ROLE OF MULTILINGUALISM

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Abstract:*New research on multilingualism has revolutionised our knowledge of the effects of learning and using two or more languages for cognition, the brain, and success and well-being across the lifespan during the last two decades. Contrary from the notion that exposure to numerous languages in infancy affects language and cognitive development, the new findings imply that exposure benefits individuals, with higher receptivity to different languages and new learning itself. Active use of two or more languages appears to protect against cognitive deterioration at the opposite end of the lifetime. This protection is demonstrated in healthy ageing and, more dramatically, in compensating for pathological symptoms in patients who develop dementia or recover from stroke.*

Keywords: *cognitive and neural consequences, language experience, language learning, multilingualism, myths.*

While the majority of the world is multilingual, the use of two or more languages in the United States has always been viewed as a hindrance rather than an advantage. Language views have been muddled with attitudes about immigration and cultural diversity, resulting in a plethora of mythology around language acquisition and language use. The concept that English is the sole or dominant language in the United States has contributed to the widespread belief that learning a second language as an adult is an impossible undertaking that can only be achieved effectively by a select few with a particular gift for language acquisition. Similarly, while young children appear to be capable of learning many languages readily, it is commonly considered that introducing a second language too early in infancy may create confusion and irreversible harm to the child's linguistic and cognitive development. Language mixing or language switching among capable speakers of two or more languages when conversing with people who are similarly proficient has also been proposed as a symptom of pathology or insufficient language capacity. These and other attitudes towards and perspectives on multilingualism in the United States have influenced not just popular perceptions, but also educators and scientists.

Yet, growing research has revealed that historically common preconceptions and attitudes are in reality myths: 1 Far from being a hindrance, research has demonstrated that multilingualism benefits people at all stages of life, from newborns and children to young adults and older persons who may be experiencing cognitive loss. Hearing two or more languages does not confuse young newborns; instead, they gain the ability to differentiate among the languages they hear; they

are more susceptible to new language acquisition than their monolingually exposed peers. Despite their age, workers who are well past early infancy have been demonstrated to be able to gain sensitivity to the syntax of a second language.

Furthermore, the discovery that a second or third language uses the same basic cognitive and neurological machinery as the first has ramifications for language itself. The interactivity of networks that accommodate all known languages has an impact on the local language. A bilingual or multilingual speaker's native language differs from a monolingual speaker's native language, indicating the effect of the second or third language on the first. What is amazing is that these bidirectional affects can be demonstrated at all levels of language usage, from how speech is perceived and spoken to how grammar is processed and how words are chosen to reflect perceptual experience. Because the bilingual's native language is no longer the same as the monolingual speaker's native language, it is simple to understand how these changes to the original language may be viewed as a negative outcome of new language acquisition or, at the at least, as a sign of language attrition. The viewpoint, however, fails to account for the diversity exhibited among monolingual speakers. Most Americans understand that folks in the South talk with a distinct accent than people in the Northeast or Midwest.

Given the growing body of evidence that multilingualism benefits both normally ageing and more challenged older adults, and because studies on young adult bilinguals have suggested that many of the same cognitive benefits can be seen for late bilinguals as for early bilinguals, other studies have looked into whether a person needs to be bilingual from birth or whether late bilingualism can confer some of the same benefits as early bilingualism. Because age of acquisition and language proficiency are inextricably linked-the longer a person has used a language, the more likely he or she is to be proficient, and proficiency appears to be more important to the consequences of bilingualism than age of exposure per se-research has yet to provide a definitive answer.

Therefore, it is difficult to control or match as many aspects as possible when comparing groups of people, for example, to study the influence of bilingual or multilingual language expertise independent from total life experience. Some people choose to learn a second or third language, while others are forced to do so due to immigration requirements. Some people live in environments where everyone speaks two or three languages, while others live in environments where everyone speaks just one language, such as many parts of the United States. Understanding how these various types of language experience impact the reported effects for the mind and brain is thus an ongoing research area.

In principle, doing longitudinal research with the same individuals is a solution to the problem of between-group variability, but this is both expensive and difficult since attrition over time need very large samples to get unambiguous findings. In one recent study, researchers used a unique database in Scotland, the Lothian Birth Cohort 1936, in which over 1,000 people were assessed for intellect when

they were 11 years old in 1947, and again when they were in their 70s. Bilinguals had a strong benefit regardless of age at which they became bilingual, reflecting the findings of research comparing bilingual and monolingual groups.

As stated at the outset of this piece, the mythology surrounding multilingualism is one of the most significant impediments facing multilingualism in the United States. Learning a second or third language is neither a cognitively abnormal undertaking, nor does it have negative implications at any age. New research, particularly work enabled by the neuroscience revolution, demonstrates that all of the languages that a human learns and uses are processed in an integrated language system with substantial interaction. Such connection between languages creates competition among recognised languages, which need regulation.

Such connection between languages creates competition among recognised languages, which need regulation. Although this need appears to incur an initial cost during learning, it appears to be the flip side of a process that yields major rewards for cognitive control development. Researchers believe that novel approaches to language acquisition that allow learners to encounter variance across two or more languages, and that may result in language mixing and early effortful processing, may be helpful to long-term outcomes.

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