetoric not only devalues bilingualism but also associates it with negative and stigmatising connotations, linking

it to psychiatric and religious extremes. Despite efforts by English as an Additional Language (EAL) specialists and researchers, these perceptions persist.

Research with policymakers further confirms that languages spoken by underprivileged immigrant groups, such as Bengali or Sylheti, are often deemed irrelevant or insignificant to British culture unless linked to economic opportunities. For example, one Conservative MP, whom I interviewed, suggested that Bengali "has no value" unless it is tied to the economic growth of Bangladesh, whereas languages like Welsh and Gaelic receive greater political support as symbols of UK indigenous cultural identities (ibid). This dichotomy illustrates how linguistic value is shaped by economic and political priorities rather than a vision for supporting every child to develop their full potential.

The same dismissive attitudes are evident in statements like [Suella Braverman's 2023 speech]in which she described multiculturalism in Europe as failed and fostering "parallel lives." Such comments ignore structural barriers faced by immigrant communities, such as limited access to education or language learning opportunities. A poignant example comes from Hackney's Berger Primary School, where Turkish-speaking mothers and grandmothers, many of whom were illiterate, were given their first chance to learn to read and write in both Turkish and English. Their tears of gratitude reveal a different narrative: these women are not unwilling to integrate but are instead excluded by systemic failures (Mehmedbegovic & Coulthard, 2014).

The deficit-based framing of bilingualism has contributed to practical disadvantages for bilingual children in schools. For example, EAL students are frequently misclassified as having special educational needs and placed in low-ability groups, a problem highlighted in research and publications like Bilingual Pedagogy for UK Schools (Cable, 2009). Such practices further entrench the idea of bilingualism as a "problem," especially when associated with immigrant communities (Mehmedbegovic & Bak, 2017).

In contrast, bilingualism linked to affluence is valued. Languages like French, German, Spanish, and more recently, Mandarin, taught as high-status subjects in schools, are seen as assets. For instance, the elite Kensington Wade School in London offers bilingual English-Mandarin education, attracting parents without family ties to Mandarin who view the language as a strategic investment in their children's future. This form of bilingualism, driven by privilege and choice, contrasts sharply with the necessity-driven bilingualism of immigrant communities.

To address these disparities, I propose the term "Imported Bilingualism" to describe cases where families deliberately invest in bilingual education, recognising language as a form of capital. This concept highlights the value assigned to languages when linked to privilege and affluence while exposing the stark contrast with the deficit model applied to bilingualism of immigrant communities. Shifting perspectives to view all types of bilingualism as assets, regardless of socioeconomic context, is essential to challenging linguistic hierarchies and fostering social justice in education and wider society.

Conclusion

The reason why I consider it groundbreaking to use a concept that comes from economics—"Imported"—is to highlight the parallel with making business decisions to import certain goods. For example, when a business decision is made by a government or company to import something like avocado, to make an analogy with a healthy diet, it is because this tropical fruit is desired and valued as a superfood for our health and well-being. People of the UK and EU do not have to import avocado for their survival, but they make a decision to do so; they invest resources and efforts to

make avocado an ingredient in their diet because they are aware of its benefits, not found in eating only locally grown fruit. In that same way, some parents commit to importing a language of their choice into their family environment and making it an ingredient in their linguistic diet and family dynamic with the aim of enhancing the development of their children. Bilingualism, through this process, takes the features of desired goods by being carefully selected, imported, and utilised.

The main purpose of this stark analogy is to use it as a wake-up call for parents who make decisions to switch to speaking English at home when they move to the UK or other English-speaking countries or even switch to English when they still live in their country of origin, which happens in Indonesia and Dubai, as I observed during my professional involvement with parents in these countries. These decisions are always based on the best intention to provide conditions for children to acquire proficiency in English as the global language but at the expense of children using and developing their home language.

My intention is that by highlighting the outlined phenomenon as Imported Bilingualism, one can look to raise awareness among all stakeholders that the home languages of immigrant, ethnic minority, and indigenous communities, which are present in many homes but not utilised and valued, can deliver the same benefits as imported languages which require bigger investment for families who commit to it. Healthy Linguistic Diet (HLD) framework, which I have developed also based on my research, facilitates positioning language learning and bilingualism within the well-being agenda based on evidence that all types of bilingualism provide a cognitive advantage in comparison to monolingualism (Mehmedbegovic, 2011).

Implications for further research

The concept of "Imported Bilingualism" challenges traditional models of language acquisition by shifting the focus from passive exposure to active decision-making. In many existing frameworks, bilingualism is often seen as an outcome of migration, education, or societal necessity. However, by borrowing from economic and decision-making theories, "Imported Bilingualism" introduces a more intentional, strategic perspective on how languages are acquired and maintained within families and communities. This concept has the potential for:

1. Rethinking language acquisition models

Most language acquisition theories emphasise input, interaction, and exposure as primary drivers of bilingual development. While these factors remain crucial, "Imported Bilingualism" suggests that families do not passively receive linguistic input but rather make deliberate choices about which languages to introduce, prioritise, and sustain.

By applying economic frameworks, this concept encourages researchers to consider factors such as:

- Cost-benefit analysis: Families weigh the perceived advantages and disadvantages of maintaining a home language versus switching to a dominant societal language.
- Resource allocation: Just as economic decisions involve investing in goods, parents invest time, effort, and sometimes financial resources (e.g., enrolling in language classes, hiring tutors, or traveling) to sustain bilingualism.
- Market demand: Families may decide to "import" a language, via bilingual schooling for example, based on its perceived value in global markets or resist language shift based on cultural and identity-based considerations.

This approach aligns with behavioural economics and decision-making models, which recognise that choices are influenced by more than just external constraints—personal motivation, perceived future rewards, and societal narratives all play a role.

2. Opening interdisciplinary discussions on language maintenance

By incorporating economic and decision-making theories, "Imported Bilingualism" encourages interdisciplinary research that bridges linguistics, psychology, sociology, and economics. Some key questions that arise from this perspective include:

- How do parents conceptualise the "value" of different languages?
- What factors influence whether families maintain their home language, transition to a dominant language, or import a language of their choice?
- How do social, economic, and political forces shape families' linguistic choices over generations?

This perspective also shifts the focus from "language loss" to "language investment"—encouraging discussions about how to support families in actively cultivating bilingualism rather than merely documenting language decline in minority communities.

3. Empowering families and communities

Finally, by framing bilingualism as an active choice rather than a passive outcome, "Imported Bilingualism" has the potential to empower families and communities to take control of their linguistic futures. Instead of seeing language shift as an inevitable consequence of migration or globalisation, this framework provides a more agency-driven approach that:

- Encourages awareness of the long-term benefits of maintaining home languages.
- Validates the efforts of families who intentionally cultivate bilingualism.
- Highlights the role of policymakers and educators in supporting language diversity by recognising the economic benefits of multilingualism.

Final points

Imported Bilingualism exposes a paradox within education and academia—Academic Monolingualism. While families actively invest in multilingualism, educational institutions remain largely monolingual, privileging dominant languages like English in knowledge production and dissemination. This disconnect reinforces deficit models of bilingualism, particularly for minority and immigrant communities, and fails to recognize the benefits of Healthy Linguistic Diet—as an approach to language use that nurtures cognitive, cultural, and social development through diverse language input.

"Imported Bilingualism" redefines bilingual development as a strategic, investment-based process rather than an incidental byproduct of migration or education. By integrating economic and decision-making frameworks, this concept opens new interdisciplinary avenues for research and policy discussions, ultimately leading to more effective strategies for language maintenance, revitalisation, and most importantly replacement of Academic Monolingualism with Academic Multilingualism and epistemic diversity.

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