

AL ENCUENTRO CON

Multilingualism in Education and Science:

Between Normality and Strangeness



Laurent Gajo
University of Geneva



Multilingualism is not usually the norm in social and institutional organizations. Yet social and family life brings many people into daily contact with a variety of languages:

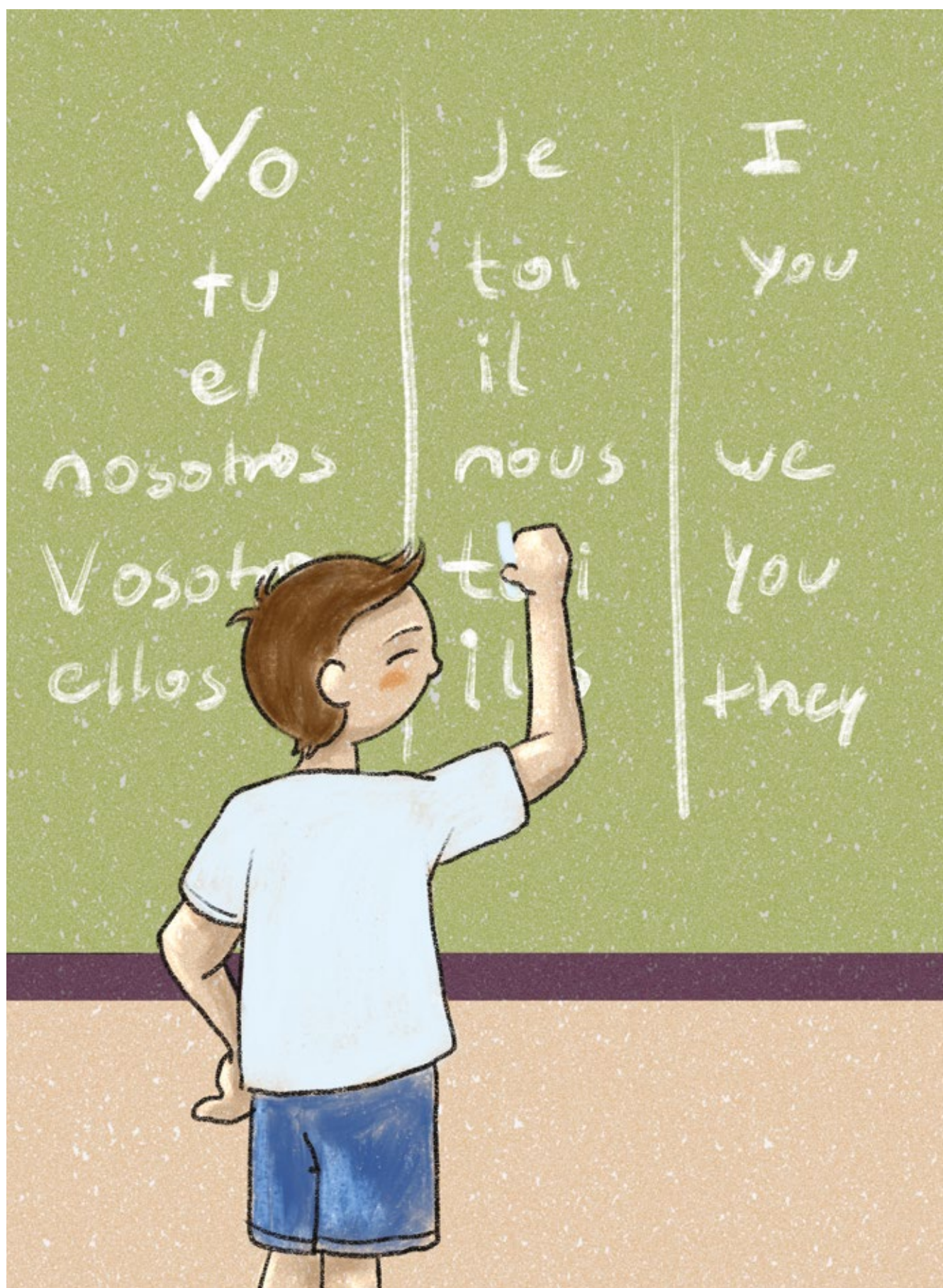
In the span of a few hours this Monday morning, I bought croissants in French from the baker's wife, who then served the next client in Swiss German; I accompanied my bilingual wife into town to meet her trilingual Italian-French-German friend; I stopped by my garage to have my car checked by a mechanic of Portuguese origin, who explained to me, in French, how the cooling system worked (Grosjean, 2010, p. XIII)

Of course, we are talking here about a multilingual country (Switzerland), which also attracts a large number of migrants, but diversity is everywhere and is visible and put into practice to a greater or lesser degree. There are few families who, over several generations, speak only one language, and few urban areas where only one is heard. *Social practices* are pervaded by diversity. Yet, *social representations* often remain anchored in the view that monolingualism is the norm:

the view of child bilingualism as a potential source of possible disturbances must be abandoned. Instead, monolingualism can be regarded as resulting from an impoverished environment where an opportunity to exhaust the potential of the language faculty is not fully developed (Meisel, 2004, p. 92).

This excerpt refers to a relatively burdensome legacy of dominant discourses on bilingualism, in which it was actually seen as a source of problems for children. Yet, humans are cognitively equipped to develop in more than one language. Monolingualism is, thus, a kind of accident, caused by an impoverished sociolinguistic environment. For at least two centuries, Western language policies tended to mask linguistic diversity. Initially, an instrument of power, monolingualism rapidly became the norm at home, school, and work.

Today, linguistic diversity is generating different discourses and generally positive attitudes. However, multilingualism is often considered in terms of the languages involved. For instance, when defending a university's multilingual policy in terms of the need for internationalization, the tendency is to promote widely used languages, especially English. In Europe, most bilingual teaching programmes, particularly in the form of CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning), focus on the use of English. Ultimately, an addition of some *specific monolingualisms*—if well chosen—is more useful than *general multilingualism*. Beyond the value attached to this or that language, there are practical arguments that reduce pressure for multilingualism, in that an internationalized or globalized space seems unable to function in the absence of a common language or languages:



The majority of Europeans (81%) agree that all the languages spoken within the EU should be treated equally. Even if around seven in ten (69%) think that Europeans should be able to speak a common language this view does not extend to believing that any one language should have priority over others (European Commission, 2012, p. 9).

European citizens seem aware of the equal dignity of all languages, but, at the same time, of the need to have one common language, which brings us to a central issue: the function of languages. Social representations and tools of language policy emphasize the *communication function*. Although this is certainly important, there are at least two others: the *identity function* — undoubtedly linked to the idea that each language should be treated equally— and the *cognitive function*. A person's multilingual repertoire may include languages that do not fulfil the same functions or use the same ones for the same reasons or purposes. With regard to the communication function, Grosjean (2015) refers to the complementarity principle, in the sense that languages in multilingual repertoires do not cover the same fields or activities. One language is spoken at work, another at home, the paper is read in a third one, and so on. Multilingualism allows different experiences, for the various languages do not just repeat each other's capabilities.

We can then shift towards the cognitive function, which takes this idea of *differentiation* even further. Languages, discourses, and cultures often relate us in a specific manner to objects in the world and, in particular, objects of knowledge, which, in turn, make translation both complex and instructive (Cassin, 2004). In physics, it is interesting to see, for example, that German says *Widerstandsmessgerät* (literally 'resistance-measuring apparatus') whereas English says *ohm-meter*: the former refers to the physical quantity, while the latter refers to the unit. This difference may be useful in scientific work and teaching, for someone with access to both languages will clearly understand that ohm is a unit of resistance. Within a single language,

the vehicle of differentiation may be the specialist language. For instance, understanding 'quadrilateral' immediately requires scholarly knowledge, whereas 'resistance' (see above) is based on everyday knowledge that may interfere with understanding:

Ce jargon gréco-latin ésotérique ferait obstacle aux efforts de partage du savoir vers une grande part de la population. J'émets pour ma part un jugement plus réservé, car s'il est vrai que certains termes scientifiques ne sont pas immédiatement transparents, ce n'est pas seulement un inconvénient : cela a également l'avantage qu'ils ne sont pas d'emblée mal compris ! (Lévy-Leblond, 2013, pp. 24-25).¹

There may, therefore, be an advantage in the *strangeness* of specialist language, which shifts us, 'resists' us, forces us to question our representations of the world. The same advantage may be sought in access to a foreign language, which cannot only open us up to other worlds but also make us question what we think we already know about our own. *Normality of multilingualism*, yes, but *strangeness in multilingualism*.

References

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1 Such esoteric Greek and Latin jargon supposedly make it more difficult to share knowledge with the general public. I would disagree, even though certain scientific terms are not immediately transparent, this is not necessarily a bad thing, for it ensures that they are not immediately misunderstood! [Author's translation].