

Being bilingual does not make you smarter, new study reports

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Credit: Amanda Slater on Wikimedia

The widely held belief that being bilingual makes you smarter is being challenged by psychologists in a newly published paper.

Writing in the *Journal of Cognitive Psychology*, a group of [language](#)

experts from Abertay University describe how they began – quite unintentionally - to unravel one of current psychology's big myths: that being [bilingual](#) makes you smarter.

Professor Vera Kempe and her colleagues began their latest research assuming - like everyone else - that a cognitive advantage in bilinguals was an established fact.

Based on this assumption, they wanted to see whether there was a similar cognitive advantage to speaking two dialects - something that had not been looked at before.

To find out, they compared [cognitive control](#) in a group of people who switch between speaking the very distinctive Dundonian dialect and Standard Scottish English, with cognitive control in two other groups: those who speak two languages, and those who speak only one.

To their great surprise, their research produced some wholly unexpected results, contradicting everything they thought they knew: the bilingual control groups performed no better in the cognitive task than those who spoke only one language and those who spoke in a dialect.

There were no differences whatsoever.

Professor Kempe explains why this is an important finding:

"When we started our research, we were convinced - like everybody else - that there was an advantage to being bilingual, but when we carried out our analysis, we were astonished by the results.

"Although we had replicated the original study to the letter, we found no benefit in either of our bilingual groups; neither in the Gaelic-English bilinguals, nor the bilinguals speaking a variety of Asian languages.

"At first we were stumped. How could this be? How could we have failed to find an effect, when we knew there was supposed to be one?"

"When we began to dig deeper, we discovered that - far from being an anomaly - our study is actually one in a now growing number of studies that fail to find that bilingualism makes you smarter.

"In other words, there is actually no conclusive evidence that bilingualism makes you smarter."

Referring to something called 'publication bias' - where a study only gets published if an effect is found - the authors point out that, at present, it is misleading for educational policy recommendations to be based on the belief that learning languages makes you smarter when it is not yet clear whether this is true.

Publication bias is a long-standing problem, and is one of the main causes for this myth about bilingualism having been created.

Professor Kempe continues:

"Saying that 'some scientists carried out a study, but didn't find anything', doesn't make for a very good story - and that is where the problem lies.

"There is so much pressure to demonstrate novelty and real-life impact that it has sometimes been difficult for scientists to get studies published if they haven't found something startling and newsworthy.

"Other factors that come with being bilingual - like being an immigrant or coming from a culture which values mentally challenging activities - may be responsible for a benefit in some instances.

"Psychologists are working hard to find out whether studying more languages and knowing them well can really make a difference to mental agility, but so far we simply do not have conclusive evidence.

"What we can do in the meanwhile, though, is to encourage everybody - especially young people - to learn languages not based on the selfish motive of boosting individual brain power, but because knowing languages affords us the opportunity to connect with different people from different backgrounds and cultures.

"Perhaps being able to see the world from another point of view is the most beneficial and mind-enhancing effect that comes with learning languages."

More information: The complete study is available online:
www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/.U-yOssVdWSp

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