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POLYGLOT STUDIES IN SPRING 2022

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Abstract. *This paper is a review of academic conferences on polyglottery that took place in spring 2022, namely a paper at the conference “Integrative and Cross-Cultural Approaches to the Study of Thinking and Language”, the 2nd International Seminar on Linguistics & Polyglot Studies, and the round table “Research on Polyglottery: Theoretical Analysis and Practice” as part of the 20th International Symposium on Psycholinguistics and Communication Theory. Discussed are polyglots’ cognitive skills, self-monitoring instruments and learning strategies, the hyperintensive method, cognitive metaphors, social perception of polyglottery, common principles behind language processing by brain and by machine, and other issues.*

Keywords: *polyglot, polyglottery, multilingualism, language learning, cognitive processes, psycholinguistics*

ИССЛЕДОВАНИЯ ПОЛИГЛОТИИ ВЕСНОЙ 2022 г.

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Аннотация. *Данная публикация является обзором конференций по вопросам полиглотики, состоявшихся весной 2022 г., а именно доклада на конференции «Интегративные и кросс-культурные подходы к изучению мышления и языка», II Международного семинара по лингвистике и полиглотики и круглого стола «Исследование проблем полиглотики: теоретический анализ и практика» в рамках XX Международного симпозиума по психолингвистике и теории коммуникации. Обсуждаются когнитивные навыки, инструменты самонаблюдения и учебные стратегии полиглотов, гиперинтенсивный метод, когнитивные метафоры, социальное восприятие полиглотики, общие принципы обработки языка мозгом и машиной и другие темы.*

Ключевые слова: *полиглот, полиглотия, многоязычие, овладение языком, когнитивные процессы, психолингвистика*

Based on the developments that took place in 2021, including the foundation of a specialized journal and a regular international seminar [8], spring 2022 became a period of steady growth of ideas and activities in the field of polyglot studies. Three academic conferences featured these topics in their agenda, bringing together new researchers and opening up new perspectives on consciously attained individual multilingualism.

On April 6, within the framework of the conference *Integrative and Cross-Cultural Approaches to the Study of Thinking and Language* at the Russian State University for the Humanities, Grigory Kazakov presented the paper “Polyglots’ cognitive skills: problem statement”, which posed the question of interpreting polyglots’ linguistic achievements from a cognitive viewpoint and offered a review of information sources and a working hypothesis for its solution. Presented was data from polyglot memoirs, research literature and from the materials of the modern polyglot movement. On this basis, a presumption was made about polyglots’ high neural efficiency, which, in its turn, is based on the capacity of the brain for specialization and on an exceptional level of motivation for language learning.

On April 26, the 2nd **International Seminar on Linguistics & Polyglot Studies** was held online. The meeting was organized by the editorial board of the journal *Linguistics & Polyglot Studies* in cooperation with the Department of English No.3 at Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO University), and was attended by researchers from Russia, Japan, Nepal, USA, Turkey and France.

Addressing the participants with greetings, Polyglot Conference Academic Liaison Alexander Arguelles connected the agenda of the seminar with recent developments in the polyglot community worldwide. President of the Nepalese Society of Geolinguistics Aita Bishowkarma recounted the history of geolinguistics activities in Nepal, which expanded from New York to Tokyo and subsequently to Kathmandu. Co-President of the American Society of Geolinguistics Hikaru Kitabayashi emphasized the role of geolinguistics and polyglot studies in securing proper use of language and information for the purpose of international cooperation.

Dina Nikulicheva (Institute of Linguistics, Russian Academy of Sciences, and Moscow State Linguistic University) delivered the expert presentation “Polyglot’s know-how approaches to learning ancient languages: the strategies of Maria Flaksman”, in which she described polyglots’ proactive strategies of learning ancient languages, including their spoken form.

In the young scholars’ session, Yan Aleshkevich-Suslov (Moscow State University) in his talk “Monitoring language activity using MS Excel spreadsheets” described his experience of documenting the process of learning languages in recent years. Alisa Virolainen, Nikolai Kovalenko and Dmitry Komarov (MGIMO University) spoke about “Sociological studies on the perception of polyglots”, presenting a review of existing works on sociological aspects of polyglottery [5], [1], and their own research project. Karina Stupina (Moscow State University of Psychology and Education) read the paper “Biblical phrases in Russian, English and Italian songs” devoted to biblical expressions in the songs of popular performers.

In the ensuing discussion, it was noted that the emergence of monitoring data for a larger number of polyglots should make it possible to formulate in more precise terms the patterns of language acquisition that were previously felt by polyglots only intuitively. Also, it was observed that the involvement of polyglots from Asia in research would expand our understanding of the types of polyglottery and its social significance.

On May 28, the round table discussion *Research on Polyglottery: Theoretical Analysis and Practice* took place as a special session in the program of the 20th International Symposium on Psycholinguistics and Communication Theory held in Moscow [14, p. 186–196].

Yan Aleshkevich-Suslov continued his previous research, now focusing on the time factor in language learning by reference to his self-monitoring data. Keeping record of his language studies from 2019 to 2022, he came, among other things, to the following observations:

- he spent twice as much time on listening than on reading;
- his time spent learning new Germanic languages decreased exponentially;
- 469 hours is the hypothetical time needed to learn one’s first Germanic language up to the A2–B2 level;

– one needs to have studied 2.4 languages in order to reduce the time for learning a new language by half.

This data is interesting to compare with the estimate that “an adult learner... with good levels of motivation and access to good learning resources and well-trained teachers” requires 350 to 490 hours to reach the B1 level [9]. Further research in this direction implies regular measurement of attained language skills and verification against the data of other polyglots.

Alan Bigulov presented an analysis of his experiment of learning five Romance languages (French, Italian, Spanish, Catalan and Portuguese) hyperintensively and simultaneously. This method was designed within the framework of his “10 languages in 1,000 days” project [2], [12], and is based on the concepts of the communicative situation, controlled intensity, resource state and motivation factor. Hyperintensity is defined as several hours of conversational practice (up to 14 hours per day) with a large number of native speakers for one or two weeks. The speaker arrived at the following conclusions:

- one can enter conversational practice in at least two languages simultaneously;
- conversational practice is attainable in several languages at the same time provided there is progress in other languages at a higher level of competence;
- simultaneously learning several languages from the same genetic family creates a synergy effect and accelerates progress in all languages;
- phonetic interference is more significant than the lexical one.

Veronika Bigulati and Yulia Drik supplemented Bigulov’s talk by commenting on the convenience of online platforms, such as Italki, Amazing Talker, Verbling and Preply, and by comparing it with the traditional approach. It was concluded that these services significantly simplify the organization of classes, that it can be more efficient than travelling to the country where the target language is spoken, and that a similar platform is needed for the “smaller” languages of Russia.

Nastasia Britsyna placed polyglottery in the context of the UN philosophy of “leaving no one behind” where it finds itself alongside such concepts as *sharing*, *community*, *cooperation*, *inclusion* and *diversity*, in terms of supporting underprivileged groups of population, including the right to use and receive education in one’s mother tongue. The global relevance of these issues is highlighted by the fact of the UN declaring the years 2022–2032 the International Decade of Indigenous Languages. The presenter also indicated that polyglots can provide interesting data for the study of cognitive metaphors, which in many cases are not merely literary techniques but rather indispensable instruments of language and thinking as certain phenomena (even in science) can only be described metaphorically [4], [11].

Alisa Virolainen, Nikolai Kovalenko and Dmitry Komarov presented the results of their research devoted to the image of a polyglot as seen by MGIMO students. They pointed out that MGIMO University is in the *Guinness Book of Records* as the most multilingual educational institution in the world in terms of the number of languages taught (53), and can thus be regarded as a space of unconscious polyglottery where its students are a transitive group between ordinary people and polyglots. Using the qualitative method of a focus group and the projective techniques of free and controlled associations, personalization, personification and object manipulation, the authors found out that, in the students’ mind, polyglots are perceived in an exclusively positive light as a highly educated social group, and some of the interviewees said they would not mind being polyglots.

Tatiana Ivushkina described the journal *Linguistics & Polyglot Studies* (formerly *Philology at MGIMO*), which in 2021 acquired its current title and format, as a new platform for academic discussions on polyglottery. She noted that MGIMO University is a natural environment for multilingualism offering ample opportunity for academic growth in this field, and that the journal is unique in publishing papers in 10 languages. These topics become particularly up-to-date in view of the fast-developing technologies of machine translation. Being the first specialized journal on polyglot studies in the world, it is more than a publication. The editors hold conferences, organize research and invite new authors, thus making *Linguistics & Polyglot Studies* a welcoming centre for international cooperation in the field of polyglottery [6].

Grigory Kazakov’s paper aimed to identify common principles operating behind the mechanisms of language learning (and polyglottery as its highly efficient form), machine translation and artificial intelligence as different applications of brain functions that can be modelled in technology. Language acqui-

sition was stated to depend on two main factors, input (speech material) and affective filter (emotional readiness to receive it), in Stephen Krashen's terms [10], and the threshold level of foreign language competence (B1–B2) was argued to require the input of some 1 million words (the amount contained, for example, in the seven books about Harry Potter) [7], [15, p. 16]. The more efficient forms of machine translation were characterized as having passed from formalized rules to systems based on statistical analysis of human translations which need bilingual and monolingual corpora amounting to hundreds of millions of words [13]. Modern models of artificial intelligence were described as having moved from preloaded knowledge to precedent-based inductive learning which requires extensive samples for each parameter of the object being studied. In all of these cases, more data means better results. The common principles of the said functions thus seem to be the input factor, the statistical mechanism, and the principle of analogy and typology, i.e. finding patterns in large sets of empirical data and then using them to recognize and classify new phenomena. In the case of polyglots, their cognitive skills based on these principles must be developed to perfection thanks to their high brainwork efficiency.

Giving the last talk of the session, Dina Nikulicheva attempted to define the place of polyglottery studies in psycholinguistics by distinguishing the terms currently used for the capacity to speak several languages. While some understand multilingualism as something that can be achieved through formal education, and polylingualism as a competence developed naturally from the individual's contact with different languages [3, p. 457], polyglottery is a result of conscious self-study at an adult age. The speaker also presented an analysis of applying Alan Bigulov's hyperintensive learning strategy to her own study of Spanish. This experience demonstrated the feasibility of starting to maintain a dialogue in a new language with unknown native speakers in seven to ten days of training and the importance of taking an active role and of minding one's emotional state in this process.

The presentations were followed by an animated discussion, which included the following ideas:

1. Language learning includes passive, active and superactive forms. The most likely communicative situation in a new language is meeting an unknown native speaker, hence the choice of topics for conversational practice.

2. It is important to learn how to formalize video data and to ensure comparability of results, which implies defining common criteria (in simplest terms, a universal assessment test). To identify quantitative parameters of language learning progress, one could formulate a goal and then subdivide the way towards it into a scale of measurable units. These figures must be checked by reference to different language aspects (speaking, vocabulary, etc.).

3. Cognitive metaphors are valuable insights into polyglots' mental processes and can be regarded as one of the "languages of the brain" (along with straightforward use of verbal speech, visualization, and, possibly, others). Polyglots as individuals in possession of large sets of comparative linguistic data are a unique source of observations on patterns across different languages, including figurative naming.

4. Inviting students to imagine what they would do and how things would be different if they were polyglots may be a productive way of enhancing their language learning motivation and modelling success-oriented behaviour. The efficiency of this technique could be tested in educational practice against a control group.

5. Weak affective filter (high degree of emotional readiness for language study) may be able to significantly reduce the amount of input necessary for a certain level of language competence, although the latter can also be a biological constant.

6. Fluctuations of emotional states and intensity in polyglots' language studies may indicate the tendency of the brain to segment solving a complex holistic problem into three parts: initial euphoria and quick progress, then a decline in both motivation and results, and finally a smooth rise based on the acquired experience. Language learning can thus be helped by splitting tasks into smaller ones and by maintaining the routines at the times of crisis.

The round table crystallized recent trends in polyglot studies and marked their extensive development since the previous psycholinguistics symposium in 2019, in terms of new topics, researchers and discussion platforms. More monitoring data of individual polyglots has been introduced into academic circulation, and the traditional agenda of polyglots' language learning practices has been supplemented by a

sociological approach and by broader technological applications of polyglot-like brainwork. In all of this, though, a cognitive perspective comes to the fore, as understanding the mental processes underlying the performance of highly efficient professionals of their craft seems to be the most promising research goal, the attainment of which can, hopefully, increase human potential and help respond to modern challenges in science, education and society.

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