

THE “CULTURAL CHAMELEON” IN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES THROUGH THE PRISM OF MULTILINGUALISM

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***Abstract.** The present article deals with the concept of the **cultural chameleon** under the European multilingualism framework, examining how individuals adapt to various linguistic and cultural environments. Given the increasing rates of mobility, migration, and globalization, Europe's linguistic landscape is under constant change as well, therefore, the cultural chameleon emerges as a key figure in both social and professional contexts. Basen on theories of cultural intelligence (CQ) as well as sociolinguistic perspectives on language use, this study follows the patterns of language adaptation and highlights social and political factors contributing to the development of multilingual societies, alongside some real-world examples from European institutions. We argue that cultural chameleons, with their ability to switch between languages and cultures benefit from cognitive and social flexibility and at the same time play an important role in fostering cross-cultural understanding, enhancing professional mobility, and promoting linguistic diversity in a globalized world.*

***Keywords:** cultural chameleon, multilingualism, cultural intelligence (CQ), migration, globalization, linguistic diversity, cultural diversity, sociolinguistics, multilingual communities, cultural flexibility, European Union, cultural integration.*

INTRODUCTION

In the context of contemporary Europe, multilingualism has become both a defining characteristic and a complex challenge. With over 175 nationalities residing within the European

Union, linguistic diversity is a reality shaped by centuries of migration, conquest, and globalization. As people move across borders, so do their languages, contributing to a dynamic linguistic landscape. This movement has given rise to new forms of identity, with a complex linguistic repertoire, where individuals and communities must use multiple languages and cultures in their daily lives. Therefore, the concept of the *cultural chameleon*, with a view on individuals who adapt fluidly between different linguistic and cultural settings, becomes increasingly relevant.

According to the cognitive psychologist, Winston Sieck, the cultural chameleon comprises the individual's ability to juggle diverse linguistic environments, switching between languages and cultural norms depending on the social or geographical contexts [20]. In European societies where the asymmetric distribution of language (as stated in the asymmetric principle of multilingualism) is predominant, the flexibility of the cultural chameleons is seen as a survival strategy. Languages such as English dominate international business and higher education, while regional and minority languages are associated with strong cultural identities. The arising interrelationship between these languages generate a complex network of linguistic hierarchies navigated by the cultural chameleons.

This article underscores the concept of the cultural chameleon based on European multilingualism, following social and political factors contributing to the emergence of multilingual communities. Namely, it assesses the way individuals adapt to and manage the challenges faced by dominant and minority languages in multilingual communities, with a view on how multilingualism reflects broader societal and cultural power dynamics. This study explores how language use, cultural exchange, and multilingualism shape identity in Europe. It highlights the need to support linguistic diversity as our world becomes more interconnected.

APPROACHES TO THE CONCEPT OF CULTURE IN THE SPECIALIZED LITERATURE

The concept of *culture* has long been a subject of extensive debate and varied interpretations within the field of anthropology. Different schools of thought, shaped by historical and theoretical developments, have offered distinct definitions and approaches to understanding culture, reflecting the evolving nature of the discipline. In this paragraph we aim to provide an overview of the major anthropological theories that have influenced cultural research, focusing on the different lenses through which scholars have interpreted the complex relationship between culture, language, and society.

One of the earliest and most influential definitions of culture comes from the British anthropologist Sir Edward Burnett Tylor, a key figure in the evolutionist tradition alongside Charles Darwin, Lewis Morgan, and James Frazer. In his seminal 1871 work, Tylor defined culture as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.” His evolutionary perspective viewed culture as a vestige of earlier stages in human development, implying that all societies follow similar trajectories in their progression. This notion was foundational but has since been critiqued and refuted by later anthropological currents, including diffusionism, which emphasized the transmission and distribution of cultural traits across societies rather than their evolution in isolation. An acceptance that is later refuted. Diffusionists, for example, in reaction to some evolutionary excesses, came up with the idea that cultural traits travel, are transmitted and distributed, any invention being a unique phenomenon which is then "diffused" to other societies. [5, p. 56; 21]

American cultural anthropology, in contrast, introduced a more holistic and relativistic view of culture. This school of thought, pioneered by figures such as Franz Boas, emphasized the uniqueness and diversity of cultures, rejecting the universalist assumptions of evolutionism. Theories like the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis suggested that language shapes thought and worldview,

highlighting the interconnection between language and culture. This linguistic relativity posits that the structure of a language influences how its speakers perceive and conceptualize reality, therefore challenging the notion that cultures evolve through similar stages. Opposed to the evolutionist school, Sapir and Whorf favoured the enclosure of each culture, seeing it as a unitary whole, all its members included in a constraining but original "matrix". The linguistic relativity hypothesis put forward by Sapir and Whorf is based on the idea that language offers people much more than the possibility of communicating with each other. Language is prone to certain interpretations. The finding is based on the fact that people see the world in different ways, depending on the language they use, in other words, linguistic structure leads to different world views, so language (especially the grammatical structure of language) structures the way the world is perceived, establishing mental categories that predispose people to see reality in one way or another. The authors come to the conclusion that the morphological system of language is closely related to the set of concepts, which presupposes the mental basis of the living activities of a particular group, because morphology reflects in particular that particular type of thinking that characterizes the speakers of that language [21].

There have been various analyses of culture, comprising the ones put forward by Ruth Benedict in her analysis of the culture-personality relationship, and the hermeneutic approach of Clifford Geertz. As anthropological thought continued to evolve, other influential figures such as Clifford Geertz put forward their approaches. Clifford Geertz, a leading proponent of symbolic anthropology, argued that culture is essentially a "web of meanings" that individuals interpret and interact with [9, p. 5]. In his approach, the scholar argued that culture is a text to be read and analysed, thereby shifting the focus of anthropology from explaining cultural practices through historical or biological determinism to understanding the meanings and symbols guiding human behaviour. Furthermore, Robert Deliege points out that the notion of text takes on a double meaning: on the one hand, reality can be read as a text (as a set of coherent ideas emitted by actors) and on the other hand, he reconstructs his own texts, having more or less distant relations with reality [5, p. 161].

Moreover, the British functionalism school of thought, represented by Bronislaw Malinowski, advanced culture as a system of interrelated parts, each fulfilling specific functions to meet the needs of individuals and society. According to Malinowski, every cultural practice or institution serves to satisfy basic human needs, although this biological determinism has received some criticism for oversimplifying the complexities of social institutions and cultural dynamics [14, pp. 36-37].

Throughout these varying approaches, one constant remains: the concept of culture is multi-faceted and resistant to any singular definition. From the evolutionary models of the 19th century to the interpretive frameworks of the 20th century, anthropologists have continually revisited and reshaped their understanding of culture, making it a central and enduring theme in the study of human societies. In this article, we will explore these diverse theoretical perspectives, examining how they have shaped anthropological research and contributed to our understanding of the intricate relationship between language, culture, and society.

THE CULTURAL CHAMELEON AND SOCIETAL MULTILINGUALISM

In most European countries, multiple languages are spoken, many of them having substantial numbers of speakers across national borders. Europe is continually evolving due to factors like mobility, migration, and globalization, resulting in a diverse *linguistic landscape*. This increase in migration and mobility has transformed Europe as well as countries like Canada and the USA, thus underscoring the need for new policies and initiatives that embrace linguistic diversity.

Societal multilingualism can take different forms. The first refers to countries or regions that comprises several language groups, however each monolingual, with monolingual citizens. In

Canada for instance, where the nation is multilingual, its individual citizens are not usually multilingual, this model being usually referred to as the "territorial principle of multilingualism." On the other hand, the "personality principle" refers to situations where multilingualism is the official policy, and most individuals are multilingual [15].

Historically, multilingual communities have emerged through various processes. Migration, both voluntary and involuntary, has played a foundational role. Involuntary migrations, as the Babylonian exile or the forced relocation of populations in the 20th century by the Soviet Union for example, have shaped the multilingual communities we see today. For instance, after the collapse of the USSR, in the Baltic states, Russian immigrants now face the challenge of learning Estonian, Latvian, or Lithuanian. Furthermore, voluntary migration (the USA) has led to the assimilation of large immigrant communities, each contributing to the country's multilingual landscape of a melting pot. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, the USA absorbed speakers of German, Italian, Yiddish, and Spanish, and many other, however, even if many of these groups adopted English over time, multilingualism persisted.

Conquest and colonial expansion have also contributed to the multilingual states we have today on the linguistic landscape. The spread of English throughout the British Isles resulted in multilingualism and the gradual loss of Celtic languages. Similarly, Spanish and Portuguese conquests in the Americas created multilingual nations with large indigenous populations, many of whom still speak native languages. Colonial policies in Africa further compounded this situation, as European powers drew borders that grouped diverse linguistic communities into single political entities, often adopting the colonial language as a common lingua franca. These diverse historical factors have produced varying patterns of multilingualism, often resulting in language conflict. Pressures for one language to dominate over others, whether through formal policy or informal social dynamics, have prompted sociolinguists to focus on issues of language maintenance and shift within multilingual societies.

The concept of the *cultural chameleon* refers to individuals or communities that possess the ability to adapt and navigate multiple cultural and linguistic environments fluidly, adjusting their behavior, language, and social norms based on the context in which they find themselves. The concept of the cultural chameleon is deeply intertwined with the idea of *cultural intelligence (CQ)*, a framework that describes an individual's ability to adapt and function effectively across diverse cultural settings. Pioneering research in this area has been conducted by P. Christopher Earley and Soon Ang, who are widely recognized for their work on CQ. Their research outlines how individuals with high cultural intelligence are capable of recognizing cultural differences, adjusting their behaviors, and seamlessly integrating into various cultural environments as key characteristics of the cultural chameleon. Earley and Ang's work emphasizes the importance of cognitive, motivational, and behavioral flexibility in navigating multicultural contexts, which is crucial for individuals who frequently engage with different cultural and linguistic groups [7]. Additionally, scholars such as David Livermore have expanded on this concept, linking cultural intelligence with leadership and global competence, and demonstrating its relevance in both professional and social interactions. Together, these researchers have laid the theoretical groundwork for understanding how cultural chameleons operate, highlighting the adaptive strategies and psychological traits necessary for thriving in multilingual and multicultural environments. While Livermore may not specifically use the term "cultural chameleon," his work on cultural intelligence provides a framework for understanding how individuals can become adept at navigating multiple cultural environments. By developing high CQ, individuals can effectively become cultural chameleons, seamlessly adapting to various cultural settings [13].

In the context of European multilingualism, the cultural chameleon embodies the flexibility and adaptability required to move across linguistic borders, both within and between nations. As Europe becomes increasingly interconnected through mobility, migration, and globalization,

cultural chameleons represent a growing phenomenon, especially in regions where multilingualism and multiculturalism are the norm. Moreover, within multilingual societies, the cultural chameleon is not just a linguistic adept but a cultural mediator who understands and embodies different value systems, social practices, and traditions. This adaptability is essential in environments where identity is fluid, and communication occurs across diverse linguistic communities. In multilingual contexts such as Switzerland or Belgium, for instance, individuals often navigate between multiple official languages, such as French, German, and Italian in Switzerland, or Dutch, French, and German in Belgium. Being able to shift seamlessly between these languages is not just a practical skill but also a reflection of a deeper cultural sensitivity and awareness.

PATTERNS OF USE AND ASYMMETRIC POWER DYNAMICS IN MULTILINGUAL SOCIETIES

In multilingual communities, languages are valued on different scales. This phenomenon, known as the "asymmetric principle of multilingualism," refers to the unequal distribution of power, prestige, and vitality among languages. According to M. Turner, languages are arranged on a hierarchy based on the roles their speakers get within a society. Usually languages of opportunities providing access to valuable domains, such as education or employment, get a higher place on this hierarchy, while languages with more limited roles are positioned lower in the hierarchy pyramid. In many post-colonial countries, the language of the colonizer was often kept as the official language, thus providing some minor roles and marginalising indigenous languages and cultures. Other factors would comprise immigrants who may face pressure to learn the dominant language of their new country, affecting their cultural identity and social integration, or schools that prioritise instruction in a dominant language leading to students being disadvantaged and, therefore, affecting their academic performance and future career opportunities [19].

In multilingual societies, the value placed on different languages often depends on their specific domains of use. For instance, in India, Sanskrit is related to ritualistic and academic settings, while English, due to its colonial history and dominance in the areas of administration, science, and international affairs and business, is seen as an opportunity to upward social mobility.

However, these evaluations are not always tied to material or economic criteria. The revival of Hebrew in Israel, the resurgence of Catalan and Basque in Spain, and efforts to revitalize Sanskrit in India demonstrate that factors like ethnic, national, or religious identity can play a crucial role in language use, maintenance, and revitalization. Around the world, movements are advocating for the recognition and expansion of indigenous languages, particularly in former colonies like Malaysia, the Philippines, and Ecuador, where these languages had been marginalized. Such efforts often seek to extend the functional range of indigenous languages by incorporating them into domains like education, administration, and law, challenging the dominance of hegemonic languages.

The linguistic dynamics within multilingual societies are thus reflective of broader societal power structures, with languages competing for status, authority, and functional range. These shifts highlight the ongoing tension and negotiation inherent in multilingual settings.

A key feature of the cultural chameleon in Europe is the ability to deal with the *asymmetric principle of multilingualism*. Based on the aforementioned, as European societies generate language hierarchies, where some languages are attributed more prestige and practical use than others, cultural chameleons are expected to face these inequalities [18]. For example, English has emerged as a dominant lingua franca across Europe, particularly in international business, academia, and technology. Speakers of dominant languages typically have better access to educational and economic opportunities, thus, leading to cycles of inequality, as those speaking less-dominant languages may struggle to access the same resources. Moreover, languages could serve as an important form of cultural capital, meaning that proficiency in the dominant language would

provide greater social mobility, status and influence. Therefore, it is important to note that a cultural chameleon might use English in professional or educational contexts, while being fluent in a local or regional in more personal or community-oriented settings, which requires not only linguistic proficiency but also the cultural intelligence to understand when and how to use each language.

BENEFITS OF BEING A CULTURAL CHAMELEON IN EUROPEAN MULTILINGUALISM

Cultural chameleons often emerge as mediators in contexts of *language conflict* or *language shift* [15]. In regions where one language group has historically dominated another, such as in the Baltic states, where Russian speakers must now integrate into societies that prioritize Estonian, Latvian, or Lithuanian, cultural chameleons bridge the gap between competing linguistic groups. They may act as interpreters of not just language, but also the underlying cultural values, easing tensions and facilitating smoother integration in socially diverse environments. In multicultural European cities such as London, Berlin, or Paris, cultural chameleons are often found among immigrants and second-generation citizens. These individuals frequently switch between the language and cultural norms of their family's country of origin and the local culture of their adopted country. For example, many young people of Moroccan descent in Amsterdam speak Dutch fluently but also maintain proficiency in Arabic or Berber. This ability enables them to integrate more successfully into Dutch society while preserving their cultural heritage, opening doors to career opportunities in fields such as translation, international business, or diplomacy. The ability to adapt to different linguistic and cultural contexts helps cultural chameleons integrate more easily into multiple communities, being given the opportunity to participate in various social, professional, and educational networks, thus, making them more adaptable in changing environments.

Most EU institutions, such as the European Commission and the European Parliament, operate in 24 official languages. Therefore, diplomats, translators, and interpreters working within these institutions face the multilingual environment daily, having to switch between languages and cultural contexts. Moreover, the cultural chameleons hired for these positions will enhance communication and foster cross-cultural understanding and collaboration at the same time, an essential feature for the functioning of a linguistically and culturally diverse union such as the EU. Research shows that multilingual individuals who can shift between cultures often have greater cognitive flexibility and problem-solving competencies. This flexibility allows them to approach situations from different cultural perspectives, making them more adept at conflict resolution and innovation.

Therefore, the cultural chameleon is a product of linguistic fluidity and cultural hybridity, thriving in environments (linguistic and cultural) where borders are flexible. As countries such as the USA, Canada, and the EU continue to evolve into even more multilingual and multicultural societies, the cultural chameleons will be increasingly valuable in fostering cross-cultural understanding, promoting social cohesion, and dealing with the complexities of modern, diverse societies.

CONCLUSIONS

In an era where Europe's linguistic and cultural diversity continues to expand due to migration, globalization, and mobility, the cultural chameleon represents a vital model of adaptability and resilience. This article has demonstrated how cultural chameleons thrive in multilingual contexts, from the diplomatic and professional environments of EU institutions to multicultural cities like Brussels and Luxembourg. By fluidly switching between languages and cultural norms, these individuals not only enhance their own social mobility and career prospects but also contribute significantly to fostering cross-cultural communication and cohesion.

Multilingualism plays a central role in shaping the cultural identities and cognitive flexibility of individuals in these settings. As demonstrated through examples from Switzerland, the European Union, and multicultural urban centres, the ability to navigate multiple languages not only fosters professional success but also enhances social integration. This flexibility underscores how language and culture are interconnected, where language serves as a tool for both communication and the transmission of cultural values. Cultural chameleons, through their linguistic adaptability, are able to mediate between different cultural perspectives, making them key players in resolving cultural tensions and promoting mutual understanding.

At a societal level, multilingualism reflects more than just linguistic competence, it represents cultural diversity and the coexistence of different worldviews. Multilingual societies, in Europe, Canada, the USA, benefit from a deeper collective understanding of varying cultural norms and practices, leading to more inclusive policies and stronger social cohesion. The interaction between multilingualism and culture highlights the importance of developing cultural intelligence (CQ) to facilitate integration and intercultural dialogue.

As multilingual countries/communities (EU/USA) continue to tackle the challenges and opportunities presented by the multilingual reality, developing cultural intelligence and encouraging the development of cultural chameleons become key in the policies of promoting integration, social harmony, and linguistic diversity. To remain culturally and linguistically rich, countries need to embrace and respect the many languages and cultures within their borders, and the individuals able to adapt to varying cultural settings are key in this changing landscape.

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