

Multilingualism is good for you!

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Outline

- Results from recent research in bi-/multi-lingualism
- What are the benefits?
- Are there downsides?
- Multi-lingualism in the Scandinavian context

Results from recent research in bi-/ multi-lingualism

- Multilingualism and cognition
- Multilingualism and linguistic knowledge

Results from recent research in bi-/ multi-lingualism

- Multilingualism and cognition
- ✓ A point of concern for both parents and educators
- ✓ Early ideas: early bilingualism made children confused and slowed down their cognitive and linguistic development
- ✓ A turn: bilinguals superior to monolinguals on a wide range of intelligence tests and aspects of school achievement (Peal & Lambert 1962)

Multilingualism and cognition

- Bilingualism is a positive force that enhances children's cognitive and linguistic development
- ✓ Bi-/multilinguals outperform monolinguals on non-verbal tasks requiring attention and control
- ✓ Better executive control abilities: at the centre of intelligent thought

Cognitive advantages

- Many studies demonstrate a cognitive advantage for bilinguals (Bialystok, 2001; 2008) displayed in
 - greater linguistic creativity
 - greater awareness of the arbitrary nature of naming, which lies at the heart of language as a construct
- Our research: better conceptualisation mechanisms

Multilingualism and linguistic knowledge

- Previously thought that language development is slowed down in bilinguals
- Recent research suggests:
 - ✓ Better metalinguistic awareness
 - ✓ Bilingual babies in Canada (Weikum et al., 2007) retain phonological sensitivity for an extended time-window (compared to monolingual babies, where non-native speech perception declines at 9 months)

Multilingualism and language

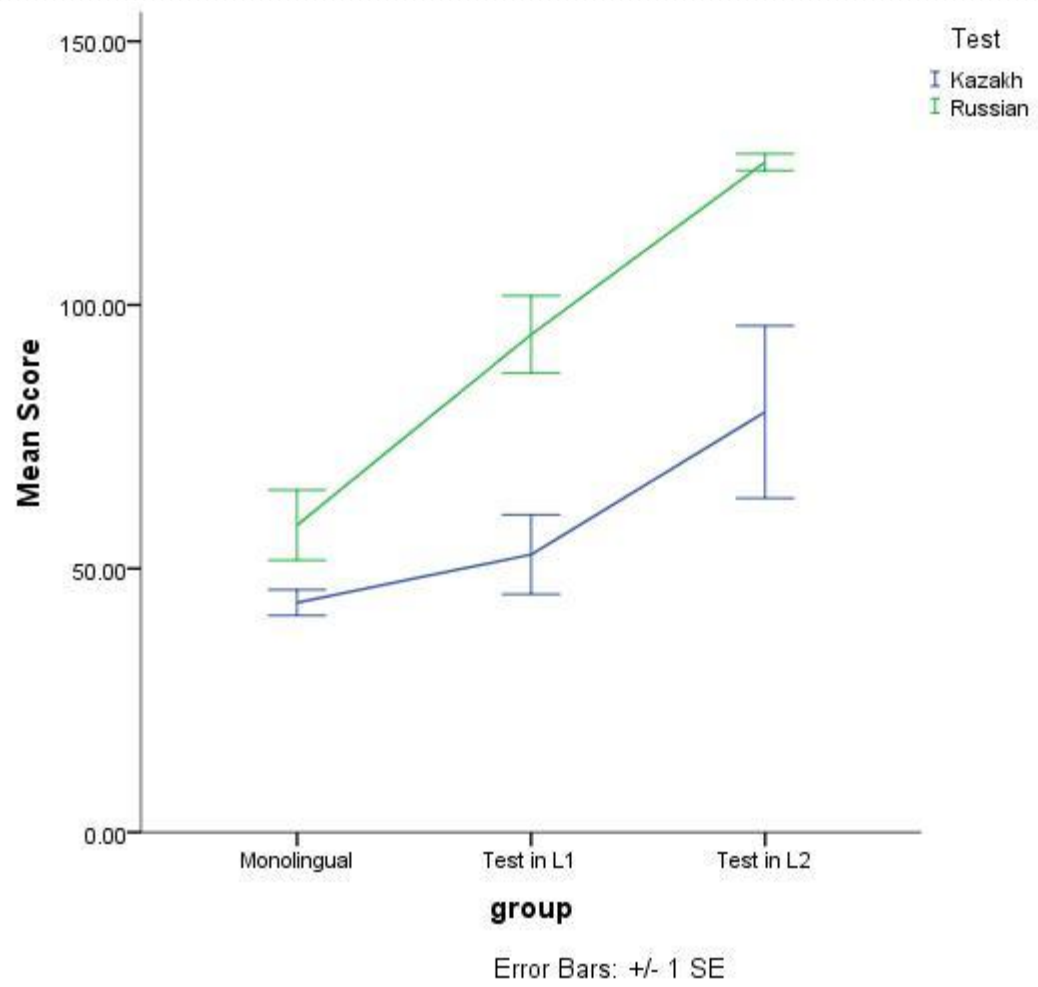
- Obvious advantages:
 - ✓ has command of more than one language
 - ✓ Is literate in more than one language
 - ✓ Has access to more information sources
 - ✓ Has access to more cultures and their way of thinking (Slobin's "thinking-for-speaking" hypothesis)

Are there downsides?

- It has been maintained (support in research) that bilingual vocabularies are smaller than those of monolinguals
- Not supported in our research (Vulchanova et al. 2011) – Kazakh & Russian (nabospråk/Kazakhstan)
- Overall bilingual vocabulary (including concepts) greater than the monolingual one
- ✓ Both bilingual groups had a significantly higher mean score on their better language (127,1 and 94,4 R), but also performed better than the

Our results

- Both bilingual groups outperformed their age-matched monolingual controls on a receptive vocabulary task
- ✓ the Russian L1 bilingual children → clearly better in Russian than their monolingual peers ($p < .05$)
- ✓ the Kazakh L1 bilinguals were slightly better on Kazakh than their monolingual peers ($p < .1$)



Are there downsides?

- Multilinguals may process linguistic information more slowly than monolinguals as a result of the necessity to inhibit the language they are not using currently (David Green's research)
- Potential delays in bilingual grammar development

Advantages: a summary

- Smarter
- Access to more information sources and cultures → more general knowledge
- Feel more confident when travelling abroad
- In a global world: have more friends coming from different linguistic backgrounds

The Scandinavian context

- Scandinavian languages: the closest language family among Indo-European languages
- The languages are largely mutually intelligible (e.g., other Germanic languages, English vs. German!!)
- Language proximity can be positive and negative (conflicting ideas in L2 studies, Ringbom vs. Kellerman)

L2 hypotheses

- Ringbom (1987, 1992) – similarities between the L1 and target language enhance positive transfer
- Kellerman (1979) – *The perceived distance hypothesis*: difference prevents negative transfer
- Cadierno (2008) – L2 learners likely to have problems when target language offers more elaborate structure in a domain

My favourite quote (Danish polyglot)

- **Why I learned Swedish**

I didn't, - I just heard so much of it that it penetrated into my brain ---> I have tried to think in the language, and it just flows, so now I really can't pretend anymore not to have any active skills at all

- **How I learned Swedish**

Swedish television, travels in Sweden, meeting Swedes in Denmark

Polyglot quote, ctd.

- **My plans to develop my Swedish skills**

It's idiotic that I understand everything and speak nothing, so one day I'll just work through a grammar plus a few thousand words on word lists

- **How I use Swedish - Passively**

Polyglot quote, ctd.

- **My strong points in Swedish** - Much exposure to native material
- **My weak points in Swedish**

It's too close to Danish, so I have never bothered to study it

(Source: How-to-learn-any-language.com)

Why learn your neighbour language?

- Access to more information sources (newspapers, news on TV, shared TV channels) → more knowledge
- Travelling around
- Have more friends (closer Scandinavian community even in international contexts, e.g. the Scandinavian School in Brussels)

Is it more difficult?

- YES, and NO
- Closely related languages appear easy to learn on the surface, but
- Present challenges at a more advanced level (from a linguistic perspective, more in the summary)
- A “foreign” language is perceived as more interesting and very different (Kellerman’s *perceived distance hypothesis*) → easy?
- Words of similar origin (cognates) present greater difficulties for skilled bilinguals measured on RTs (Gascoine, 2001)

How?

- Start young
- Early learning is advantageous (brain plasticity)
- Later, structured instruction (at school) helps (the adult learning style)
- Pick up a grammar book (e.g., “Statistics for dummies”)



So, what do you think?

Du forstår mer enn du tror

Hvis du tør