

## **Bilingualism makes you (children and elderly people) smart**

We spoke to Antonella Sorace, linguist at the University of Edinburgh

Two groups of children under 6 years of age and a series of colourful objects: yellow triangles, red squares, white rectangles. A researcher asks the little ones to sort them by shape. Once they are done, the task changes: the same objects should now be sorted by colour. And that's when the difference becomes clear. One group will tend to repeat what they did during the first task, sorting triangles together with other triangles, and squares with squares: that's expected, at their age. The second group, instead, will be able to perform the new task more quickly. This is because the second group is made up of children who speak more than one language. In other words, bilingualism makes you smart.

"Children who speak more than one language are more flexible. They are better at managing conflicting information and selecting what is most relevant". Antonella Sorace teaches Language Acquisition at the University of Edinburgh. She has tested the empirical validity, and is committed to disseminating, the following claim: bilingualism is a life-long investment. Therefore, parents should not be afraid if their children speak Italian and Sardinian from an early age. "A child who can speak more than one language is also better at understanding other people's points of view". Different languages mean different ways of thinking, different cultures: multilingual children are sensitive to this, whereas adults often are not.

Prof. Sorace is part of an excellence cluster bringing together linguists, sociologists, psychologists, physicians. "I research linguistic and cognitive aspects of bilingualism, but there also relevant social aspects. A child surrounded by people who undervalue one of her languages, perhaps because they consider that language useless and outdated, as is the case in Sardinia, will grow up less motivated to learn it." It is therefore most important to make sure families are aware of the implications and discontinue the legacy of the so-called *Bregungia generation*<sup>1</sup>. Everybody is in favour of bilingualism when the second language is English. Much less so when it is a regional language, Prof. Sorace is ready to acknowledge. "But our brain makes no difference: Italian and Sardinian or Italian and English are equivalent". The enhanced mental flexibility that characterizes multilingual children has been confirmed by several international studies. And even bilingual grandparents are smarter: "According to preliminary results of a study conducted by researchers at the University of Edinburgh, elderly people who speak more than language maintain their cognitive abilities intact for longer."

There is no single recipe for bringing up a happy bilingual child. "Most importantly, they should listen to both languages and come to think of them as equally important. In some cases, the formula one parent-one language works. In others, both parents speak the local community language at home, and the national language outside." It is not necessary to plan a bilingual education from birth, but it is better to introduce the second language as soon as possible. "Unfortunately, many parents are not aware of this, they think their child can only acquire one language at a time." But what if there are three languages: Italian, Sardinian, and English? "No damage for the child's brain" muses Prof. Sorace: "but mum and dad should have realistic expectations: waking hours are limited and need to be divided between three

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<sup>1</sup> "Bregungia" means "shame" in Sardinian. The phrase refers to generations of Sardinians who considered it shameful to speak their own language instead of Italian.

languages. This means that one could lag behind, at least for some time". In fact, she explains, there is no such thing as perfect bilingualism: depending on age and circumstances, one language can become dominant.

While researchers are confident that speaking more than one language brings advantages, families are often unaware of the benefits. Prof. Sorace established an information center in Edinburgh, called Bilingualism Matters, whose aim is to disseminate the outcome of academic studies among the general public. "We have branches all over Europe and we used to have one in Sardinia, too". Is that project over? "Hopefully not. Bilinguismo Creschet was a great initiative and I hope the new regional government will decide to continue supporting it".

Sociologist Alessandro Mongili and linguist Roberto Bolognesi proposed a link between suppression of Sardinian, the emergence of regional features in the Italian spoken in Sardinia, and the poor performance of Sardinian students on standardized tests like Invalsi or Ocse Pisa: what do you think of this idea? Prof. Sorace is keen to stress that "Languages in contact always influence one another, interference is a common phenomenon, in Sardinia as anywhere else. However, I think that promoting knowledge of Sardinian and Italian, and better understanding of the benefits of bilingualism, would limit the disadvantages."

A world-leading scholar

Antonella Sorace is Professor of Language Acquisition at the University of Edinburgh, one of the most prestigious universities in the world. Prof. Sorace's mother is from Pozzomaggiore ("I don't speak Sardinian, but I understand it"); she has a degree in Foreign Languages from the University of Rome, a Master from the University of Southern California, and a Ph.D. from the University of Edinburgh. She has held teaching and research positions at the following institutions: the University of Tromsø, the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, the Johns Hopkins University, the Michigan State University, and the Universities of Hamburg and Siena. She is the director of an information center at the University of Edinburgh (<http://www.bilingualism-matters.org.uk/>), whose name summarizes her own academic career: "Bilingualism matters".

Translated by Chiara Gambi from the original article by Daniela Pinna in L'Unione Sarda  
1/8/2014