

Speaker: Professor Antonella Sorace

The European context for bilingualism

The context in which we find we are operating is this: Multilingualism is becoming more and more common all over Europe, but at the same time we are always confronted with a number of facts. One is lack of information. People really do not know very much about bilingualism and what it means to grow up with more than one language. As a result there are many misconceptions about child bilingualism and we will look at these later today.

In some European countries, language learning is a low priority. I happen to live in one of those countries: The UK. I live in Scotland, which is still part of the UK (you may have heard that there was a referendum a few days ago). Because of the status of English, people in the UK do not have the incentive or motivation to learn other languages. In some other countries, there is an almost exclusive focus on English, so everybody wants their children to learn English, and we will see that this focus is often at the expense of other languages. This is the context in which operate.

Before I tell you what we are doing, I think it is useful to start with the many misconceptions that people have about bilingualism. If you think that you don't share those misconceptions, then I am very pleased, but I can tell you that those misconceptions are very strong - I deal with people in my public engagement activities all the time and I can really see how strong the misconceptions are; and as Maaïke [Verrips – director of the new Netherlands branch of Bilingualism Matters] was saying, it is not a question of education because these misconceptions are found across the board, in many different types of people.

Misconceptions about bilingualism

Many people think that the bilingual child is confused and will grow up speaking none of his languages properly. This naturally worries parents and it worries teachers later on.

There are other people who think that bilingualism particularly in young children maybe such a burden on the young brain that it can slow down other kinds of development - the idea that two languages are really too much for a very young brain.

And then there are people who think that having a second language at school will undermine progress in the language of schooling, which is almost always the language of the country in which they are growing up. In other words the main language at school might suffer because there is a second language.

And finally, some people think that bilingualism might be only good if it involves certain languages, such as Spanish, English or increasingly Chinese, as they are perceived as a good investment. But how about regional languages like Frisian, like Gaelic in Scotland, like Sardinian in Italy? Or the languages of immigration - Polish happens to be the second most spoken language in the UK at the moment. What about Urdu, or other languages brought in by immigration? People can and do think that these languages are a burden and it is not worth investing in them.

So now I am going to say very briefly why research shows that these misconceptions are wrong. The main message is that bilingualism gives children much more than two languages.

First let me tell you that I am using bilingualism in its broadest sense: bilingualism, trilingualism, quadrilingualism, pentalingualism.. put simply, the ability to speak more than one language. I will also refer to bilingualism with regards to two languages at any ages. I would regard myself as bilingual, although I grew up as a monolingual speaker of Italian and I didn't learn English until my

teenage years, but because I use English and other languages on a daily basis, that makes me bilingual.

The kind of research that I am going to briefly mention doesn't really talk about the social or cultural advantages of bilinguals because these are better known. Such as the fact that bilingual children are often exposed to two different cultures, and as a result they are more interested and tolerant to other cultures. Instead I will focus on the linguistic and cognitive benefits to bilingualism, because this is an areas where people know a lot less.

Let's start with the rather obvious notion that learning languages is easier when you are young, like many other things. Learning languages for the child does not involve conscious effort; it is spontaneous as long as there is input in place. Whether the child is a small baby; or whether the child is a bit older and has already learnt one language, and is then exposed to another language in childhood; or whether we have slightly older children or teenagers .. there is a naturalness in learning languages in childhood that is slightly lost later on. It is not that you can't learn languages as an adult - the world is full of proficient adult speakers – but the mechanisms used are slightly different.

Bilingual children: are they confused?

So, do bilingual children get confused? Remember, that was the first misconception.

Well research shows that that is not the case. Even tiny babies can tell their languages apart. Researchers have ways of studying very young infants these days that were not available until fairly recently... So we now know what a child can do and whether they can tell the difference between the two languages long before they start speaking. And by using these methods, we know that even a child who hears fairly similar languages can distinguish between them. I have colleagues in Barcelona, who work with children who learn Spanish and Catalan – very similar languages – and those children know perfectly well when they are listening to Spanish and listening to Catalan.

Language Mixing and Switching

Do children mix languages? I hear this from many parents who ask if their child is confused, because it seems the child is mixing the two languages together. There is a lot of research on mixing and switching in bilinguals, that shows that actually, first of all children mix perhaps a lot less than you might imagine. Children switch languages for a reason. For example sometimes children mix because there is a word in the other language that expresses the meaning they are trying to express better than the word in the language they are using. So this is a bilingual strategy, a communication strategy, that enhances the meaning that they are trying to express. And it is good strategy to use among bilinguals. Mixing is seldom a sign of confusion – there is a grammar of mixing. Mixing can only happen at certain points of the sentence, but not at others; children use these rules of mixing that are also used by adults in communities where mixing is common. So mixing happens to be a skill rather than a sign of confusion.

Bilingual children understand how language works better

When I say they notice how language works, I don't mean that they can recite the grammatical rules of the language in the same way that a second language learner in a classroom might learn; I mean spontaneous understanding of language structure at the level of sound, words, and sentences. And it is because of this implicit understanding of language structure that many bilingual children find it easier to learn other languages. A third or a fourth languages comes much easier if you already have a second language in your brain. And because of this better understanding of language structure,

contrary to what people normally think, many bilingual children have a better understanding of the language of schooling. We have research now that shows that in some regional minority communities, children actually have a better understanding of the main language of schooling despite the fact that many people think that they are at a disadvantage with respect to that language.

Literacy

Many bilingual children are early readers. Much of this research has been done on the acquisition of alphabetic languages such as Dutch, Italian, English... In these languages, many children can learn to read earlier. And when you read in one language, some of those skills can transfer to learning to read in another language. So again, learning to read in a language is not a source of confusion because children figure out what it means to learn to learn any alphabetic language. Learning to read in an alphabetic language means that there are correspondences between printed letters and the sounds in the spoken language. That's what children have to figure out. If they figure it out in one language, e.g an easy language like Italian, which is very friendly to beginning readers because it is very transparent - the spoken and written languages are very close - they don't have to rediscover it for another language, because they only have to learn that the other language doesn't have the same system of correspondences between letters and sounds.

Different perspective

Outside languages, there are advantages having to do with the early discovery that other people may have a different perspectives from their own. This is a major milestone for all children. Children have to learn that other people may have a different point of view from their own, and that they can't read their mind. How do bilingual children have an advantage here? Well they discover from early on, that not everyone is bilingual and so they have to select one language according to who they are talking to. This really opens the mind in a very clear sense. The fact that they also have two words for the same object - my children learned that there are two words for glass for example, the English word and the Italian word - also opens the mind in the sense that there are different usages, different points of view. This is reflected outside the language domain, so it leads children to appreciate at an earlier age that other people can have a different perspective. It is hard to underestimate the importance of this with respect to living together with people from different cultures and walks of life, and appreciating that everyone is different and there is no more important or less important point of view.

Paying attention and switching tasks

With respect to attention, there are some benefits that research has shown in bilingual children. Bilingual children, and then bilingual adults as well, tend to be better than monolinguals with respect to focused attention. This means paying attention to what matters in whatever you are doing, so paying attention to the relevant information and at the same time ignoring the irrelevant information. So focussed attention means the ability to choose what you are focussing on and disregard what you are not focussing on. And bilinguals are also better at switching between tasks. Where does this come from? It comes from the experience of switching from one language to the other. You can't simply switch off a language in the morning because you don't need it today. Every time a bilingual speaks, the other language(s) is still very much there and the bilingual has to keep them under control. So I am speaking English to you but I am fighting my Italian and other languages so they don't interfere with my English. And it is this experience that is generalised to other tasks that are not linguistic.

Bilinguals are also better at adapting attention depending on what they are doing. So they adjust their attention and they are able to perceive exactly what the task demands. So looking at this ambiguous figure, if you look at it one way you see a vase; if you look at it another way you see two people facing each other. Bilinguals can focus on one image and ignore the other better and more efficiently than monolinguals.

Why all these advantages? As I have already said, the languages in the bilinguals are always active. So the experience of, in my case, speaking English and pushing Italian away is at the root of many of these advantages.

Privileged Bilingualism?

Let's go back to one of the misconceptions that I was talking about before – the idea that there is a privileged kind of bilingualism and a less privileged kind of bilingualism. But from this [the cognitive] point of view, it doesn't really matter which languages are spoken. What matters is having more than one language in the brain, not how many people speak those languages or if a language is associated with political power, which is what makes a language wide spread if you think about it. So there are no useful or useless languages from this point of view; all languages are valuable. All languages are useful whether they are spoken widely in the world or only in small regions.

Do all bilingual children benefit from this?

Now you are going to ask: do all children benefit from these advantages? In order for these advantages to come out, it's important that first of all, children hear enough of both languages; they need to have enough input in both languages. It's not enough for parents to speak two different languages – because I'm afraid there is no genetic transmission of languages. If my children hadn't heard enough Italian living in Scotland, they wouldn't have become bilingual. So that is one thing. And the other thing is: positive attitude. Children are very sensitive to what people think about their languages and they know when people think that one of their languages is less important, or useless, or funny, or not worth speaking. So positive attitudes around languages are really important for bilingual benefits to emerge.

Older learners

What about older language learners? We are beginning to find that even starting a language later has some of these benefits. In Edinburgh we are focussing on late language learners who reach a high level of proficiency – so in university students for example, we are beginning to find big changes between the first year of a language degree and the fourth year of a language degree compared with students who do a different kind of degree. We are also studying at much older learners – people who take up a language in their fifties – and we find that the brain is still flexible even at that age. So learning a language is always useful, although there are advantages in starting earlier as we saw. But it is not the case that if you don't start as a child it's too late, you've missed your chance - far from it.

The 3 important factors for late bilingualism are regular use, proficiency level and number of languages. You may also have heard that there are potential longer term benefits of bilingualism in elderly people. So in normal aging, elderly bilinguals may keep their cognitive faculties for longer than monolingual elderly people. But if they are unlucky enough to get a kind of dementia, the symptoms of dementia tend to appear later – on average 4 years later – compared with monolingual elderly people. Again, in Edinburgh, many neuroscientist colleagues have made an important contribution here.

In what fields are languages useful?

Time to look at two more misconceptions. Some people think that languages are only useful if you end up studying arts and humanities but not science, because in science, you don't really need languages. The other misconception is that in business, what is the point of learning languages – everybody speaks English. English is the global language of business. So is there any room in business for bilingualism and multilingualism?

For the first misconception we can say that there are an increasing number of studies showing that knowing more than one language improves some kinds of mathematical reasoning and logical reasoning, and some kinds of problem solving abilities. Arguably some of these abilities are involved in whatever type of "Science" people want to engage with.

For business – this remains to be demonstrated – but arguably, business people with knowledge of languages have better negotiation abilities and a better understanding of priorities. Ultimately they have better leadership skills because they have more sensitivity to the other person's culture and they understand what lies behind the message. This is actually the topic of an article in the Financial Times about by us last year; we organised a Round Table with the Financial Times dealing with entrepreneurs and business people; these are the conclusions that we drew and that the article covers.

The business thing is really a big problem for the UK because of the insular attitude and the privileged monolingualism that characterises the UK. These are facts from government sources: lack of language skills in the UK is the equivalent of a tax on the British economy that equals something like £7.3 billion a year. This is a staggering figure, and something has to be done. We are trying to reach businesses in the country to make sure that they develop corporate and social responsibility for bilingualism in many ways. For example they can hire bilingual and multilingual people, they can give priority to bilingual and multilingual people; they can champion policies that enhance early bilingualism; they can sponsor institutions that encourage child bilingualism; they can support their workforce and employers who want to raise their children bilingual, who want to be posted abroad and so on.

Bilingualism Matters

So investing in multilingualism requires, as I said at the beginning, changing attitudes. And we think that one way in which we can contribute to changing attitudes is by giving people information, providing them with the correct information about bilingualism so that they can make informed decisions wherever they are. Whether they are parents, whether they are teachers, whether they are policy makers, whether they work in hospitals or in speech therapy clinics, whether they are businesses – they all need the correct information.

That is where Bilingualism Matters came from. And since we started in May 2008, we have been growing exponentially because there is such a need for information on bilingualism and multilingualism. We now have collaborations with many institutions and organisations, we are in the media quite a lot, we have European branches – and I am soon coming back to the big finale here – we are a centre with full time staff and offices now (I am very pleased to say!). On this slide is a list of the present branches of Bilingualism Matters [Croatia, England, Germany, Greece, Italy, Norway, Scotland] , as you saw before, so we already have a huge network of branches with other branches in the pipeline. In the next few months we will be opening other branches including one in the

United States in December, and we have expressions of interest from 6 more countries at the moment that we are negotiating with.

We deal with encouraging early language exposure in the pre-school and primary school years – this is perhaps normal in the Netherlands, but it is not normal in a country like the UK.

We deal with the maintenance of home languages in immigrant children. We go to immigrant families and we tell them, look if you keep speaking your language, your child will learn English, Dutch, Italian – whatever the language of the community is – faster and better, and they will have the advantage of having more than one language in the brain.

And finally we deal with the maintenance of regional and minority languages. I do a lot of work in Sardinian personally because my mother was from Sardinia, and because she was convinced that Sardinian wasn't very important, she never spoke Sardinian to me. So we are working there to ensure that people understand that they have a privilege, they have an opportunity rather than a problem.

The following are just some of the collaborations that we have. We collaborate with Edinburgh City Council, particularly in schools with a high percentage of immigrant children; we collaborate with the Scottish Government – they now have a new policy for introducing languages in schools, and we made some important contributions to this new policy; we deal with other societies and organisations in Scotland, including one for Gaelic – this is Bòrd na Gàidhlig, which is the government sponsored agency for Gaelic in Scotland.

We also do research projects, many of which are sponsored by stakeholders. So this project [Early learning of Chinese Project] was sponsored by the Scottish Government [sic – project was sponsored by the Scotland China Education Network] about introducing Chinese in schools. We trained a group of native speakers of Mandarin to go into Primary 1 classes – that is five year olds – and do activities in Chinese. We wanted to show that for a 5 year old, Chinese is not a difficult language. If we think it is, it's because we are projecting our own perception of Chinese as difficult language. But for a 5 year old, spoken Chinese is not a problem – even in written Chinese they learned to recognise the characters quite fast.

We work in Sardinia with the Sardinian government. In fact we have just completed a project where we tested Sardinian-Italian bilingual children and compared them with Italian monolingual children and sure enough, Sardinian-Italian children have a better structural understand of Italian, contrary to public perception.

In terms of the private sector, I've already mentioned the Financial Times. We also give talks in the European Central Bank - their employees are very privileged, they speak several languages, but do they have more information? Not necessarily. They raise all sorts of issues, and they tend to be afraid that three or four languages might really be too much for their children.

We work with the European Commission. A few years ago we worked with the Piccolingo campaign, helping to shape the campaign and organising events in Scotland. We had a project sponsored by the European Commission on language learning in the family, which we completed last year; we currently have a project on immigrant children where we try to facilitate integration of immigrant children through language activities and getting the families involved as well.

Finally, ATHEME. ATHEME is a big project as Maaiké already mentioned. It is sponsored by the European Commission; it has just started and will last for the next five years. It involves 17

institutions, 8 different European countries, and it is through AThEME that we have the privilege today to launch Bilingualism Matters in the Netherlands.

Bilingualism Matters in the Netherlands is our 11th branch and we really hope that we can start a very good collaboration – not only within the AThEME project, which will certainly happen – but also beyond the AThEME project. I'm hoping we will have the basis for integrating Bilingualism Matters in the Netherlands into this European network where I hope we will be able to exchange ideas...[video ends]

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