




THE UNIVERSITY
of EDINBURGH

**HERITAGE LANGUAGES AS
RESOURCES AND OPPORTUNITIES
FOR ACTIVE MULTILINGUAL SOCIETIES**

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1



What's 'bi-multilingualism'?

~~Bilingual: a person who knows two languages perfectly from birth.~~

Bilingual: a person who knows two or more languages and uses them on a regular basis.






2



Some definitions

"Heritage" languages:

- community languages introduced by migration
- regional/indigenous minority languages




3



Heritage speakers

- Heritage speakers: second generation children who acquire the language from first-generation parents




4



We need to separate....





5



Three common misconceptions about early bilingualism

Confusion



Problems at school



'Useful' and 'not useful' languages



- English, Spanish, Chinese
- Irish, Gaelic, Sardinian, Polish, etc.

6

What research shows

Bilingual sensitivity begins at birth, or even earlier

Bilingual infants can discriminate rhythmically-similar languages at 3-4 months

Bilingual infants at 8 months can (still) distinguish two rhythmically different languages just by watching silent talking faces

7

What research shows: potential benefits for children

- Better understanding of how language works; headstart in early literacy
- Better ability to learn other languages and (potentially) better at the majority language
- Language mixing = competence in both languages

8

What research shows: potential benefits for children and adults

- Awareness of other people's perspectives
- Selective attention and ability to handle conflicting information
- Flexibility in task switching

9

One consequence: enhanced creativity

10

"Draw a flower that doesn't exist"

- Monolingual children delete elements in their drawings (e.g. "it's missing leaves" or "it doesn't have a stalk")

(a) Girl 3;11	(b) Girl 3;8	(c) Girl 4;2
(d) Boy 4;0	(e) Girl 4;1	(f) Boy 4;1
(g) Girl 4;8	(h) Boy 4;0	(i) Girl 4;2

(Adi-Japha et al. 2010)

11

"Draw a flower that doesn't exist"

- Bilingual children insert elements from other categories (e.g. "a giraffe flower" or a "flower with hands")

(a) Girl 4;8	(b) Boy 4;2	(c) Boy 5;0
(d) Girl 4;4	(e) Boy 4;2	(f) Boy 5;9
(g) Boy 4;1	(h) Boy 3;8	(i) Girl 4;7

(Adi-Japha et al. 2010)

12

New myths about children

LANGUAGE LEARNING = GENIAL BRAINS



CHILDREN'S BRAINS ARE LIKE SPONGES!



13

Why these effects on cognitive control?

- The two languages of bilinguals are always active.
- Bilinguals have to exclude one language when they speak the other.
- This makes them better at handling and monitoring conflicting information.



14

Why these effects on perspective-taking?

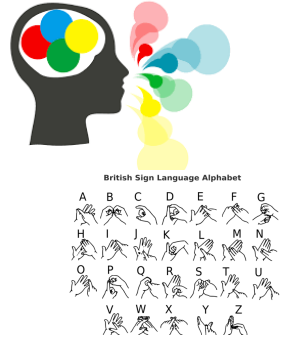
- Bilingual children learn that not everyone is bilingual: they have to adapt their language choice to the person they are talking to.
- This involves embracing the other person's linguistic perspective.



15

It doesn't matter *which* languages

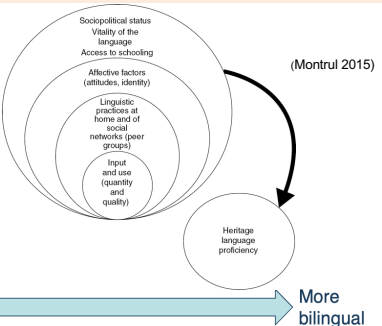
- It's the fact of having more than one language that matters.
- THERE ARE NO 'MORE USEFUL' OR 'LESS USEFUL' LANGUAGES FROM THIS POINT OF VIEW!**



16

But the bilingual experience DOES matter

These effects are not always found in all bilinguals because the type of **bilingual experience** plays a role



17

Important implications for...

- Families
- Policy makers: language learning and teaching in schools
- Multilingual classrooms and migrant children
- Indigenous minority languages
- Health professionals
- The private sector

18



Challenging negative attitudes

- Maintenance of languages but also cultural diversity is a challenge in contexts that often don't value either.



19



Maintaining home languages? YES

- First generation migrant families often experience pressure not to speak their home language
- Maintaining home languages is an advantage for active bilingualism, family communication and the expression of emotions.



20



Challenging negative attitudes

- Children exposed predominantly to impoverished non-native L2 input are at a disadvantage in acquiring the L2.



21

21



Self-enforced use of the L2 as the home language

- The most dramatic effects are on the range of vocabulary.
- Poor vocabulary means less access to and use of L2 input.
- Migrant heritage children in this situations lose access to L1 and don't gain easy access to L2.

22

22



Speaking the minority language at home

- Speak/read/play in the home language with the whole family
- Non-native speaking partners too!
- Older siblings too!
- Frequent online chats with grandparents, or family members not living at home



23

23



Bilingualism in the family: a commitment

Enough engaging exposure to both languages



Variety of speakers



Literacy



Positive attitudes and confidence



Positive environment



24

24

Different patterns in the family



- One parent – one language
 - Minority language at home, majority language outside the home
 - Majority language at home, minority language at nursery/school
- Two parents, two languages
 - Language A and Language B at different times/places

Any of these will work if it provides enough engaging input in both languages!

25

The importance of literacy

- Learning to read in the home language can benefit literacy in the language of schooling, even if this uses a different writing system.
- Encouraging early reading in the home language is always a good idea.




26

There are challenges too

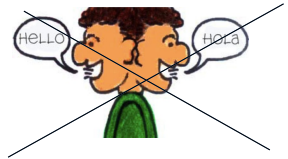




- Vocabulary
- Silent periods and atypical behaviour
- Identity, 'belonging', not wanting to feel different

27

"Bilingual" → NOT the sum of two monolinguals



- Risk of over/under-diagnosis: some typical delays and mistakes in bilingual children may look like speech impairments but in most cases are not.

However, many educational and diagnostic tests are still based on monolingual norms

28

Language learning in schools

- Children learn differently at different ages
- Teachers should be trained
- Parents should be informed
- Multilingualism should be recognized and promoted



29

Increasing sensitivity to bi-multilingualism in education

Language-responsive education
ONLINE EVENT | 15 SEPTEMBER 2026 | 3PM (BST)




30

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CarnegieUK
TRUST
CHANGING MINDS • CHANGING LIVES

- (Peace-Hughes, De Lima, Tisdall, Jamieson & Sorace 2021)



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32



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**A LANGUAGE IS A
DIALECT THAT HAS
AN ARMY AND A
NAVY.**

QUOTEHD.COM

Max Weinreich

34



- (Sorace, 2011,2016)

35



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36

6

Linguistic diversity disappearing

Roughly 6,000 to 7,000 languages spoken worldwide

- 25 languages account for more than half of the world's populations
- The vast majority of languages are minority languages in every country in which they are spoken.
- By the end of this century, half of the world's languages will have disappeared (UNESCO estimate)

Top 25 World Languages

37

Minority languages ↔ bilingualism

- Speaking a minority language may give children the benefits of bilingualism.
- Active bilingualism is essential for the transmission of a minority language across generations.

38

What's the role of AI for language learning, diversity and revitalization?

It can contribute to language learning but not replace human interaction.

It can be a threat to language diversity.

AI should become → IA (Intelligence Augmentation).

39

In conclusion:

Heritage languages = a resource, an opportunity, an investment for life for countries and communities

40

What can be done?

PROVIDE ACCESSIBLE INFORMATION to communities about benefits, challenges and developmental facts = **BETTER DECISIONS**

41

Investing in multilingualism, beyond English

CORRECT INFORMATION = BETTER DECISIONS IN ALL SECTORS OF SOCIETY

42

We need bridges connecting research and society



43

Bilingualism Matters

Founded in 2008

Seminars and training for families, educators, health professionals, policy makers, international companies and institutions; increasingly also children and younger people

Public engagement, policy advice, media attention

Research commissioned by stakeholders

Wide network of international branches

Now a not-for-profit organisation

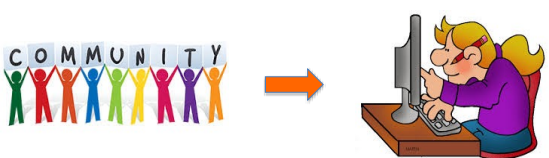
44

Partnerships and collaborations



45

From the community back to research



46

More insightful cross-disciplinary research



Better understanding of the contexts of research questions and more research insights.

Better ability to communicate across disciplinary boundaries

47

Training young researchers

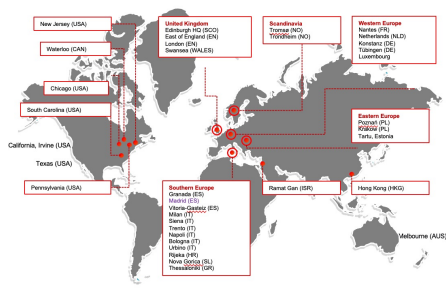
- Training and opportunities to talk to the general public and engage in community projects.
- This experience is increasingly valued by employers.




48



International network



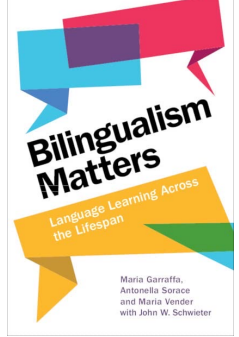
35 partners:

- 25 in the UK and Europe
- 6 in the US
- 1 in Canada
- 1 in the Middle East
- 1 in China
- 1 in Australia

49



If you want to know more...

50



THANK YOU!

More information:

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51