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CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF MULTILINGUALISM: AN AFFORDANCES PERSPECTIVE

Abstract:

Multilingualism in post-postmodernity has proved to be the prevailing human condition. Various approaches have been applied to fully embrace the advantages of multilingualism and to come to terms with its challenges—among them, first of all, the widely spread competence concept. In addition to the competence approach, there are several others, such as linguistic ecology, complexity, and the philosophical approach. The aim of this article is twofold: 1) to discuss ways of conceptualizing multilingualism under the *new linguistic dispensation* (Aronin 2007; Aronin and Singleton 2008), and 2) to stress the role of affordances as a promising organizing concept for investigation of multilingualism.

Keywords:

affordances ♦ multilingualism ♦ new linguistic dispensation ♦ philosophy of multilingualism ♦ edge

The competence paradigm is one of the various conceptualizations of how language is used and acquired. In this article, I will situate the affordances perspective among other current conceptualizations of multilingualism. To this end, I will first describe the New Linguistic Dispensation, which accounts for salient global changes in the role of languages in society. Next, I will briefly discuss some theoretical approaches to multilingualism, including the competence approach, with special emphasis on one recently emergent line of research—the philosophy of multilingualism. The final section of the article is devoted to examining the concept of affordances and its significance in multilingualism research and multilingual practices.

For current purposes, ‘conceptualizations’ are comprised of concepts, perspectives, and lines of research that consider multilingualism from a specific theoretical perspective, thus opening up additional facts, phenomena, and processes, previously unnoticed, or given scant attention, but which provide opportunities for fresh, unanticipated insights. Among these, for instance, are the widely recognized competence approach, as well as ecology of language, and complexity theory. Dominant Language Constellations (DLC), as well as the affordances paradigm, are likewise conceptualizations of a certain kind. This latter conceptualization, the affordances paradigm, is the focus of discussion in this article. The need to rethink which approaches are most appropriate for multilingualism results from global changes, and in particular to changes in the relationship between languages and society as well as the increased salience of those changes. Therefore, I will first attempt to describe these contemporary linguistic-social arrangements.

The New Linguistic Dispensation

The New Linguistic Dispensation marks a qualitative and quantitative shift from earlier ways in which people used and referred to their languages. Multilingualism in its present form has become an inherent and crucial property of society. Even in places where multilingualism has existed for hundreds of years, traditional patterns of multilingualism now have a different societal basis. Today, multilingual practices deployed in a wide range of geographical and social contexts display new common patterns and interaction regularities throughout the world. Such a wide and deep impact amounts to what is termed a ‘world order’ by political scientists (Alker et al. 2001; Bull and Watson 1984).

Sociologists of language use the term “the new linguistic order” to refer to global linguistic changes (cf. Fishman 1998; Maurais 2003). Responding to the current social linguistic reality, the concept and term *New Linguistic Dispensation* was proposed (Aronin 2007; Aronin and Singleton 2008). The concept addresses all the dimensions of global, social and linguistic changes, such as the full spectrum of extant and emerging language varieties, evolving patterns of language use of communities and individuals, language ideologies and policies, and revolutions in language education. For example, World Englishes are found the world over: Cyprus English, Quebec English, Athabaskan English, and many more. The education systems of many countries are seeking to accommodate both English and regional languages in school curricula. Parents all over the world must decide whether, and how, they should maintain their family heritage language. Industry and science organizations need to respond to the role of English as a global language in their dealing with the world beyond them, but also

to accommodate local, sometimes also international, and sometimes ‘lesser-used’ languages. Multilingual cities and areas cope with dozens of minority languages, both of the indigenous populations and of immigrants. The challenges are similar, whether in European capitals or in remote villages—though, perhaps, on a different scale. Regional and minority languages strive for higher status—to be official languages—or just to have the right to be called a language, rather than a dialect.

The New Linguistic Dispensation is an emergent linguistic-social condition, characterized by unique properties and developments, expressed in global and local patterns. The vehicular component of the new linguistic dispensation is *current multilingualism*. Virtually every facet of human life depends on multilingual social arrangements and multilingual individuals, directly and indirectly (Aronin and Singleton 2012b; Aronin, Fishman, Singleton, and Ó Laoire 2013). Concomitantly, there are manifold bilingual spaces and monolingual niches, which are mostly local (see Figure 1). The interaction between the three kinds of arrangements: mono-, bi- and multi- (with the most prominent role resting with multilingualism) produces the reality of a new linguistic dispensation in each particular local context, and globally (Aronin 2015).

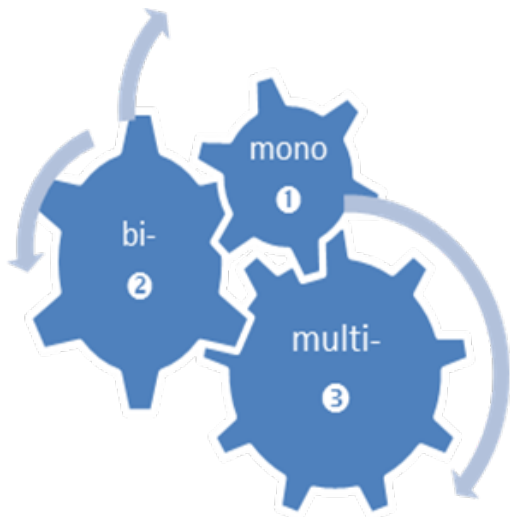


Figure 1. The New Linguistic Dispensation embraces multi-, bi- and monolingual arrangements. Multilingualism is the defining, inherent part of the new linguistic dispensation. It is both the vehicle of the new linguistic dispensation and plays a central role in it.

Current and Historical Multilingualism

Although multilingualism has always been a characteristic feature of human society and has existed down through the centuries, our current day-to-day existence and social behavior, accompanied by language, differ markedly from those of previous generations (Aronin 2007, 2015; Aronin and Singleton 2008, 2012b). Multilingualism has undergone significant changes, and *current multilingualism* differs from multilingualism of the past in a number of important ways. Consider the Volga region of Russia, about three centuries ago, where in addition to Russians, various Turkic tribes, such as Tatar, Kalmyk and Chuvash traditionally inhabited this territory and spoke their languages. In the 18th century, upon the invitation of Catherine the Great, the Germans founded colonies in the lower

Volga river area to farm the Russian lands. Yet one more multilingual community began in Russia, later known as the Volga Germans, as the Empress allowed the newcomers to maintain their own language and culture.

This German princess who became the Russian Empress is herself an example of a highly motivated, successful multilingual, with German as her mother tongue, French, the language she was educated in, and Russian, acquired and ardently learnt when she married the Tsar Peter III. The communal multilingualism of the time, and especially the individual active and successful multilingualism of this extraordinary monarch, had a certain impact on what is considered the golden age of Russia. But using multiple languages, though advantageous, was largely supplementary to the development of Russia in that period, and not vital for the continuation of previous societies.

The crucial difference lies in the *role* of multilingualism in society or, more precisely, in the degree to which multilingualism is and has been integral to the construction of a specific social reality. If multilingualism was largely supplementary to the development and maintenance of earlier societies, today in post-postmodernity, it is ineluctable, inherent and the constituent vehicle of current civilization. Elite and common multilingualism have always been a part of life in all epochs (see Trotter 2000, on multilingualism in Later Medieval Britain; Picard 2003) and flourished in various parts of the world (see e.g. Rindler-Schjerve and Vetter 2007, on linguistic diversity in Habsburg Austria; Braunmüller on receptive multilingualism in Northern Europe in the Middle Ages, 2007, and his overview on historical multilingualism and its different forms, forthcoming; and also the fascinating accounts of multilingualism in Léglu 2010, on Medieval French, Occitan, and Catalan narratives).

However, multilingualism was not a defining feature for the continuation and development of those societies. States and individuals would not have ceased to exist without the asset of multilingualism, although they would have clearly been different in some meaningful way. Conversely, in the New Linguistic Dispensation, the opposite is true; multilingualism is integral to vital societal processes; it is one of the cornerstones of contemporary social reality. Imagine suddenly eliminating English in bank dealings, media or industry, or even just banning tolerance to accents or varieties of English. Imagine an abrupt halt in the use of seaspeak or of aviation English in today's hyper-busy seas and airways. Consider how the status and teaching of local languages is denied in certain places, such as Spanish in the US, Basque in the Basque country universities, or freezing efforts to teach, and increase the use of Irish in Ireland. There would be a collapse of trade, industrial and financial systems; we

would feel limited without the instant information delivery to which we are accustomed. The political, societal implications of limiting the use of languages other than English is hard to imagine. On the one hand, no language has ever before given rise to such fervent controversy, or has been positioned so seriously and problematically in opposition to other languages. Commerce and banking, education and science, entertainment and private communication, army and religion—in all of these domains of activity multilingualism has a direct bearing, and it might not be an exaggeration to say that none of these activities is thinkable without multilingualism in some form. One can hardly think of an activity not touched by the phenomenon.

The difference between historical and current multilingualism is important in both theoretical and practical terms, since it is clear that we cannot manage today's multilingual reality as if we were living in earlier times. One has to have a certain level of mastery in English, or any of the international languages, such as French, German, Spanish or Italian, to be able to have an international career, use the internet, follow news and developments, or travel. The activities of banking, trade, tourism, and politics are inconceivable without English and other international languages, but are also carried out in local languages. To maintain one's livelihood in the contemporary world would be more problematic without at least two, but preferably three, languages in constant daily use.

The distinguishing features of current multilingualism are thus (1) its scope, (2) the existence and interplay of the two tendencies, and (3), the fact that today *sets of languages*, rather than single languages, tend to perform the essential functions of communication, cognition, and identity for individuals and the global community.

Distinctive properties and developments of current multilingualism

Current multilingualism is characterized by particular distinctive properties and developments (see Figure 2). These have been explored in detail in previous publications (Aronin 2015; Aronin and Hufeisen 2009a; Aronin and Singleton 2012b; Aronin et al. 2013), and I will therefore address them here only briefly. Four main properties of current multilingualism have been ascertained thus far: *suffusiveness*, *complexity*, *liminality* and *super-diversity*.

The property of *suffusiveness* refers to the scope of multilingualism and the fact that multilingualism permeates the contemporary world in a variety of ways. The spread of multilingual communities and individuals, multilingual spaces, and arenas of human activity where multilingual practices prevail testifies to this. Multilingualism suffuses the world in a

variety of forms, most obviously in oral and written communication, but also in material culture, the realm of physical objects, produced by humans and surrounding us throughout our lives, is, in fact, multilingual—even in monolingual environments. (Aronin 2014a). Material culture makes the property of *suffusiveness* most apparent and appreciably adds to the ubiquity of multilingualism in the contemporary world. *Suffusiveness* comes about not only through the numbers of multilinguals and the kilometers of territories where multiple languages are used, but, in a deeper sense, in the fact that virtually every facet of human existence is contingent on multilingual social organization and multilingual individuals.

Multilingual individuals and communities are multilingual in their own ways. To see how each is unique, one has to consider, for example, the multilingualism of India, with its thousands of languages, and multilingualism in Sweden, the countries of Africa, and in Eastern Europe. In these examples, we can see how the property of *suffusiveness* overlaps with the property of *super-diversity*, a concept introduced by Vertovec (2007). It accounts for the endless variety of relationships among languages, users, and contexts, and was defined as “a tremendous increase in the categories of migrants, not only in terms of nationality, ethnicity, language, and religion, but also in terms of motives, patterns and itineraries of migration, processes of insertion into the labour and housing markets of the host societies, and so on” (Blommaert and Rampton 2011: 2). Global diversity is not just a matter of differences. Those differences carry a special meaning for contemporary society with regard to the use of languages. Diversity is witnessed in individual stylistic differences, in sociolinguistic affiliations, in language education, life trajectories, and the resulting patterns of language use (e.g. Extra 2013). In addition, recent social and legal perspectives on diversity often include a moral dimension, bearing on attitudes towards race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and of course, languages.

The term for the property of *Liminality* derives from the Latin word for ‘threshold’—*limen*. The property of *Liminality* marks the now frequent occurrence of the many processes and phenomena connected with language becoming discernible, and considered important with the advent of the New Linguistic Dispensation. That is, the issues (both global and local) that were previously impossible to single out, or were considered negligible, or hardly noticed at all, are becoming apparent and significant under current sociolinguistic conditions. For example, Extra (2013: 148-149) notes “[T]here have always been speakers of immigrant languages in Europe, but these languages have only recently emerged as community languages spoken on a wide scale in urban Europe, due to intensified processes of migration and international minorization.” Further examples of liminal phenomena are the shifts in

norms from an openly monolingual ideal to bilingual and multilingual norms. A number of socially significant topics have moved center-stage during recent decades. These include tri- and multilingual early childhood development; a meaningful distinction between bilingualism and multilingualism, multilingual identity, and language revitalization. The property of liminality accounts for the importance of such phenomena emerging gradually.

Complexity is probably the most outstanding characteristic of current multilingualism. No wonder that the Dynamical Systems Theory perspective and Complexity Theory have gained currency in multilingualism research. For multilingualism, with its multitude of agents and levels, its extreme variability and its abundant types of interaction, complexity is the inherent key quality. Some of the findings and implications yielded through research on multilingualism, drawing on the complexity perspective, include the finding that multilingualism is considerably more complex than bilingualism, having myriad components influencing language use. Furthermore, the needs of multilinguals are different from those of bilinguals in their modes of learning and input. Trilingual education is not merely a matter of the mechanical addition of one or more languages to a curriculum; it also entails complexation.

These main properties are in constant interaction; I distinguish them only theoretically. All together, and individually, the *properties* lead to a number of *specific developments*. The developments are also interrelated and are in constant interaction with the four properties. The five *developments* identified so far differentiate the transformations of current multilingualism from earlier multilingualism. They are a) shift in norms, b) the emergence of new issues of importance, c) ambience of awareness d) extreme malleability, and e) expansion of affordances.

The most prominent shift in norms is in how the monolingual norm has gradually given way to the bilingual, and later, the multilingual norm (Cook 1992; Grosjean 1992; Aronin and Hufeisen 2009b). Another example would be monolingual native speakers of English losing their special status as the only legitimate owners of this language. Among the new focal issues (b) are the expression of emotions in multilingual language use, the fortunes of minority languages, the cross-linguistic influence between non-native languages, multilingual families, and issues arising in respect to multilingual identities.

The third development, the ambience of awareness, is highlighted in the appearance of novel lines of research connected with language use, the appearance of various official documents and decisions regarding languages and their use (e.g. European Commission 2009), the

interest in, and greater availability of, language learning in communities in which people live in close proximity to speakers of other languages. Awareness of languages, their hierarchies, their importance for social and private lives, and their acquisition in ethnic, minority settings, have become greater under the new linguistic dispensation. The development of extreme malleability reflects the very rapid, and often unpredictable, changes in the way people use and acquire their languages locally and globally, and how these processes are perceived and treated. Malleability can be traced in the changing status of languages, pidgins, or dialects, in language attitudes and language policies, in rising or declining interest in teaching a particular language, or in individual shifts in language proficiency. This latter development, ‘the expansion of affordances,’ will be the focus of the remainder of this article.

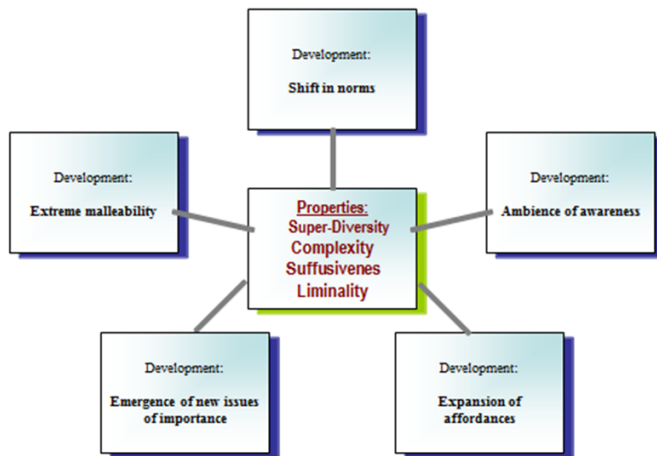


Figure 2. The properties and developmental directions of Current Multilingualism (Aronin 2015)

The specific features of Current Multilingualism, such as its overarching scope and complexity and its infinitely diverse occurrences, call for thorough theoretical examination. In the following section, I will discuss some of the traditional, recent and salient perspectives on multilingualism and then give a short introduction to the *philosophy of multilingualism*, a novel field of inquiry in multilingualism studies in which affordance is one of the important concepts. This will logically bring us to a discussion of the

merits and challenges of the affordance approach, which is the focus of this article.

The philosophy of multilingualism and affordance as its key concept

There are a number of approaches addressing multilingualism from different vantage points. The development of thought towards understanding phenomena of human reality does not proceed in a straight ascending line. It is not the case that one approach strictly follows another; rather, several approaches exist in parallel, with some more prominent than others in particular periods. The discourse on *competence* has been the most common approach for the past five decades. The work of Dell Hymes (1972) moved the inquiry away from *linguistic competence* (Chomsky 1965) to “communicative competence,” which, in its turn, diverged

into debates on the *pragmatic, intercultural* (Byram 2011), *symbolic* (Baker 2016; Hult 2014; Kramsch 2006) and *translingual* competences (cf. Müller 2013). Byram et al (2002: 30) explain that intercultural competence includes not only knowledge and understanding, but also “the ability to make the strange familiar, and the familiar strange (*savoir être*), to step outside their taken for granted perspectives, and to act on the basis of new perspectives (*savoir s'engager*).” According to Kramsch (2008: 400), “symbolic competence is the ability not only to approximate or appropriate for oneself someone else’s language, but to shape the very context in which the language is learned and used.” The *linguistic multicompetence* line of research is being actively pursued as well (see for example Cook 1992, 2013; Cook and Li Wei 2016). Today, research on competence is focused on looking deeper into perceived ability, the settings and goals of its development, and other related aspects.

Parallel to the established competence perspective, recent decades have seen the rise of another approach to dealing with multilingualism, with a completely different point of departure. The influential line of research on complexity / Dynamic Systems Theory (DST), was originally applied in Second Language Acquisition (see, e.g., De Bot et al. 2007; Larsen-Freeman and Cameron 2008), and then to multilingual acquisition and use (Herdina and Jessner 2002). According to this approach, multilingual systems are adaptive and dynamic; they are able to change depending on the perceived communicative needs of multilingual individuals. Language choices are deemed to be the driving force of language learning and use, psychologically and socially determined. Larsen-Freeman and Cameron (2008: 241) point out that, when derived from a DST-approach, “[...] the nature of explanation changes, cause and effect no longer operate in the usual way, and reductionism does not produce satisfying explanations that are respectful to the interconnectedness of the many nested levels and timescales that exist.”

Concomitantly with the two approaches above, there is the broader perspective of *linguistic ecology*, originated by Einar Haugen in his book *The Ecology of Language* (1972). Haugen initiated language ecology as “the study of interactions between any given language and its environment” (1972: 325). From this angle, the approach, also termed ‘ecolinguistics’ or ‘ecological linguistics,’ has spread to various specific areas of multilingualism studies. Metaphorical ecological models for multilingual policy and practice have been adopted in sociolinguistics. In these models, “languages are understood to (1) evolve, grow, change, live, and die in an eco-system along with other languages (*language evolution*); (2) interact with their sociopolitical, economic, and cultural environments (*language environment*); and (3) become endangered if there is inadequate environmental support for them vis-à-vis other

languages in the eco-system (*language endangerment*)” (Hornberger 2003: 136). Other researchers have chosen to examine linguistic change in the framework of the *ecology of language*. Mufwene scrutinizes the processes of linguistic change and contact in creoles, with the aim of explaining “why a particular change occurred where it did but not elsewhere, and why at that particular time but not at another” (Mufwene 2014: 13–14), in terms of language evolution analogous with phenomena in evolutionary biology. He sees languages more like viral species than organisms, and their ecologies as multifarious (Mufwene 2014). Croft (2013) prefers the framework of a generalized theory of evolutionary change. More recent research in the field delves into how linguistic ecology changes, and can be changed under globalization and in particular settings (see Kirkpatrick 2014). Claire Kramsch (2008) has shown how a number of these perspectives can be fruitfully combined. Her ecological approach to language learning and teaching is based on complexity theory. Kramsch uses an ecological analysis of data to argue that for language learners, symbolic competence is a necessary ability, to be instilled by foreign language educators.

With reference to new global and local changes, this approach is represented by Bastardas-Boada (2012), who appropriates the term *sustainability* from the field of ecology. By this, he underlines the importance of preserving linguistic diversity in a new linguistic ecosystem created by globalization. In his view, this new system involves the use of languages at different levels: the ethnic, the local/national, the state, the supra-state, and the global. While local languages are used mostly for interpersonal communications, languages such as Mandarin, Arabic, Swahili, are used on the supra-state level, while English is the global language. His proposal for appropriate dealing with the new linguistic ecosystem is to add English to the individual’s linguistic repertoires. I have discussed here several theoretical approaches to multilingualism. The next section will discuss a methodology that stands apart, as it ascends to the philosophical level of examination.

The philosophy of multilingualism

“Philosophy of multilingualism” was proposed by Aronin and Singleton (2013) as a distinct field of research. Philosophy’s general task is to subject human experience to reflective scrutiny. The philosophy of multilingualism focuses on a dominant, defining trait of the human condition, in which multiple languages are deployed and intensively shape the postmodern world. Researchers in the philosophy of multilingualism apply philosophical monitoring operations to multilingualism, the New Linguistic Dispensation. Notably, the philosophy of multilingualism has little in common with the philosophy of language; these are

different areas of philosophy. In the same way that linguistics as a field of research is different from multilingualism, the philosophy of language and the philosophy of multilingualism diverge.

Much of the work undertaken by philosophers of language is of minimal relevance to the philosophy of multilingualism, because the interest of philosophers of language is the nature of language and its relationship to meaning, concepts, and reality. In contrast, multilingualism, as an academic subject, embraces not only fields connected with language, but also necessarily involves psychology, sociology, ethnology, ethnography, globalization studies, urban studies, material culture studies, and many more. Therefore, a philosophy of multilingualism addresses not so much language itself, but primarily the acquisition and use of two or more languages, the environments of such use and acquisition, and the associated patterns and imperatives. Its distinctiveness and potential is intrinsically multidisciplinary.

One of the recent trends in the methodology of research on multilingualism is using conceptualizations. Conceptualizing, or applying theoretical thinking, entails interpretation of data from a number of viewpoints. This can include clarifying terms, developing new concepts and constructs, and applying novel perspectives upon already studied phenomena. In multilingualism, the term ‘conceptualization’ is suggested as an umbrella term embracing a number of methodologies that have evolved gradually, growing exponentially in recent years (Aronin and Hufeisen 2009a: 112-114; Aronin and Jessner 2014: 62). Thus, conceptualization is both an approach and a methodology. Conceptualizations differ in their points of departure and their scope. The broadest perspective on multilingualism is attained by ascending to the philosophical level. The enormous amount of data amassed in applied linguistics, sociolinguistics, and adjacent disciplines requires re-examining on a philosophical level. The philosophical method of research “avoids using the senses and relies on reflection” (Lacey 2001: 252).

Philosophy of multilingualism is based on a foundation of long-established philosophical concepts: dichotomy, inherent qualities, relativism, determinism—as well as cognitive notions that figure in the purview of philosophy, such as belief, understanding, reason, sensation, perception, intuition, etc. Within the framework of philosophical thinking, the concepts, new for traditional multilingualism studies, but essential in philosophical scrutiny, such as *borders* and *boundaries*, can be introduced as legitimate subjects of enquiry.

The study by Aronin and Politis (2015) is an attempt to engage in philosophical thinking about multilingualism, in which the philosophical concepts of borders and boundaries

converge with the metaphor of edge in order to arrive at a novel understanding of the nature of multilingualism. ‘Edge’ is the border, boundary, margin and verge, or outer limit of an object or area, as well as a line, or segment of a line, that is the intersection of two planes.

In biology, geography, and ecology, natural edges, such as borders between forest and grassland, or between ocean and continent, attract researchers’ attention, as they behave differently from centers. Coasts, for example, are some of the most active environments on Earth for animals, birds, and people. Winds, water and tides combine with other factors to produce highly complex tidal behavior. Edges make for bustling places. Major urban cities are often situated on those coastal areas, and their populations are growing faster than those inland. Both human-made borders, such as fences between estates, or frontiers between countries, and intangible borders, such as the equator, an imaginary line around the circumference of the Earth which divides the planet into the Northern Hemisphere and the Southern Hemisphere, are very important for people in many different ways. It is along edges that essential physical, biological, and social activity takes place. Edges, natural scientists believe, are where the action is, and where discoveries are to be made.

Ecologists have discovered that edges attract, harbor, or trigger intensive activity; that edges differ considerably from non-edges in appearance and structure, and that borders have considerable impact on the inner areas that they define. The ‘edge effect’ entails a) a much higher diversity of species than in ‘inner’ areas and b) an intensity of biological and other processes. In nature, the so called “transitional zones” between two areas are pieces of territory that separate areas, communities, and habitats; they have ‘breadth’ and ‘width’ and are known to possess specific features.

These findings, and also traditional philosophical concerns about borders and boundaries, lead us to believe that considering edges, or boundaries of multilingualism, and multilingualism as an edge, has philosophical significance. In fact, much thinking on multilingualism consists of considering and examining boundaries. Multilingualism studies describe recognizing and experiencing boundaries, fixing them, crossing them, and breaking them. Take, for example, the discussions on the term ‘bilingual.’ The borders denoting the point at which a monolingual becomes a bilingual, the border set to pinpoint an exact moment, or level of skill, with regard to proficiency, fluency, frequency of using L2, is arbitrary and extremely wide-ranging. In the same way, the most basic question—what is a language?—is crucially bound up with establishing and locating boundaries. Further, the concept of interlanguage, associated with Larry Selinker (1972), or, as termed in the earlier version of the notion put forward by

Stephen Pit Corder in 1967, ‘transitional competence,’ is a transitional zone, an edge between the two different entities of the first (mother tongue), and the second (target) language. It displays edge effects in being different from the neighboring entities, and having its own quality; it is systematic in its own way.

Conceiving multilingualism as an edge explains why multilingualism is currently at the center of life and civilization. Accepting the ubiquity and ‘normalcy’ of edges in multilingual complex reality encourages us to admit the reality of transitional entities. Those are not anomalous phenomena, but are characteristic of the current sociolinguistic dispensation. Edges, borders, and boundaries in multilingualism are to be investigated in the first instance, as they contain and reflect the most important events and developments.

In other studies, the concept of spacetime (Aronin 2014b; Aronin and Jessner 2016) is put forward to accommodate the multilayered structure of communication in multilingual settings. This concept, used in philosophy, physics, and of late in sociology, treats the three spatial dimensions (length, width, height), and one temporal dimension (time) as a single abstract universe (Castells 1997; Cilliers 2010). A spacetime of multilingualism is a multidimensional cross-section of reality in reference to a speaker(s), the languages involved, and the environment, in which time is its essential dimension. The interaction between the many elements of each spacetime makes it unique, along with its unique affordances; accordingly, the understanding of multilingualism becomes more realistic and more attuned to the diversity and unpredictability of each particular sociolinguistic situation.

The concept of affordances is also a part of the philosophical scientific lexicon. The importance of the affordances perspective to multilingualism is underscored by the prominent role of affordances under the New Linguistic Dispensation. ‘Expansion of affordances,’ brought about by globalization processes, is one of the five specific developments in current multilingualism (see Figure 2 above). The next section is devoted to the elaboration of affordances in general, and specifically in multilingualism research.

The Affordances Perspective in Multilingualism

The term ‘affordance’ was coined in the area of biopsychology by James Gibson, to denote what the environment “*offers* the animal, what it *provides* or *furnishes*, either for good or ill” (Gibson 1979/1986: 127). For example, for “terrestrial animals like us” (Gibson 1979/1986: 130), horizontal, flat, extended and rigid terrestrial surfaces, such as ground or floor, afford support. Conversely, a non-rigid surface, such as a stream or lake, does not afford support for standing, walking or running. Cliffs, trees, and stones are climb-on-able, or fall-off-able, or get-underneath-able, or bump-into-able. According to Gibson, human-made objects, as distinguished from natural ones, are still part of the same environment, of one world that we live in. A table affords writing on, or serving food on, conversing around, sitting on, standing on for any purpose, such as to whitewash the ceiling, or to change the electric bulb. Doors afford entering and leaving, or marking the borders; a needle affords piercing; rope affords weaving.

Gibson asserts that affordance refers to both the environment and the animal. Complementarity of animal and environment is the key idea that made the concept so compelling. Mutuality of the two, seen as parts of one system, allows for successful functioning and survival of an animal. Other significant points in Gibson’s theory are that affordances are a) relative to the animal, b) real, and exist independently of our knowledge about them, c) to be realized, an affordance needs to be perceived. Particularly with reference to perception, Gibson’s idea of affordances became influential because it provided an alternative to a number of traditional theories in cognitive psychology and philosophy. The original theory of affordances did not, and could not (as no theory can) answer all the questions on perception, but it inspired research across a great many fields of knowledge, which in turn, broadened the purview and raised new questions.

The perspective was successfully continued by Gibson’s wife, Eleanor, who extended the approach in the theory of perceptual learning in infants and toddlers (Gibson and Pick 2000). Segalowitz (2001: 15) seconded the importance of affordances for learning “because it is only by being able to perceive affordances that an organism is able to navigate its way around the environment successfully.” He referred to affordances of human language, which he saw “like any other physical environment, as possessing affordances” (2001: 15). The affordances concept proved useful in fields as distant from one another as psychotherapy (Alpher 1991) and aviation and technology (Gross et al. 2005; Hutchby 2003; Warren and Owen 1982).

Often scholars start their research with reference to the contribution of Gibson, and then adapt it to the needs of a particular area of knowledge. The best-known adjustment of Gibson's original idea of affordance is that by Norman (1988). Norman took the perception of affordances by a user (an animal, in Gibson's terminology) as a point of departure, and introduced the theory to the field of industrial design. The goal of the subsequent numerous studies, stimulated by Norman's *The Psychology of Everyday Things* (1998), and his other writings, is to find the ways of presenting affordances so that they are unequivocally perceived by the users. Door handles and knobs for turning, elevator buttons for pushing, are the most frequent examples of affordances in design research. This differs from Gibson's original idea, in which an affordance is first of all a *relationship* between an actor and environment, which may or may not be discovered.

Gibson's pioneering work on perception allowed for extending it into the perception of the social world, and into affordances emerging in human communities. Although Gibson did not put an emphasis on social and cultural affordances, he devoted a section to discussing how other persons provide affordances in the human environment; he also deliberated on paintings, drawings, and movies, thus acknowledging the possibility of direct perception of meaning and value. Good (2007: 270–271) goes further, noting that “In one sense, all human affordances may be deemed to be social insofar as the meaningful objects which we perceive are the products of a socially and culturally co-constructed world.” With humans, affordances often have a cultural and societal dimension (Gaver 1991; McGrenere and Ho 2000; Letusche and Lissak 2009). Such a view, going beyond the classical view of affordances and taking into consideration social-institutional and mental realms, in addition to the physical, is sometimes called the ‘extended theory of affordances’ (see e.g. Nye and Silverman 2012). Researchers who embrace the extended view of affordances acknowledge the intentionality of human actions in culturally and historically modified environments, as well as social and institutional constraints. Costall, who has been exploring affordances for many years, distinguishes between “affordances in general” and the “canonical affordances” (Costall 2012: 85), where the latter relate to shared social practices. Those, such as a chair—which according to social conventions, affords sitting on—are in some sense objective. Costall (2015) notes that affordances emerging in society are countless; some are readily seen in particular contexts, while others are hidden.

Affordances leading to a certain goal operate in concert. Scholars realise that even basic physical affordances are multidimensional. The popular example of the stairstep affordance demonstrates its complex composition; alternatively we may think that an action of stepping

on consists of a set of simpler affordances. Through empirical testing, Warren (1984) found that the height of a stair seen as climbable is strongly associated with an individual's leg length. But step-body-scaling ratio alone is insufficient to realize this affordance. A step affords stepping on, if a number of other conditions are fitting, including that its surface is not slippery, not tacky or brittle, that the step is stable etc. (Heft 2003: 157-159). This is still not enough, however, for comprehensively defining the step affordance. For humans, this physical affordance often involves social and cultural considerations. Socio-cultural meanings dictate the individual's choice either to take advantage of these physical affordances, or not. Consider the picture of the steps leading to the rostrum of the Lenin Mausoleum, where the Soviet rulers stood during parades (Picture 1 below). Social and political conventions held that they be reserved for the convenience of the saluting Communist leaders at parades in the Red Square, Moscow (as they are now for contemporary leaders). For other people, those particular steps are 'unsteppable.'



Image 1: Leaders of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union stand together on the rostrum at Lenin's Mausoleum in Moscow in April 1968.

We can see from this long example that “sets” of affordances must be in place in order for a desired goal to be achieved. For an endangered language to survive, a sufficient number of living speakers is required. They must know the language well enough to be able to pass this language on; material, organizational and societal affordances such as schools, books, and various activities are also necessary. Affordances for

multilingualism are multidimensional; they exist on a variety of scales, and fields of reference, and are extremely varied and changeable, like the contemporary world.

Affordances are complex and emergent. The correspondence between affordances and the dynamic systems perspective was applied in 1981 by Clair Michaels and Claudia Carello, who championed a theory of direct perception in psychology. Comparing the indirect perception theory and Gibson's ecological approach of direct perception, the authors capitalized on complexity / Dynamic Systems Theory (DST) principles. Among these, timespace is a continuity, rather than separate instances; such the dynamic and fluid nature of

perception. In this approach, an event is considered to be the significant unit of perception, as opposed to isolated objects in the indirect perception approach. In line with complexity theory, Michaels and Carello explain that “a whole event is perceived not by adding parts, but by detecting the continuity of those ‘parts’” (Michaels and Carello 1981: 10).

Letiche and Lissak (2009) undertook a philosophical excursion into the interrelation of affordances and complexity, articulating it as follows: “Emergent possibilities afford; complexity affords” (Letiche and Lissak 2009: 61). These statements imply the magnitude of the affordances that are ceaselessly emerging everywhere in the world, in all aspects of our life. An infinite number of affordances for language change, use, and acquisition, different from those engendered by previous human conditions, have appeared under Current Multilingualism.

Theorizing affordances

Affordances can be categorized according to multiple criteria. The categories and kinds of affordances relevant for multilingualism are summarized in the table below.

Table 1
Criteria and categories of affordances pertinent to multilingualism

Criteria	Categories/ kinds	Source
1) Subject of affordances; to what do they relate?	<i>Language affordances</i> as opposed to affordances applied to any other feature of human life, e.g. reproduction, sustenance or economics <i>Language affordances in a multilingual world</i> <i>Affordances for teaching in an international classroom</i>	Segalowitz 2001; Aronin and Singleton 2010; See, e.g., Gaisch 2014.
(2) Categories of the social or individual (in some studies the organizational is singled out as a category for affordances)	<i>Social and individual</i> <i>(social and organizational affordances)</i>	See e.g. Good 2007; Schmidt 2007
(3) Trigger	<i>Goal and happening</i>	Scarantino 2003
(4) Probability	<i>Sure-fire and probability</i>	Scarantino 2003
(5) Manifestation	<i>Tangible vs. intangible / ideational</i>	Aronin 2014a
(6) Dependence on social norms	<i>Canonical vs. affordances in general</i>	Costall 2012, 2015
(7) Origin of furnishing	Found in nature or provided by people	Gibson 1979/1986
(8) Detectability / clarity of appearance	<i>Perceived affordances</i> (Norman). Obvious or in need of additional actions / thought for effectuation	Norman 1988, 1998; Kaptelinin 2014
(9) Result on particular	“for good or for ill” Gibson 1979/1986: 127; also variously	Gibson

activity	called constraints, defordances	1979/1986; also see, e.g., Hammond 2010, Henry 2016
(10) Origination of recognition of affordances as such	<i>Traditionally recognized as affordances vs. re-conceptualization of affordances</i> , that is, affordances uncovered as a result of reconceptualization	Current article

The list of possible categorizations is not exhaustive. Below, I shall comment further on categorization items, which are not yet addressed in the previous sections of this article.

1) If *language affordances* in general (Segalovitch 2001) refer to language as a human possession, *societal language affordances* are the affordances through whose realization communication, using a language or languages, and the acquisition of a language or languages, is possible in a multilingual society (Aronin and Singleton 2010). Under the New Linguistic Dispensation, this definition refers to language affordances in mono-, bi-, and multilingual communities.

By way of example, for the renowned ballet star Rudolf Nureyev (1938-1993), of Tatar heritage born in Russia, the societal affordances of the Soviet Union made three languages available to him from early on. Along with Russian, the minority languages of the Turkic group Tatar and Bashkir, were used in Ufa, the capital of Bashkortostan in the Volga-Ural Region, to where the family had been evacuated in 1941. The affordance for French as a foreign language was open to him as a student when, at the age of 17, he was accepted to the Leningrad Choreographic School. After Nureyev's famous 'Grand Leap to the West,' he found himself in a new environment, with plentiful affordances for English.

2) The societal language affordances are always time-specific and include a wide array of dimensions, from the biological-physiological, such as the human language apparatus; the linguistic, such as the particular features of languages used in a community; and affordances provided by political, historical, religious, and ethnic situations. Societal affordances unfold on a number of levels, from global, national, to area- or district-based, to the very local such as school, class, and family. Martin's (2003) microethnographic study, which examines a science lesson in a rural primary school in Brunei, provides information on the language affordances that the educational system of the country, and of the teacher and pupils, bring into the classroom. The lesson on the topic 'food' for the fourth graders, members of the three distinct minority groups—Penan, Dusun and Iban—is carried out in Malay, the official

language of the country, and English, the language in which the textbook is written. The author shows how, in these particular settings a number of linguistic affordances are manipulated in order to provide “a clear statement about what goes linguistically, that is, what linguistic resources are being used to accomplish the lesson” (2003: 31). The juxtaposition of Malay and English in the introductory phase, the way the teacher uses language, that is, employing affordances for the two languages used in educational system, and the exclusion of Penan, Dusun and Iban except in break time (ignoring affordances for these three lesser-used minority languages), indicate “the attempts to face the challenge of an educational system, which, at this level, gives pre-eminence to English” (2003: 31-32).

Another, more recent example, this time distinguishing between *societal* and *individual language affordances*, is on the one hand obvious but, on the other, quite tricky. Individual language affordances embrace personal, biological attributes such age and health, current linguistic skills, aptitudes, and cognitive and emotional personality traits, current motivations, as well as family surroundings. Social language affordances ‘open the door’ to individual linguistic affordances, because the former are essential for recognizing and effectuating individual affordances (Aronin and Singleton 2010). The case of the Ukrainian ‘dog-girl’ Oxana demonstrates how individual and societal affordances can be effectuated or missed. Born in 1983, Oxana had been abandoned by her parents at the age of two. Societal language affordances became unavailable for her, as she spent about six years with dogs in a shed behind her house. At the age of eight, she was belatedly discovered by social workers. They and other specialists taking care of the feral child reported that Oxana had only minimal elements of human language. Instead, she was growling and barking like a dog. Once the relevant social affordances, including language social affordances, were provided for her, she was able to realize her individual language affordances. As of 2010, at the age of 26, she appeared on a Ukrainian talk show. Not only did she not display the behaviour and skills of a dog, seen when she was discovered in the dog shed, she freely and smoothly switched between two languages, Russian and Ukrainian, as is a norm for that show and in wider circles of society. Despite the fact that Oxana still needs rehabilitation and care, her case clearly demonstrates how important social language affordances are and the intricate interplay between individual and social language affordances. Numerous examples across the world can be found to illustrate the general priority of social language affordances over individual language affordances. If a minority language is considered valuable in a community, then an individual would find social and institutional provisions for its learning and use. Schools, classes or courses carried out in a particular language, or teaching a number of languages as a

subject, theatres, and culture groups, newspapers, and museums, would normally be in existence, and would assist in promoting and maintaining the language in question.

Social language affordances are not equally accessible for all people in a society. Social divisions have always played a role in distribution of affordances. In early 19th-century Russia, affordances for speaking French were in-built in the way of life, and the language was naturally grasped by children in noble families from birth. For peasants, social affordances were available, mostly those for communication in Russian. Most of the peasantry were illiterate, and only a few children read and wrote in their mother tongue, not to mention foreign languages. An exception, illustrating the dependence of individual language affordances on societal ones, is the story of Praskovia Ivanovna Kovalyova-Zhemchugova (1768-1803), one of the best opera singers in 18th-century Russia, and a serf shining on the stage of the Kuskovo serf theatre owned by Count Pyotr Sheremetev. A peculiar set of political, economic, and cultural affordances of that time, including the affordances existing in Russia for the French language, the European lingua franca of that time, led some rich aristocrats to organize extended education for their serf actors. By the age of 17, in addition to her harp and clavichord skills, Praskovia could fluently read and write French and Italian.

In today's sociology of language, scholars concern themselves with a range of tasks that should be undertaken in communities with regard to affordances. The contributors to a volume dedicated to languages under the New Linguistic Dispensation (Singleton et al 2013) do not explicitly use the word 'affordances,' but in fact, this is what they are dealing with in their contributions. In particular, the scholars in the volume deal with *identifying* affordances for cross-linguistic interaction in the social milieu of Berlin, such as described by Dittmar and Steckbauer; *providing* affordances for the evolution of new language varieties, such as the Casablanca variety in Morocco, as described by Moha Ennaji. Georgiou argues for the *creation and enrichment* of affordances for the use of immigrant languages in health care and social care contexts in Ireland. In one of his last publications, Fishman, for his part, appeals for attention *to effectuating and cherishing affordances* for Yiddish, an endangered language (2013). Garcia describes a wide range of affordances conducive to bilingual acquisition that are often neglected. On the other hand, Heugh discusses the wisdom of *selecting and effectuating* some language affordances and not others in South Africa.

3, 4) Thinking of affordances as *goal* and *happening* affordances (item 3 in Table 1) was proposed by Scarantino (2003). This class of affordances is based on the distinction between 'doings,' events triggered by the selection of a goal, and 'happenings,' which are not so

triggered, or “not goal-achieving under some description” (Scarantino 2003: 960). “What makes an organism-involving event a doing rather than a ‘happening’ is how the manifestation is related to the triggering circumstances,” explains Scarantino (2003: 958). The above-mentioned social affordances for Russian, Bashkir and Tatar were happening affordances for Rudolf Nureyev, while his English acquisition made use of both happening and goal affordances. Further differentiation between *sure-fire* and *probability* affordances (item 4 in Table 1), is logically connected with the previous item. “Affordances such that the manifestation follows the triggering circumstances with certainty” (Scarantino 2003: 259) are dubbed sure-fire, while “affordances such that the manifestation follows the triggering circumstances with some positive probability p less than 1” (939-960) are *probability* affordances. Including Spanish and Catalan as languages of instruction at school, the Valencian community presents surefire affordances for these languages, while a casual meeting with a Swedish native speaker is a probability affordance for someone to begin speaking this language.

These two sets of categorizations have explanatory power. For example, happening and surefire affordances seem to be stronger predictors of success in language learning, as suggested by Aronin and Singleton (2012a), who attribute different outcomes in language acquisition to different kinds of affordances. A recent example of societal-technological affordances for multiple languages comes from Nightingale (2016), who studied the effect of new media contact on language attitudes in multilingual adolescents. He found that Web 2.0 search engines, social networks, internet forums, video games, online multiplayer games, and instant messaging provide affordances for engaging in multilingual practices, a range of unique language learning affordances, and resources for communication. In particular, text-making practices and technological affordances enhance social language competence, a high degree of meta-linguistic competence, and new literacy practices.

The explanatory power of the affordances concept allows for insights into multilingual phenomena that were previously elusive for research, and also offers an opportunity for enlarging on familiar findings. For example, the classic sociolinguistic concept of domain (Fishman 1965), which is less clearly apparent in the changed realities of the 21st century, can be reinforced if reframed in terms of affordances. From this perspective, domain is a meeting point of affordances, which are conducive to encouraging and facilitating the use of a particular language or languages. Thus, in addition to Fishman’s classical definition, domain may be defined as “a space-time where and when the most powerful ‘collection’ of

affordances favoring the choice of a particular language or languages is furnished” (Aronin and Singleton 2010: 122).

5) The criterion of the *manifestation of affordances* (item 5 in table 1) distinguishes a variety of forms that affordances can take. Cognitive, evaluative, moral, and intentional characteristics of a person supply the most crucial affordances for acquiring and using languages. Linguistic affordances may incorporate feelings and emotions, assumptions and common knowledge. Those are largely unnoticeable at first. Legal provisions enabling the use of a language are normally found in a written form; teaching skills and the degree of a language teacher’s professionalism are perceived through events and activities. Social conventions, familial preferences regarding languages, and other affordances emerging in society are often inconspicuous, but they are real. Affordances may be a function of time. Societal processes, which enhance positive attitude to particular languages, events that afford language use, may take longer or shorter periods of time.

One of the most fascinating forms of affordances for using and acquiring languages is the material culture of multilingualism (Aronin and Ó Laoire 2013; Aronin and Singleton 2012a; Aronin 2012, 2014a; Aronin, in press). These kinds of affordances manifest themselves in the tangible form of physical objects such as buildings, pieces of art, utensils, souvenirs, books, food or clothing. In a multilingual society, material culture is a specific blend of materialities, originating from many cultures. As material culture reflects traditions, and “often tacit concepts of value and utility that have been developed over time” (Marshall 1981: 17), it provides acquaintance with yet another language and culture, that is, ensures affordances granting linguistic and cultural input. Being solid, and having size, weight, form and sometimes smell, artefacts afford ‘anchoring’ remembrance and motivation. Such is, for example, the so-called Solomon Ring (see picture 2), a ring that has the Hebrew phrase *zeh ya'avor* carved on its outside, with *Gam zeh ya'avor* inside and on the accompanying legend.



Image 2: Solomon Ring

According to the legend, King Solomon once desired that a wise man give him advice. The king disclosed that he could become very angry or sad easily, and it bothered him. He asked the wise man if he could help him. The wise man gave the king a ring and told him to look at the ring every time he was too angry or sad. On the ring, there was an inscription “This shall pass.” So the king did as instructed and the ring helped him. The legend says that, once, looking at the ring, Solomon did not calm down, but on the

contrary, became even more angry. He took the ring off his finger and began to throw it into the lake, but suddenly he saw that there were letters inside the ring. Inside there was one more inscription, “This too shall pass.” As the story goes, it was upon seeing these three words that King Solomon realized that all his wisdom, wealth and power were but fleeting things.

The ring, which is a popular tourist item in Jerusalem, can be produced and purchased in a number of languages. Inscribed in Hebrew, it invokes language, culture and beliefs, stirs emotions and gives hope. It is a tangible affordance for the Hebrew language. Material culture is known to have the feature of affective understanding. Many objects generate emotional and cognitive stimuli. An example is the golden-framed picture, with the Lord’s Prayer written in



Image 3: The Lord’s Prayer

Armenian depicted in picture 3, as described in the study by Kassis (2013).

It provides emotional and cognitive affordances for Armenian, which is a heritage language for this particular family in a village in the upper Galilee, Israel. The dwellers of the village, Druze, Muslims and Christians, share Arabic as a mother tongue. Picture 4, a Pittsburghese shirt, is an illustration to Barbara Johnstone’s 2009 paper in which she suggests that Pittsburgher shirts contribute to dialect enregisterment.

One further criterion for categorizing affordance is the impact of their effectuating on a particular activity (item 9 in Table 1) concisely expressed in Gibson’s classical definition, “for good or for ill” (Gibson 1979/1986: 127). Affordances that are not deemed to bring expected results or hinder activity are mentioned in the scholarship as constraints. In Second Language Acquisition (SLA), Third Language Acquisition (TLA) and Multiple Language Acquisition (MLA), the adherents of the affordances approach mainly discuss positive, useful affordances, and the ways to recognize them (Van Lier 2007; Singleton and Aronin 2007; Dewaele 2010; Otwinowska-Kasztelanic

2011). In this light, the investigation of affordances by Henry (2015) is notable, as it considers not only positive, enabling affordances in the classroom, but also constraining ‘negative’ affordances. Henry studied affordances associated with lingua franca English for recently arrived migrants in Sweden. When learning Swedish, they attune to affordances associated with English, perceiving them as either enabling, or constraining, which, as the study found, is



Image 4: a T-shirt with inscription ‘Pittsburghese’ thought to be unique to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

dependent on their current motivational and affective state, and at-the-moment cognitive processing. In another study in the area of applied linguistics, Gaisch (2014: 170) concerned herself with what teachers in an international classroom felt as ‘defordances.’

Finally, an additional theoretical way of singling out affordances is advanced (referred to in the table in item 10 as ‘origination of recognition of affordances as such’). The idea is that by re-conceptualization and changing the point of departure in looking at multilingualism, we can see “other,” “fresh” affordances instead of those traditionally perceived. To illustrate, let me turn to the metaphor and the concept of “edge,” which I mentioned in the previous section while discussing the philosophy of multilingualism. Edges attract, harbor, or trigger intensive activity. For example, major urban cities and areas are often situated on the borders between continents and oceans; their populations are growing faster than those in inland areas are. Major urban cities are also highly multilingual, and they are characterized by super diversity, and heightened social commotion and bursts of activity. In fact, multilingualism is all about edges. Most well-known multilingual phenomena can be seen as ‘edges’ or ‘transitional entities,’ and display the so called ‘edge effect’ (see Aronin and Politis 2015). The transitional zone, or the ‘transitional entity,’ may appear in the form of new multilingual communities, new languages and speakers of these languages. The edge effect means the meaningful changes in the structure and processes that occur in the transitional zones. In addition, borders have considerable impact on the inner areas that they separate. Geographically and socially peripheral edges in some particular circumstances may take a central place. With humans, even physical geographical edges are not only physical, but at the same time, indicate and actualize political, ethical, moral, and other divisions between people, and periods in the life of a country. They may be recognizable to varying extents. Some, even significant ones, may be indiscernible. Moving the traditional angle of vision toward seeing multilingualism as an edge, can reveal specific indicators for invisible, and symbolic edges in multilingualism, and raise fresh questions in relation to dealing with its challenges. One can only imagine how many and which “fresh” or “freshly reconsidered” affordances emerging from the edge effect can be perceived and effectuated for the good of speakers and learners. Thus, the affordances approach can be a productive addition to other existing perspectives.

To finish the discussion of Table 1, it should be noted that although the categorizations in it include pairs of seemingly dichotomous kinds of affordances, they are not poles. Moreover, it is often difficult to untangle one category from the other. For example, the attempt to clearly cut across social and individual affordances would most probably lead to understanding how tightly interrelated they are. The dichotomy of ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ affordances is

situational, and related to particular actions. For some it can be “for good,” for others, “for ill” (Gibson 1979/1986: 127).

Categorizations, with all their generality and vagueness too, are still helpful for understanding practices of multilingualism because they diminish the uncertainty of multilingual events and allow stakeholders to act with more confidence. Affordances are abstractions. Even if we label tangible things such as books or school buildings as affordances, this entails that we first employed an abstract concept and came to the conclusion that these particular tangible objects can be thought of as affordances. We can see that *what* we call affordances depends on the theoretical distinctions we choose to employ, on a particular action involved, and on who the actor is.

Conclusions

With the advance of post-postmodern society, social linguistic arrangements have become transformed into a new condition, called *the* New Linguistic Dispensation. The new linguistic dispensation is predicated on the mutual interaction of mono-, bi- and multilingual social arrangements, with multilingualism in the leading role. Current Multilingualism differs from previous forms, or ‘historical multilingualism’, in an essential way. The multilingualism of today has its specific features, and with them, the expanded and variegated number and scope of affordances has come into being.

A wide range of attempts to theorize multilingualism makes us recognize the inexorable necessity of pondering multilingual realities from a broad perspective. The field of multilingualism has developed to a point where it allows for ascending to the highest philosophical level of conceptualization. *Philosophy of multilingualism* is an unfolding field of research, marginally connected with the philosophy of language. The affordances concept is embedded in a philosophical vision of the world. It appears to be promising for research on multilingualism, especially in that it allows a fresh view of circumstances often already explored by more traditional methods. Conceptualizing multilingualism in terms of affordances offers an additional, possible way of studying and dealing with the global reality of multilingualism.

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