

PSYCHOLOGICAL ANALYSES OF BILINGUALS

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to integrate the current literature about the psychological dimensions of bilingualism: that is, to analyze psychological, subjective, and internal perspectives on bilingualism. What is the internal world of bilinguals like? How do they perceive the world and how do they think? What are the advantages and disadvantages of being bilingual? How does bilingualism interact with personality? In what way does being bilingual impact the aging mind? It will appeal to a wide range of readers across various intellectual and professional arenas, including cognitive psychologists, personality psychologists, psycholinguists, educational psychologists and second language teachers, among others.

Key words: bilingualism, executive function, inhibition, monolinguals;

Психологический анализ билингвов

Аннотация: Цель этой статьи состоит в том, чтобы объединить текущую литературу о психологических аспектах двуязычия, то есть проанализировать психологические, субъективные и внутренние взгляды на двуязычие. Каков внутренний мир билингва? Как они воспринимают мир и как они думают? Каковы преимущества и недостатки двуязычия? Как двуязычие взаимодействует с личностью? Каким образом двуязычие влияет на стареющий ум? Он понравится широкому кругу читателей из различных интеллектуальных и профессиональных сфер, включая когнитивных психологов, психологов личности, психолингвистов, педагогов-психологов и преподавателей второго языка, среди прочих.

Ключевые слова: билингвизм, исполнительная функция, торможение, монолингвы.

The view of bilingualism is remarkably different from the understanding of bilingualism through much of the 20th century. Researchers, educators and policy makers long considered a second language to be an interference, cognitively speaking, that hindered a child's academic and intellectual development. They are

not wrong about the interference: there is ample evidence that in a bilingual's brain both language systems are active even when he is using only one language, thus creating situations in which one system obstructs the other. But this interference, researchers are finding out, isn't so much a handicap as a blessing in disguise. It forces the brain to resolve internal conflict, giving the mind a workout that strengthens its cognitive muscles.

The collective evidence from a number of such studies suggests that the bilingual experience improves the brain's so-called executive function — a command system that directs the attention processes that they use for planning, solving problems and performing various other mentally demanding tasks. These processes include ignoring distractions to stay focused, switching attention willfully from one thing to another and holding information in mind — like remembering a sequence of directions while driving.

Why does the tussle between two simultaneously active language systems improve these aspects of cognition? Until recently, researchers thought the bilingual advantage stemmed primarily from an ability for *inhibition* that was honed by the exercise of suppressing one language system: this suppression, it was thought, would help train the bilingual mind to ignore distractions in other contexts. But that explanation increasingly appears to be inadequate, since studies have shown that bilinguals perform better than monolinguals even at tasks that do not require inhibition, like threading a line through an ascending series of numbers scattered randomly on a page.

The key difference between bilinguals and monolinguals may be more basic: a heightened ability to monitor the environment. “Bilinguals have to switch languages quite often — you may talk to their father in one language and to their mother in another language,” says Albert Costa, a researcher at the University of Pompeu Fabra in Spain. “It requires keeping track of changes around you in the same way that they monitor their surroundings when driving.” [17, 83-86]. In a study comparing German-Italian bilinguals with Italian monolinguals on monitoring tasks, Mr. Costa and his colleagues found that the bilingual subjects not only performed better, but they also did so with less activity in parts of the brain involved in monitoring, indicating that they they're more efficient at it.

Speaking two languages rather than just one has obvious practical benefits in an increasingly globalized world. But in recent years, scientists have begun to show that the advantages of bilingualism are even more fundamental than being able to converse with a wider range of people. Being bilingual, it turns out, makes you smarter. It can have a profound effect on their brain, improving cognitive skills not related to language and even shielding against dementia in old age.

“From a very young age, children who are bilingual are using their executive control system and in a way that advances its development,” says Dr. Ellen Bialystok, a cognitive neuroscientist and Distinguished Research Professor of Psychology at York University in Toronto. The executive control system is, “the basis for every hard thing they do. It helps us pay attention to this and ignore that,” says Dr. Bialystok, adding, “It’s precisely the system the brain calls on to pay attention to one language over the other.”

This means bilingual children constantly use their executive control systems to switch between languages. And frequently exercising this function makes bilinguals better at planning, focusing, multitasking and problem solving. This doesn’t mean bilinguals have a higher I.Q., but it does mean their executive control systems are more advanced. For example, in Bialystok’s 2004 study with Martin-Rhee, bilingual children are faster than monolingual children at sorting objects into bins by shape despite conflicting colors. Bilingual children ignored distractions, because their executive control systems are more developed. This skill translates into directing attention away from everyday distractions as they’ll from noises while driving to classroom chatter during a lecture.

“This back and forth switching (between languages) is a strengthening agent for the brain,” says Dr. Patricia Kuhl, Co-Director of the Institute for Learning and Brain Sciences and Bezos Family Foundation Endotheyd Chair in Early Childhood. Dr. Kuhl even goes so far as to say bilingualism allows you, in those frontal areas, to make decisions better, to be more creative in their thinking and it’s protective against age or brain disease like dementia and Alzheimer’s.

In a small 2012 study headed by neuropsychologist Dr. Tamar Gollan with 44 elderly Spanish-English bilinguals, those with a higher degree of bilingualism resisted Alzheimer’s better than others. And in Bialystok’s 2012 Neurology study of 211 bilinguals and monolinguals, those who spoke multiple languages shot they’d signs of Alzheimer’s five years later than their monolingual counterparts. Speaking more than one language and exercising the executive control system regularly is, in Dr. Bialystok’s words, “the ultimate Sudoku or ultimate crossword puzzle!”

Despite research showing many benefits for those who speak multiple languages, many Americans remain skeptical. “I think that people are afraid of bilingualism in general,” says Dr. Kuhl who believes many parents fear increasing skills in one language will reduce their skills in another. But as she points out, “Research is showing that’s not the case.”

While bilingualism doesn't hinder their child's learning, it makes speaking more work. Bilinguals have to produce speech rapidly and coherently while there are two languages in their heads.

Speakers of two languages may have extra defenses against the onset of dementia and Alzheimer's disease—that's according to new research announced this at the American Association for the Advancement of Science meeting in Washington, DC. Psychologist Ellen Bialystok and her team studied more than 200 Alzheimer's patients with about the same level of mental acumen, about half of whom they're bilingual and half of whom they're monolingual. The result: On average, the speakers of multiple languages had been diagnosed of their years later in their lives. Says Bialystok:

“Being bilingual has certain cognitive benefits and boosts the performance of the brain, especially one of the most important areas known as the executive control system. They know that this system deteriorates with age but they have found that at every stage of life it functions better in bilinguals. They perform at a higher level. It won't stop them getting Alzheimer's disease, but they can cope with the disease for longer.”

To get a look at that system, the team took CT scans of the patients' brain. That's when they found something curious: The physical ravages of Alzheimer's they're actually more advanced in the brains of bilinguals, despite the fact that they're mentally more protected.

Apparently, the bilinguals' brains are somehow compensating, she said. “Even though the ‘machine’ is more broken, they can function at the same level as a monolingual with less disease,” she said. [23, 76]

Bialystok's research, which appears in *Neurology*, isn't the only good news for bilinguals. A separate study by Janet Thicker says that babies raised to speak at least two languages from birth have an amazing ability they mono-linguist's lack: They can tell the difference between two languages they've never heard just by watching to people speaking—they don't even need to hear them.

Given regular exposure to two languages, infants develop a general ability to track closely what they hear and see in decoding languages, Thicker proposed. In the visual realm, such information may include lip movements, the rhythm of the jaw opening and closing, and the full ensemble of facial movements while talking.

Not everyone was fortunate enough to hear multiple languages from birth, but Bialystok says that's OK—bilingualism could offer brain benefits even if you wait until later in life to finally master those French verb conjugations.

Bienvenidos to the Department of Bicultural-Bilingual Studies! Their faculty and students study, design, and participate in bilingual and/or second-language

teaching, Mexican-American studies, multicultural functions of society, migration, trans-nationalism, and ethnic studies. Their graduate and undergraduate programs are interdisciplinary in nature, content, approach, and range. The Bicultural-Bilingual faculty engages students with the cultural and linguistic resources of multicultural communities.

They are committed to the educational needs of traditionally underserved populations. The department's faculty is diverse and internationally recognized. Their 16 members publish in leading journals and books, with renowned academic publishers across a range of disciplines. Students gain a variety of perspectives, as professors share expertise in education, anthropology, applied linguistics, cultural studies, policy, and sociology. The presence of their faculty on a number of major research journals in various disciplines, in addition to being an indication of their stature as recognized scholars in their respective fields, also serves as a testament to the quality of faculty in all of their disciplines in the department. Bicultural-Bilingual Studies was one of the founding academic units when the University of Texas at San Antonio first opened its doors in 1973. Three decades later, their department is a leader in preparing researchers, educators, and community leaders. Students participate critically in the creation of a more just and democratic society, at schools, research institutions, universities, or non-profit organizations.

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