

Antonella Sorace

Bilingualism matters

This is Forward Thinking, I'm Isabella Melking.

Does speaking multiple languages make you smarter?

Linguistics professor Antonella Sorace thinks bilingualism has many benefits that go beyond language, for example in task switching.

Science communications student Susie [Shuoqi] Qu talks to Antonella Sorace about research into bilingualism and the work of her research and information centre Bilingualism Matters.

Susie:

Hi there, I'm Susie and I'm a master's student [of] science communication. I'm very interested in bilingualism so today I'm going to do an interview with Professor Antonella Sorace who is from Linguistics, University of Edinburgh. She also founded the Bilingualism Matters Centre which does research and public engagement about bilingualism across the lifespan.

Hi Antonella.

Antonella:

Thank you. Hi!

Susie:

Could you talk about some main benefits of bilingualism for children?

Antonella:

So bilingualism is very good for children in more than one way. We can say that bilingualism really opens the mind in several ways. Some of these ways are very obvious, a bilingual child is also a multi-cultural child because there is a culture behind every language and so bilingual children are more sensitive to the existence of other cultures and culture differences and so on. But there are also less obvious ways in which bilingualism opens the mind of a child and these have been found by research on language and research on cognition.

Susie:

Okay, so how [does] bilingualism benefit children?

Antonella:

Bilingualism has been found to be beneficial for children's knowledge of language. So a bilingual child has a natural sensitivity for the structure of language; a better implicit understanding of how language works. And that means that they are better at learning other languages, so a third language, a fourth language is easier. But also, they may have a better understanding of the main language, the language used at school, for example English in this country.

Susie:

Okay, so what is the best age of learning a second language for a kid? Do you have some recommendation?

Antonella:

I think that any age is good, but if a child can learn two languages from birth, the parents should really go for that. Because it's perfectly possible for a young child to learn more than one language. And research has shown that bilingual children are not confused, they can distinguish their two languages from very early on. But they can also learn one language first and then another while they are children, so not necessarily together. And we know that adults can also learn another language and they can reach very high levels of competence.

Susie:

So it's never too late to learn a new language?

Antonella:

I think we can say that it's never too late to learn another language. Obviously, we shouldn't think that bilingualism means perfect knowledge of both languages. Because languages can be learnt and known to different levels, and these levels can change over time depending on where a person is and who they are talking to and so on and so forth. So it's perfectly possible to learn a language to a very good level without becoming perfect.

Susie:

So it sounds like there are many benefits to learning another language! And is [a] bilingual user smarter than [a] monolingual user, is that true?

Antonella:

I would say that certainly being bilingual gives many advantages that go beyond language. So for example, in children, it makes them aware at an earlier stage that other people can have a different point of view, or a different perspective. And this is because bilingual children realise that not everybody is bilingual, and they have to choose the right language depending on who they are talking to. It also has been found that bilingualism is beneficial for the way we pay attention to things. And so bilinguals are generally better at paying focused attention without being distracted by other factors and they are better at switching from one task to other.

Susie:

Okay, so what is code-switching between different languages?

Antonella:

Code-switching can be defined as a communication strategy that bilinguals use with other bilinguals. So bilinguals can code-switch because code-switching improves the communication, improves the message that they are trying to get across. And they generally code-switch when they speak to other bilinguals, but not when they speak to monolinguals.

Susie:

So it only happens between two bilingual users?

Antonella:

It tends to happen among bilingual users because it usually denotes very good knowledge of both languages and this is something that people usually don't understand; they think that code-switching is a sign of confusion, it is a sign of mixing up the languages because you don't know them. Whereas in fact, research shows that a code-switcher usually has a very good knowledge of both languages. And there is a grammar of code-switching. So code-switching has rules that are learnt by children and then they are used by adults in bilingual communities where code-switching is normal.

Susie:

Does multilingualism have more benefits than bilingualism?

Antonella:

This is a very interesting question for which we don't have a clear answer. At the moment, research shows that what matters is the difference between knowing one language and knowing more than one. Research hasn't really found very big differences between knowing two languages and three or three and four, so between bilingualism and multilingualism. But we need more research to address these questions. At the moment, what seems to matter is having more than one language in the brain.

Susie:

Mm, okay. Do you have any suggestions for people who want to learn another language... As soon as possible?

Antonella:

I think they should go for it. I think learning another language is really a good idea, as I said, from multiple points of view, and it is possible even later on, even in much older people. It has been shown that even much older adults can learn the language up to a point, but their brain responds in a very positive way to the challenge of learning a new language. So I would say that learning a language can be done at old ages, and it's a form of investment that societies should really encourage. It means an investment for life.

Susie:

And I heard that if people are learning a new language, it can delay dementia, is that true?

Antonella:

There is some evidence from an increasing number of studies that bilingualism can delay the first symptoms of dementia. Or at least certain kinds of dementia which doesn't mean that bilinguals don't get Alzheimer's this is a common misunderstanding. But it means that the symptoms are delayed by four or five years which is a long time in terms of independence of autonomous life.

Susie:

So it does delay the dementia.

Antonella:

It can delay the dementia, but not all kinds of dementia, but certain kinds of dementia, and so the results are very encouraging.

Susie:

So do you have any suggestions for [a] policy-maker who is responsible for making policy for school language course?

Antonella:

Yes, we do have many suggestions for policy-makers. In fact, we work with policy-makers. For example, in Scotland we work with the Scottish government on their plan to teach two languages in primary schools. And we are working with them on the best way of implementing this plan.

I think there are three things that policy-makers should bear in mind: one is that children learn in different ways at different ages, so a five-year old doesn't learn in the same way as a ten-year old. Because the brain develops in many ways over childhood.

Second, the teachers should be properly trained, they should know about bilingualism and how children learn languages.

And the third important point is that families should be informed about the benefits of bilingualism. And so they should be supportive of their child while they are learning. And this is a particularly important point in this country where language learning is not regarded as high priority because of the status of English as an international language. So people need to know that learning a language is good for their child and they should encourage that.

Susie:

It should become common sense.

Antonella:

Yes, it should become a normal thing. And it's not yet.

Susie:

Okay Antonella, thank you very much for coming and thank you all for listening!

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