

# Refining the Perspectives on Language Proficiency: Bilingualism and True Bilingualism

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## Abstract

*In a world under massive globalisation and, at the same time, under deep boundary rethinking, the ability of speaking two or several languages has become, over the last decades, an important individual concern, as well as the main topic of fruitful scientific research. In this context, bilingualism and bilinguality are interdisciplinary concepts pertaining to the fields of sociolinguistics, education, philosophy, cultural studies, to name but a few. This study has as a starting point the broad definitions of the individual bilingualism provided in the literature in this field, according to which it generally points to one's ability of speaking two languages perfectly (Hamers & Blanc 2000, Bloomfield 1933; Thiery, 1978; Majchrzak 2018). It aims at tracing the reasons behind the need of refining the terms by introducing the concepts of true bilingualism and true bilingual, as more notionally meaningful than the old concepts of bilingualism and bilingual. The modifier true is approached as a dissociation device, which, from the rhetorical perspective, allows for a disjunction between what was already acknowledged as bilingualism, and the new definition of the concept. Moreover, the study aims at answering the following questions: do the new notions, namely true bilingualism and true bilingual, bring forth new notional content or do they merely rearrange the existing one? Are the new concepts endowed with explanatory and normative functions? (cf. Perelman & Tyteca 1992)*

**Keywords:** *bilingualism, dissociation, notional content, content remodelling, definition*

## Introduction

The world-wide phenomenon of globalisation, which mainly impacts on the political and economic development, also affects the cultural and social levels of society. Prefixes such as *poly-*, *multi-*, *bi-*, *inter* have become common word formation devices, while terms such as *polylinguist* and *polylinguism*, *multilingual speaker*, *intercultural communication* seem to have entered the mainstream vocabulary although their meaning is not always clearly perceived. This study focuses on four such terms: *bilingualism* and *bilingual* vs *true bilingualism* and *true bilingual* in order to build a semantic bridge over the years,

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through a content analysis approach and a rhetorical perspective, a bridge meant to highlight the evolution of the terms and to anticipate their future development.

This study is structured into two main parts: first, after providing a brief overview of the evolutions of *bilingual/bilingualism* and *true bilingualism/true bilingual*, a parallel analysis of a series of definitions of these terms is pursued in order to point out to what extent their notional content is different, assuming that the notions containing the adjective *true*, as subsequently derived concepts, attempt to convey a distinct semantic charge. Secondly, we consider several contexts taken from the Internet where the same notions are characterized using, among others, qualifying adjectives and nominal syntagms whose study is meant to highlight, at a small scale, the individuals' perception of this phenomenon.

### ***Bilingualism and true bilingualism - an attempt to trace their notional content***

The *Online Etymology Dictionary* traces the origin of the term *bilingual* to the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century ("speaking two languages" from the Latin *bilinguis* – meaning literally *two-tongued*). The noun derived from this adjective, namely *bilingualism*, was registered later, in the middle of the same century. As early as 1933, Bloomfield provides one of the first scientific definitions of the phenomenon ("native-like control of two languages", 1933: 56), while, later, in 1953, Weinreich (1953: 1) defines it as "the practice of alternately using two languages". So far, effort has been put into circumscribing the meaning of the notion *bilingualism* without really reaching a unitary definition. The fact that specialists could not agree upon the notional sphere of bilingualism is testified by the creation of new concepts, namely *true bilingual* and *true bilingualism*, meant to reconcile different semantic perspectives that *bilingualism* had generated among specialists. In 1978, Thiery attempts to define *true bilingualism*, perceived as "an extreme form of bilingualism". Moreover, the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century consecrate *bilingualism* and *true bilingualism* as core notions in psychological, sociological and language acquisition studies.

Before approaching the definitions of *bilingualism* and *true bilingualism* per se, we consider it appropriate to dwell on the theoretical background of our approach, namely the rhetorical device of dissociation.

According to Perelman and Tyteca's *Treatise on argumentation* (1992: 552), dissociation refers to the process of redrafting a concept due to the incompatibility generated, within the notional sphere of the term, by the confrontation between propositions or theses and involving norms, facts or truths. In other words, dissociation stems from the speaker's intent to eliminate the notional incompatibility existing within a concept by remodelling its content in order for the speaker to be rhetorically efficient.

Van Rees, echoing Perelman and Tyteca [1], ranges dissociation among argumentative techniques according to which a unitary concept is separated into two new notions "unequally valued, one subsumed under a new term, the other subsumed either under the original term, which is redefined to denote a concept reduced in content, or under another new term with its own definition, the original term being given up altogether" (2009: 9). The same author provides several examples of dissociation derived from philosophical, juridical or political discourses. In order to anticipate our analysis of *true bilingualism*, we will mention van Rees' example derived from Socrates' *Phaedrus*:

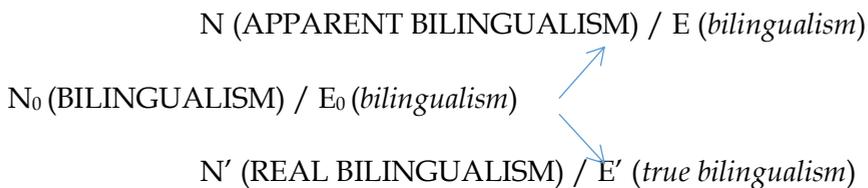
And it is no *true wisdom* that you offer your disciples, but only its semblance, for, by telling them of many things without teaching them, you will make them seem to know much, while for the most part they know nothing, and as men are filled, not with *wisdom*, but with *the conceit of wisdom*, they will be a burden to their fellows (2009: 18).

In the example, Socrates performs a dissociation which separates true wisdom from its semblance or the conceit of wisdom, respectively. Găță and Andone clearly explain the dissociation process by using N for the notion /concept and E for the linguistic expression carrying it. Thus, the notional remodelling process starts from a largely accepted concept (N<sub>0</sub>) "referred to by a specific linguistic expression, or initial term, E<sub>0</sub>." (2011: 7). From N<sub>0</sub>, a new concept is derived, N, denoted by a new expression, E, meant to better fulfil the speaker's rhetorical objectives. If we are to apply this scheme to the example drawn from Socrates' *Phaedrus*, we may say that the initial concept (N<sub>0</sub>) is WISDOM denoted by the linguistic expression of *wisdom* (E<sub>0</sub>) which remains partially concealed in the discourse. From this concept is dissociated N, the REAL WISDOM, rendered by the linguistic expression, E, *true wisdom*. The second term of the dissociation is N' (WISDOM STEMMING FROM EXCESSIVE PRIDE) rendered by the expression *the conceit of wisdom*.

In this paper, two sets of definitions, for *bilingualism/ bilingual individual* and *true bilingualism / true bilingual individual*, are dealt with. Apart from being an argumentative device, the definition becomes an instrument of content dissociation, especially when it aims at providing the real meaning of a notion in contrast with its ordinary and generally accepted meaning (Perelman and Tyteca 1992: 590). When putting forward the true meaning of a notion, the speaker indirectly disagrees with the old definition which he/she may consider either as incomplete or not (anymore) according to reality.

Moreover, the labelling of a definition as conveying a real meaning may not necessarily operate a rearrangement of the notional content as compared to the old concept, but it can point only to the speaker's intent to enhance the persuasive aim of his/her discourse. We will further approach this aspect in our analysis of the two sets of definitions, taking into account that, according to Gâță and Andone (2011), the dissociation involves three moves performed by the speaker: a) a distinction among the various aspects of a notion; b) a concession regarding some of the aspects of the initial notion by highlighting their acceptance; c) a negation of some other aspects of the initial notion by highlighting their non-acceptance.

In general, the adjective *true* functions as indicator of dissociation based more or less on the disjunction (a philosophical pair) between *apparent* and *real*. In our specific case, every time a speaker (be it an academic or an ordinary individual) brings to the fore the definition of *true bilingualism*, he/she attempts to dissociate the concept of *bilingualism* into two separate concepts, namely the *apparent bilingualism* and the *real bilingualism*. The following scheme of the dissociation process can be applied to bilingualism:



The initial concept of bilingualism,  $N_0$ , denoted by the linguistic expression of *bilingualism*,  $E_0$ , is felt by the arguer as not notionally meaningful enough so as to fulfil his/her rhetorical goals, namely to put himself/herself in a favourable light as someone who seizes the very

essence of a notion, and to make the audience commit to the standpoints put forward. Therefore, the notion is split into two notions: the first one, N, the *apparent bilingualism*, referred to by the same linguistic expression as the initial term, and the second one, N', the *real bilingualism*, rendered by a new expression, namely *true bilingualism*.

By means of dissociation, the speaker/ the arguer “creates a new vision of the world and persuades her or his audience to accept it” (Konishi 2002). The audience’s acceptance of the newly built concept is the prerequisite for a new reality to be established (*Ibid.*). However, a question arises in relation to bilingualism: are we dealing with a new vision of the world, contained in the *true bilingualism*, or are we facing a mere rearrangement of the initial concept that better fits his/her rhetorical goals? The answer to this question is based on a limited number of definitions. Therefore, we do not aim at exhaustivity, but at answering the above-mentioned questions, aware that an enlarged and more detailed corpus could possibly lead to different results.

The definitions taken into account in this study are presented below, but, for reason of space, we often wrote down only their core part. The sources of these definitions (dictionaries, published papers, scientific work) are provided in the endnotes. The information below should be read vertically, each column in turn, there is no row-by-row correspondence between the columns. The analysis itself that follows the definitions firstly considers the definitions in each column and then presents the parallel, in order to point out the different notional meaning of the terms under focus.

<b>Definitions of <i>Bilingualism</i> (B) / a <i>Bilingual Individual</i> (BI)</b>	<b>Definitions of <i>True Bilingualism</i> (TB) / a <i>true bilingual individual</i> (TBI)</b>
<b>B:</b> “Using or being able to use two languages, especially with equal fluency” [2]	<b>TBI:</b> “Someone who is taken to be one of them by the members of two different linguistic communities, at roughly the same social and cultural level” [3]
<b>B:</b> “The ability to use either one of two languages, especially when speaking” [4]	<b>TB:</b> “native-like proficiency in both languages” [5]
<b>B:</b> “In its simplest form, bilingualism is defined as ‘knowing’ two languages.” [6]	<b>TB:</b> “an extreme form of bilingualism” [7]

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<b>B:</b> “a native-like control of two languages” [8]	<b>TB:</b> “speaking two languages with the proficiency of a native” [9]
<b>B:</b> “the psychological state of an individual who has access to more than one linguistic code as a means of social communication; the degree of access will vary along a number of dimensions which are psychological, cognitive, psycholinguistic [...]” [10]	<b>TBI:</b> “in a true bilingual both languages have been acquired by immersion, and not via another language by tuition” [11]
<b>BI:</b> Someone who has “been brought up in a bilingual environment, such as in a home where parents speak different languages or in a community where the dominant language is not the one used at home” [12]	<b>TB:</b> “the ability to speak two languages with the fluency of a native speaker; the frequent use by a community of two languages; the institutional recognition of two languages” [13]
<b>BI:</b> Someone “whose family emigrated to a different country and he was raised with two languages: one spoken at home and the other one spoken by the target community” [14]	<b>TBI:</b> “one who has knowledge and competence in using the two languages interchangeably, as well as effectively” [15]
<b>BI:</b> Someone who “needed to emigrate at a later stage of his life, due to reasons such as job, marriage or others and had to learn the language of the new home country. Hence, he uses two languages on a daily basis: the new one in everyday situations, and the first language with those from his homeland” [16]	<b>TBI:</b> “a true bilingual is defined as one who in fact possesses two native languages and so is accepted as a native in each culture.” [17]
<b>BI:</b> Someone who has “two distinct containers in his brains. Each of these containers houses a separate language” [18]	<b>TBI:</b> “one who is able to navigate both of the languages as an idealized monolingual native speaker would” [19]

When making a point of the definitions provided in the first column, we may highlight that *bilingualism* is perceived both as an ability (from the perspective of the individual’s performance in using two languages) or as a psychological state (from the point of view of an intrinsic feature

certain individuals may possess, metaphorically referred to as “two containers in our brain, each encompassing a language”).

Therefore, a double approach is to be identified within the definition of bilingualism, namely *using two languages* and *knowing two linguistic codes*. However, the emphasis is placed on the first meaning, namely the act of using two languages in terms of:

- the coherence in both codes (“equal fluency”);
- the frequency of employing the two languages (“on a daily basis”);
- the main skill by means of which the coherence is tested in both codes (“especially when speaking”);
- the type of communication performed by the speaker (“social communication”).

As far as the bilingual individual is concerned, both the familial environment in which he/she was brought up and a possibly new living environment seem to be of tremendous importance in defining a bilingual. He/she may either:

- be brought up in an environment where “parents speak a different language than the one used in community” as a consequence of immigration, intercultural marriages or relations; or
- “have emigrated, as adults, to a different country with a different linguistic code”.

On the other hand, *true bilingualism* seems to give primacy to the individual’s ability to linguistically become an integral part of two different communities so as to be considered a native in both of them: “taken to be one of them by the members of two different linguistic communities”; “native like proficiency in both languages”; “possessing two native languages and so is accepted as a native in each culture”; “navigate both of the languages as an idealized monolingual native speaker”; “ability to speak two languages with the fluency of a native speaker”.

Moreover, the double linguistic integration should be accompanied, in the case of the true bilingual, by an equal awareness of the social and cultural dimensions in both communities (“the same

social and cultural level”) as well as by an official acknowledgement of this ability (“institutional recognition of two languages”).

Other definitions or details of the definitions do not differ very much from the initial concept of bilingualism: they either bring to the fore the language acquisition process (according to which the two languages were acquired by immersion and not by schooling - “both languages have been acquired by immersion, and not via another language by tuition”) or the high level of verbal performance in both languages (“knowledge and competence in using the two languages interchangeably, as well as effectively”).

From the label that *true bilingualism* is “an extreme form of bilingualism”, we may infer that *true bilingualism* is perceived as a particular situation (one which reaches the highest degree) within the large category of bilingualism.

The initial term is split into two (not entirely) new concepts actually, based not only on the philosophical pair *apparent / real*, but also on the pair *ordinary / extreme*. In order to further explain the dissociation occurring in relation to this notion, we will refer back to van Rees’ definition and to Perelman and Tyteca’s explanation of this rhetorical device. In the specific case taken into account in our study, the sets of definitions point to a dissociation based on the separation between the “generally accepted meaning” of a notion and its “real meaning” (Perelman and Tyteca 1992: 590).

Therefore, the concept of *bilingualism* is split into two new notions, not equally valued, as the speaker putting forward the definition of *true bilingualism* aims at making the audience commit to this new notion which does not necessarily mean that he/she refutes all the aspects of the initial notion. The two notions resulting from dissociation are: the notion “subsumed under the original term” with a conceptually reduced content (van Rees, 2009: 9) (*bilingualism* seen as *the ability to use two languages fluently in social communication as a result of immersion into an environment where the language spoken is different from the language spoken at home*) and the notion “subsumed under the new term” (*ibid.*) (*true bilingualism* [envisaged] as *the ability to use two languages so fluently in social communication that the user may easily be considered a native of both communities*).

Furthermore, we will attempt to identify the acts performed by the speaker when putting forward the definition of *true bilingualism* (cf. Găță and Andone 2011: 8):

- he/she makes an account of the different aspects within a notion: the concept of *bilingualism* is entirely scrutinized in order for the “identity card” of the notion to be built (the distinction);
- he/she overtly or indirectly accepts some of the aspects of the notion (the concession); in our case, acceptance is directed broadly towards aspects such as: *knowing and speaking two languages efficiently as a result of living in two different linguistic communities*;
- he/she refutes some other aspects of the initial notion (the negation); in our case, non-acceptance focuses on the fact that the notion of *bilingualism* should not encompass the aspect of *speaking two languages so efficiently that one may pass as a native in both communities*, aspect that represents the core of *true bilingualism*.

However, the two notions, namely *bilingualism* and *true bilingualism*, cannot be envisaged antithetically (as it is the case of *real wisdom* and the *conceit of wisdom*), but more like complementary notions, since *true bilingualism* is perceived as a step further in *bilingualism*: one cannot become a true bilingual without being first a bilingual. Therefore, the dissociation brought about a rearrangement of the notional content along two main axes: the ability *per se* (*bilingualism*) and the highest degree of this ability (*true bilingualism*).

The analysis allows us the conclusion that the two notions are endowed with both explanatory and normative functions as they are illustrative of a particular cognitive content while establishing a standard in how the notions should be assimilated by the audience. They put forward a new [20] perspective of the notions which may last till the notion of *really true bilingualism* emerges (if ever), triggering another notional rearrangement. The author of the dissociation places himself/herself in a favourable light, as one who is able to seize all the aspects of a concept and to make a notional split within it.

After looking into the definitions of the notions, in the second part of our study, we will try to examine contexts in which *true bilingualism* is characterized by means of adjectives or nominal groups in order to complete the analysis with insight from how people perceive it. To reach this goal, we have performed Internet research to identify the expressions used to characterize the notions of *true bilingualism* and *true bilingual*. This analysis will provide us with a new perspective of how this social and individual phenomenon is perceived by the public.

### **True bilingualism - brief account of people's perception of this ability**

In order to select contexts relevant for our study, we have carried out the search on the Internet starting from the phrase "true bilingualism is". We have eliminated those contexts where the verb *to be* is followed by a definition (the contexts that aim at providing an answer to the question *What is true bilingualism?*) and kept those answering the question *What is true bilingualism like?*

In the contexts identified, *true bilingualism* is referred to by means of paraphrases with an explanatory function such as "highly competent bilingualism" [21], "true balanced bilingualism" [22] and "native-like proficiency and grade-level achievement" [23]. In the examples taken into account, *true bilingualism* is described:

- as an infrequent phenomenon; that is why the adjective *rare* or synonymous expressions are frequently used in relation to it: "True bilingualism is a relatively rare and a beautiful thing" [24]; "true bilingualism is an exceptional occurrence" [25]. There are people who even go further asserting that it does not actually exist in real life, but only in theory: "true bilingualism is not completely real, as one always has a preference for one language over another" [26]. / "True bilingualism is really unheard of. I would consider someone who is as comfortable in their second language as their first, to be bilingual." [27] / "true bilingualism is the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. The more you know, the more you realise how far away you actually are" [28].
- as a skill difficult to attain: "I think true bilingualism is a pretty tough thing to cultivate." [29] / "it is not something that comes naturally. It must be carefully and continuously cultivated by the individual with the purpose of remaining equally conversant in both languages in all areas, subjects and situations." [30]
- as a highly valuable asset for someone's personal and professional development: "it takes 6 years for students to reach native-like proficiency and grade-level achievement, the importance of planning for the long term is amplified. True bilingualism is an investment." [31] / "True bilingualism is a big asset in Canada." [32] / "True bilingualism is a much-needed skill in today's global society." [33] / "True bilingualism is a

remarkable achievement that allows our graduates to go anywhere and do anything.” [34]

It may be inferred from the examples above that *true bilingualism*, as rarely as it may occur as result of the immersion into two linguistic environments, is an ability that needs to be taken care of and to be permanently cultivated. Its rare existence makes it a remarkably important investment for one’s future development.

### Conclusions

In this study we have approached the definitions of *bilingualism* and *true bilingualism* from content analysis and rhetorical perspectives. We have pointed out that the evolution of the term *bilingualism* to *true bilingualism* (the second term does not eliminate the first one) stems from the speaker’s intent to perform a dissociation of the generally accepted concept of *bilingualism* generated by the incompatibility perceived within its notional sphere.

The dissociation was based on the disjunction/ the philosophical pair *apparent vs real* by means of which the speaker/arguer aims at persuading the audience to accept two notions: if *bilingualism* refers broadly to the ability of speaking two languages fluently and coherently, *true bilingualism* overarches these features and adds extra ones, such as: native like proficiency, the same social and cultural level in both languages as well as their institutional recognition. In this case, the dissociation has not generated antithetical notions, but two concepts that should be envisaged according to a gradual approach: perfectly speak two languages and speak two languages perfectly so as to reach native like proficiency in both of them. This rearrangement of the content is endowed with explanatory and normative functions, which is highlighted by the fact that numerous specialists use these notions as theoretical framework for their research. The life of the notions resulting from dissociation is variable, depending on the potential need to further split the content: could the contemporary context take things further and generate a new concept, namely *really / truly true bilingualism*?

As far as the characterisation of true bilingualism is concerned, it is perceived by the general public as an extremely rare skill that has to be nourished, as it represents a highly valuable asset.

## Notes

- [1] In Perelman & Tylteca's Treatise on argumentation, dissociation is labelled as argumentation scheme, while van Rees (2009: 9) considers it an argumentative technique.
- [2] Merriam-Webster OnLine Search, <http://mw4.m-w.com/dictionary/bilingual>
- [3] Thiery, Christopher. "True Bilingualism and Second Language Learning" *apud* Johnson Franck "Being bilingual is not enough", The ATA Chronicle, July 2008, [http://www.atanet.org/chronicle/3707\\_22\\_johnson.pdf](http://www.atanet.org/chronicle/3707_22_johnson.pdf)
- [4] U.S. Department of State, <http://usinfo.state.gov/products/pubs/geography/glossary.htm>
- [5] Gottardo & Grant, 2008, *apud* Lucia Quinonez Summer, Language Acquisition for the bilingual child, the NCHAM e-book.
- [6] Valdez & Figueora, 1994, *apud* Lucia Quinonez Summer, Language Acquisition for the bilingual child, the NCHAM e-book.
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- [9] <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/10/well/family/raising-a-truly-bilingual-child.html>
- [10] Hamers & Blanc, 2000: 6. The authors make a distinction between bilingualism (the state of the linguistic community) and bilinguality (the state of the individual).
- [11] Thiery, Christopher. 2018. <https://www.lourdesderioja.com/2018/11/17/true-bilingualism/>
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- [13] <https://www.typesy.com/does-true-bilingualism-exist-guest-post/>
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- [16] Majchrzak, 2018 :4.
- [17] Thiery, Christopher, True Bilingualism, *Etudes de Linguistique Appliquée*, 24, 52-63, Oct-Dec 76 <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ166135>
- [18] Orellana, Lee, & Martínez, 2010, *apud* Maneka Deanna Brooks 2017: 384.
- [19] Maneka Deanna Brooks 2017: 385.
- [20] The adjective *new* should not be understood as discovered recently in relation to the present time, but within the paradigm *old notion* (the initial one) – *new notion* (the derived one).

- [21] Klass, Perri (2017). "Raising a truly bilingual child". In New York Times, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/10/well/family/raising-a-truly-bilingual-child.html>
- [22] [https://www.proz.com/forum/linguistic\\_diversity/175507-does\\_true\\_bilingualism\\_exist.html](https://www.proz.com/forum/linguistic_diversity/175507-does_true_bilingualism_exist.html)
- [23] Thomas & Collier, 2017, [http://www.dlenm.org/uploads/files/Soleado%20Articles/Mike\\_Sustainability\\_Final\\_Soleado\\_Spring2018%20\(1\).pdf](http://www.dlenm.org/uploads/files/Soleado%20Articles/Mike_Sustainability_Final_Soleado_Spring2018%20(1).pdf)
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- [27] <http://forums.premed101.com/topic/71637-bilingualism-and-out-of-province/>
- [28] <https://medium.com/@keelywrites/how-it-feels-to-learn-a-language-878afc603e44>
- [29] <http://www.cantonese.sheik.co.uk/phorum/read.php?1,3984,4092>
- [30] [https://www.proz.com/forum/linguistic\\_diversity/175507-does\\_true\\_bilingualism\\_exist.html](https://www.proz.com/forum/linguistic_diversity/175507-does_true_bilingualism_exist.html)
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- [33] [https://www.niost.org/pdf/afterschoolmatters/asm\\_2011\\_14\\_fall/asm\\_2011\\_14\\_fall-2.pdf](https://www.niost.org/pdf/afterschoolmatters/asm_2011_14_fall/asm_2011_14_fall-2.pdf)
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