

PROFESSOR MILA VULCHANOVA OF THE NORWEGIAN UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY, TRONDHEIM, ON INTER- AND INTRA-INDIVIDUAL VARIATIONS IN ORAL AND STANDARD LANGUAGES

Multilingual experiences

In today's world, most individuals master more than one language. Even if many of us are only able to speak one language natively, we are typically able to express ourselves in at least one other language. An increasing number of people are even able to master a range of languages.

This raises important questions about language and cognition. What is it that enables us to learn multiple languages? How do speakers deal with the fact that languages are rather different? What is the relationship between language skills and certain cognitive abilities? What cognitive and societal factors promote successful learning of multiple languages? And in what way are these factors linked to the variation that we find in language skills and language usage? These are among the questions that a group of researchers at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology are studying.

ETHL

The group, whose formal name is 'Experimental and Theoretical Approaches to Human Language' (ETHL), includes researchers with expertise in language development (both in native and second languages, and in typical and atypical circumstances), adult grammar competence and language processing, and cases of language breakdown (Alzheimer's) or specific deficits related to language use (for instance, reading disorders such as dyslexia).

A mounting body of evidence suggests that learning multiple languages has positive effects, ranging from better command of attention to superior conflict resolution, greater creativity and superior problem-solving.

However, many questions remain unanswered, and even the most basic questions – who is bilingual, and how many shades of bilingualism are there? – are still subject to disagreement.

Along these lines, an intriguing open question is: To what extent can variants of the same language (dialects) convey the expected bilingual advantages? And on a broader level, how close or distant can the languages be so that we see some of these positive effects?

Norway

These questions have been addressed by myself and Professor Tor Anders Åfarli in the context of the language situation in Norway.

Norway is known for its wide variety of dialects which display interesting variations both in grammar, pronunciation and intonation. Most children growing up in Norway are bound to experience more than one distinct language variety in their immediate environment, in their family, through

friends and at school. Quite often the child may end up speaking a dialect different from that of the parents as a result of their peer group at play or school. As a result, children attending school soon become literate first in one standard written variety, Bokmål, and then, a bit later, in another standard written variety, known as Nynorsk.

In view of this complex picture, an interesting question emerges as to how well bilinguals perform on reading tasks, and whether they benefit from learning to read (and write) in two languages. Our research suggests that literacy skills acquired in the context of one language can transfer positively to another. However, the question of the extent to which each literacy skill (reading, writing) contributes to specific areas of bilingual language competence remains.

Study

To answer this, we have conducted an experimental study of performance on tasks involving the two standard written languages in Norway, Bokmål and Nynorsk, both of which are present in the media, at schools and elsewhere in the public sphere.

A second central question was whether the different dialects interact with literacy skills in the two standard languages and, if they do, to what extent. The experiment included a simple word identification task with words from both standard varieties, and we measured how fast participants responded to these items. All participants responded to a detailed questionnaire reflecting their language practices and experience.

Our results have convincingly demonstrated that writing skills are the most important factor in boosting bilingual word knowledge. Furthermore, we find that only certain dialects (oral varieties), but not all, facilitate literacy skills in the two standard languages.



Surprisingly, these are not dialects traditionally assumed to be close to one of the standard varieties, Nynorsk. Furthermore, the older participants were more accurate than the younger ones, a result which suggests that the number of years spent using the language is significant.

Multiple diglossia

Since the Norwegian language situation is characterised by multiple diglossia, both at the level of the written language (through Bokmål and Nynorsk), and at the level of the spoken language (by multiple dialects), we were also interested in how the presence of such parallel 'grammars' can be used in an educational design that exploits the advantages of bilingualism in the Norwegian context.

Indeed, this is particularly important in the Norwegian context as there is a lot of discussion of the role of Nynorsk, the minority standard language, especially regarding what its status in schools should be (whether pupils should be examined in Nynorsk or not is a matter of great debate).

In light of our preliminary results from the experimental study, we have developed a design for teaching the Nynorsk variety by

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exploiting the notion of parallel grammars drawn from theoretical grammar literature.

Despite our achievements, however, many questions still remain. For instance, through statistical methods, it is necessary to establish the degree of variation displayed in the Norwegian dialects, and thus to assess the current results in view of closeness/distance. On a broader theoretical level, the Norwegian context provides for comparisons with other countries in Europe with similar conditions, and where multiple dialects, or minority languages, abound.

Finally, we need a better theoretical understanding of what it means for an individual to master multiple languages. Most theories of grammar are designed to describe and analyse the grammar of individuals who master only one language. Today, however, an increasing amount of work is also being done on multilingualism from a grammatical perspective, and the ETHL group at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology is actively taking part in this enterprise by organising an international conference on parallel grammars and multilingualism in Trondheim in October 2013.



Professor Mila Vulchanova
Director
Language Acquisition and Language Processing Lab
Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim

email mila.vulchanova@ntnu.no
browse www.ntnu.edu/langdevlab