

On the advantages and disadvantages of multilingualism: Towards a more realistic assessment

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Recent work on multilingualism and third language acquisition has led to an interesting paradox. On the one hand, there is a growing body of research documenting the influence of all previously acquired languages on third (or additional) language acquisition, modulated by parameters such as typological and psychotypological proximity, genetic distance, age of onset, recency of use, as well as several others. Arguably, third or additional language acquisition is subject to more cross-linguistic influence than second language acquisition, though most certainly not less and clearly not exclusively facilitative. On the other hand, research on multilingual development has accumulated suggestive evidence on the advantages of bilingual and multilingual upbringing and education, especially concerning cognitive development, cognitive reserve, and metalinguistic awareness, but also the acquisition of additional languages. Disadvantages, if identifiable at all, chiefly pertain to lexical development. The advantages of multilingual development seem to play out most prominently in regards to more general skills (e.g. reading and listening comprehension), and less so in more specific knowledge domains like grammatical rules (subject-verb agreement, article usage, etc.). Moreover, they seem to be more clearly identifiable in multilinguals who boast high and comparable proficiency levels in their languages, as with balanced bilinguals in contrast to subtractive bilingual heritage speakers.

In my contribution, I will first of all provide a critical reassessment of a field that is strongly characterized by incompatible methodologies, fashions, ideologies, and political convictions. Such a reassessment is necessary to understand the vast body of partly contradictory research results. Competing research camps seem to measure different things using incompatible instruments. In addition, I will offer some speculation regarding how more opportunity for cross-linguistic influence can perhaps translate into heightened language proficiency. On the whole, my presentation will be a warning against foregone conclusions and an invitation to a more thoughtful approach to a highly fascinating field.