BILINGUALISM: CONNECTING POLICIES AND COMMUNITIES

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Bridges

The public and scientific understanding of bilingualism needs bridges across:
- different research fields
- research and society

“Bilingual” = more than one language

Bilingual/multilingual = someone who knows more than one language (even if not to the same level)

- Not “two monolinguals in one”!

Bilingualism changes the brain

- Anatomy
- Connectivity

This shouldn’t be surprising!

- Brain changes observed as a consequence of different types of experience, e.g.
  - taxi drivers (Maguire et al 2000)
  - musicians (Münte et al. 2002; Moreno et al 2009)
Does bilingualism affect behaviour?

A short tour of research

Three common misconceptions

And people often think....

What research shows

What research shows

• Early perceptual separation of the two languages

• Similar stages and milestones in bilingual and monolingual language development

(Byers-Heinlein, Burns, & Werker, 2010; Unsworth et al, 2014)
What research shows

Easier to learn other languages
Potential better understanding of the structure of the majority language.

(Grey et al. 2017; O’Hanlon et al. 2010)

What research shows

• Competence and creativity in language mixing
• Transfer of aspects of early literacy from one language to the other (when a sufficient vocabulary is learned)

(Muysken 2004; Bialystok 1988)

What research shows

• Earlier awareness of other people’s perspectives
• Better focused attention and ability to handle conflicting information
• Better cognitive flexibility in task switching and changing circumstances

(Kovacs 2009; Prior & Gollan 2011)

What research shows

Some new misunderstandings

Cognitive effects found in young adult L2 learners...

• Research has found selective cognitive effects of language learning in university students....

Some保护 against the decline of cognitive abilities, both in normal and pathological ageing.

...but also in older adult bilinguals

Cognitive effects found in young adult L2 learners...

• Research has found selective cognitive effects of language learning in university students....

Some protection against the decline of cognitive abilities, both in normal and pathological ageing.
More new misunderstandings

• So if you are bilingual you don’t get Alzheimer’s!

Are these benefits automatic?

These benefits are not always found in all bilinguals: many other factors play a role.

Bilingualism is neither categorical nor clearly quantifiable!

Some potentially relevant factors

• Patterns of language use in the family and in society
• Number of speakers the child hears the language from
• Attitudes towards bilingualism and particular languages

Some challenges

• Bilingual children develop two vocabularies: the size of vocabulary in each language is smaller than in monolinguals, especially in the first few years, and in the weaker language.

Some challenges

• Children who have a home language different from the community language may go through a ‘silent period’ in which they don’t say much at all.

• Identity and ‘belonging’
The big picture

It doesn't matter which languages

• What matters is the fact of having more than one language in the brain.

• THERE ARE NO ‘USEFUL’ OR ‘USELESS’ LANGUAGES FROM THIS POINT OF VIEW!

Important implications for...

• Families

• Policy makers: language learning and teaching in primary schools

• Multilingual classrooms and migrant children

• Regional minority languages

Bilingualism in the family: a commitment

• Enough engaging exposure to both languages

• Variety of speakers

• Positive attitudes in the family and in the community

Language learning at school

• Children learn differently at different ages

• One hour a week is not enough exposure by itself

• Teachers should be trained

• Parents should be informed

Bilingualism and migration

• First generation migrants experience pressure not to speak their home language

• Maintaining home languages is better for children and for parents
Research has shown that children exposed predominantly to impoverished non-native L2 input are at a disadvantage in acquiring the L2. (Place & Hoff 2011)

Bilingualism is vital for the transmission of a minority language across generations. Speaking the minority language may give children the benefits of bilingualism.

Cognitive effects found in minority languages (but not across the board)

- No differences between home speakers and new speakers in knowledge of English and cognitive tests
- Overall, no negative attitudes in young people towards Gaelic compared to English
- BUT: English is considered more ‘cool’

Enabling bilingualism

Romaine (2007):

- "Revitalization activities will not save languages without firm community foundations for transmission"
- "Language can easily become politicized when it is no longer unselfconsciously reproduced within families"
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### Bilingualism Matters

University of Edinburgh Centre of Excellence

- Seminars and training for international companies and institutions
- Public engagement and policy advice
- Regular appearance in the media (on language and multilingualism)
- International network in Europe (15 branches), and in North America (3 branches)

### Partnerships and collaborations

[Partner logos and names]
Projects

THANK YOU!

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