BILINGUALISM AND (BI)LITERACY: MYTHS, FACTS AND CHALLENGES

Antonella Sorace
University of Edinburgh & Bilingualism Matters
a.sorace@ed.ac.uk

Dundee, 16 March 2018
A short tour of research
Myths about child language learning

Confusion

Problems at school

‘Useful’ and ‘not useful’ languages

- English
- Spanish
- Chinese
- Irish
- Gaelic
- Sardinian
- Polish
- etc.
What research shows

- Early perceptual separation of the two languages

- Similar stages and milestones in bilingual and monolingual language development

- Competence and creativity in language mixing

(Byers-Heinlein, Burns, & Werker, 2010; Unsworth et al 2014)
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)
An example: task switching

Task A: sort objects by shape

Task B: now sort objects by colour:

Bilingual children are faster than monolinguals to refocus attention and switch to Task B.
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!
Knowledge about language

• Bilinguals tend to have higher metalinguistic awareness.

• But what does this mean, exactly?
Aspects of metalinguistic awareness

- Awareness of the grammatical structure of language
- Awareness of the arbitrariness of language
- Awareness of the separation between words and meanings
Spontaneous sensitivity to language structure

Bilingual children ‘notice’ how language works

WORDS

SOUNDS

SENTENCES
Because of their natural understanding of language, bilinguals find it easier to learn other languages.

They often have a better understanding of the structure of the majority language.
Arbitrariness of language

• Imagine that the names of cats and dogs were changed around. (Child is shown a picture of a cat.] What would this animal's name be? (Answer: dog; bilinguals = monolinguals) What sound would it make? (answer: meow; bilinguals ≠ monolinguals).

• Bilingual children solve the second problem earlier than monolinguals because they are more likely to understand that only the names have changed.

(Bialystok 1988)
Arbitrariness of language

• ‘In this game, the way to say we is with spaghetti. How would you say, We are good children?’

• Bilinguals better than monolinguals at saying: ‘Spaghetti are good children’.

(Ben-Zeev 1977)
• Bilingual children perform like monolinguals in detecting ungrammaticality:
  – Why dog bark so loudly?

• Bilingual children are better than monolinguals at judging grammaticality in abstraction from meaning:
  – Why is the cat barking so loudly?
Words

• Two words for the same object within each language

• Two words for the same object across languages...

pug = dog AND animal

animals

dogs

APPLE
MELA
Can bilingualism help literacy?

Two possible ways:

- A general understanding of reading and its basis in a symbolic system of print.

- The potential for transfer of reading principles across languages.
Can bilingualism help literacy?

- Bilingual children tend to be more precocious readers.
- Reading skills may transfer across (similar) languages.

(Muysken 2004; Bialystok 1988)
Reading skills and early literacy

• Literacy builds on:
  – oral competence
  – conceptual understanding of the symbolic function of print
  – phonological awareness
Oral competence and vocabulary

• Bilingual children often have more limited vocabularies in each of their languages (although not across languages).

• Significant effects of vocabulary on reading comprehension have been reported in bilinguals, even across languages.

• Larger vocabulary and oral competence = better reading abilities.
Invariance of print

Preschool bilingual children realise sooner than monolinguals that a printed word keeps the same meaning wherever it appears.

DOB HORSE

HORSE
Reading in any writing system requires phonological analysis because print records spoken language.

The writing system that a language uses affects children’s acquisition of literacy because each system is based on a different set of symbolic relations.
Phonological awareness

Phonological Awareness Hierarchy:
- **Manipulation Activities**: change the /t/ for a /n/.
- **Blending Activities**: /k/ + /æ/ + /t/ =
- **Segmenting Activities**: = /k/ + /æ/ + /t/.
- **Identifying Activities**:
  - Initial sound = /k/
  - Medial sound = /æ/
  - Final sound = /t/.
- **Rhyming Activities**: rhymes with
Bilingual children:

- often discover the alphabetic principle (correspondences between graphemes and phonemes) more easily.

- often transfer their understanding of the alphabetic principle from one language to another with a similar system.
The Word Size Task

• “Which is the longer word?”

TRAIN

BUTTERFLY
No monolithic effect of bilingualism on early literacy

- The relationship between phonological awareness and reading will depend on the demands created by individual writing systems.

- Bilingual facilitation for early reading depends on the relation between the two languages and writing systems

- No correlation between children’s early progress in reading English and Chinese.

(Luk & Bialystok 2008)
More generally: no automatic benefits of bilingualism for all.

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

Bilingualism comes in many shapes and colours!
Important implications for...

- Families
- Teachers and policy makers: language learning and teaching in primary schools
- Migrant children and multilingual classrooms
- Regional minority languages
Bilingualism in the family: a commitment

- Enough engaging exposure to both languages
- Patterns of language use
- Variety of speakers (but also books!)
- Positive attitudes in the family and in the community
Younger not necessarily better unless children get...

- Enough input in the second language
- Engagement
- Variety of speakers
Language learning in Scottish schools

- Children learn differently at different ages

- One hour a week: is this enough exposure?

- Teachers should be trained on language learning

- Parents should be informed and helped to support their child
Language policy and intervention are often disconnected from the communities of speakers and from research.

What can be done?
Enabling bilingualism

PROVIDING ACCESSIBLE AND ACCURATE INFORMATION to parents and teachers about benefits and challenges = BETTER DECISIONS
MAKING LANGUAGES ‘REAL’ FOR CHILDREN AS PART OF EVERYDAY LIFE; ENGAGING FAMILIES IN THIS
Enabling bilingualism

EVALUATE OUTCOMES IN SCHOOLS AND OBTAIN RESEARCH EVIDENCE ABOUT WHAT IS OR ISN’T WORKING
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)
Projects
THANK YOU!

http://www.bilingualism-matters.ppls.ed.ac.uk/
bilingualism-matters@ed.ac.uk
A.Sorace@ed.ac.uk