

Growing up with two languages

How this shapes toddlers' communication skills



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Growing up bilingual comes with several advantages. Compared with their monolingual peers, bilingual children are better at switching back and forth between two different tasks, taking someone else's perspective, problem solving, and finding creative solutions to a task. So in addition to learning two different languages, bilingual children acquire a broader set of skills as they grow up. In our research, Anja Gampe, Moritz Daum and I are trying to find out whether bilinguals have superior communication skills as well.

Bilinguals in Switzerland

Switzerland is a special case in that it has four official languages, each with numerous varieties. We focused on the German-speaking region of Switzerland, where language varieties or dialects differ in their semantics, syntax and orthography. We wondered whether bidialectal children who grow up speaking Swiss German dialect alongside Standard German (as spoken in Germany) might enjoy advantages similar to those found for bilingual children.

In a recent study, we brought monolingual, bilingual and bidialectal toddlers into our lab. The bilinguals as well as the bidialectal children had grown up with two different languages or language varieties from birth: One parent spoke Swiss German while the other parent communicated with the child in some other language or German dialect, i.e. Standard German.

The children were introduced to Otto, a stuffed elephant who was eager to go for a walk and needed to put on his shoes. We asked the children to help Otto; they were placed in a situation in which the goal was to find all four shoes and put them on Otto's feet. In the course of their interactions with the researcher, the children were deliberately misunderstood and then given the chance to resolve the misunderstanding.

We found that bilingual toddlers were more likely to successfully resolve the misunderstanding than their monolingual peers. Bidialectal children – those who were growing up speaking two varieties of German – were somewhat less likely to resolve the misunderstanding than the bilingual children, but more likely than their monolingual peers.

Daily experiences shape children's communication skills

When children grow up bilingual, they encounter experiences monolingual children do not. They are confronted with different languages and cultures and this makes communication more challenging. How does one know when to speak which language?

Although young children show a remarkable ability to deal with such situations, bilingual life is particularly susceptible to misunderstandings. There can be confusion, for instance, because bilinguals know at least two different labels for the same thing. Furthermore, bilingual children often have a smaller vocabulary in each of their languages compared with their monolingual peers. As a result, they sometimes mix their two languages or use words that do not precisely fit the given context. Of course, this increases the likelihood that they will be misunderstood.

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To a lesser degree, bidialectal children, i.e. those who speak two language varieties, such as Swiss and Standard German, encounter similar problems. For example, speakers of Standard German often have difficulty understanding words in Swiss German dialect, leading to communication issues. While a great deal of research has been done with bilingual children, highlighting the many advantages they enjoy as well as some of the difficulties they face, it would be worthwhile to look at different language varieties as well.

Taken together, our research shows that experiences matter. Specifically, growing up with two languages entails experiences that shape toddlers' skills in resolving a misunderstanding and might therefore contribute to their social development.