

The advantages of multilingualism

April 27 2015, by Kim Bergström



Leena Huss believes that the whole of society benefits from a more open attitude towards minority languages ??and other languages. Credit: Mikael Wallerstedt

'Multilingualism is not a problem, it's a gift.' So says Leena Huss, linguist and research leader of the minority studies programme at the Hugo Valentin Centre at Uppsala University.

Learning a language keeps the brain active. And just like all other activities that exercise the brain, more language training makes the brain

'stronger' and more efficient.

'Research has shown that [children](#) who grow up multilingual are more creative, find it easier to assimilate new languages ??and have greater metalinguistic awareness.'

Metalinguistic awareness means that children are better able to discuss things and to reflect on language, not merely to use it. For example, young multilingual children notice that others speak other languages, ask how they work and compare them with the languages they speak. They point out similarities and differences.

'This, in turn, seems to also favour success in subjects other than languages.'

Anyone looking at Europe could easily get the impression that 'one country—one language' is the norm. But that isn't the case, says Leena Huss.

'It is often said that over half of humanity is multilingual. Currently Europe is pretty poor in language terms, because for a long time many countries in Europe had the idea that a single language was desirable and there was a strong assimilation policy. Outside of Europe, things aren't really like that.'

But even in Europe this has been partially reversed by the Council of Europe Minority Languages ??Charter and the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities.

'We can already see big differences. Minorities have been given more of a say, national legislation has been amended and minorities have come back to life.'

I study southern Sami. Old people who were beaten or harassed in other ways at school can now see that their language has value and is something to preserve. It's almost a vindication for the discrimination they suffered. They can also see that they can be Swedes without sacrificing their Sami origin.'

She believes that the whole of society benefits from a more open attitude towards minority languages ??and other languages.

'They feel more like a part of society, reducing the bitterness and hopelessness that some people feel. Young people who fight for their [language](#) become more actively involved in the community instead of feeling depressed or neglected. It's my firm belief that this is a good thing for society.'

That's why Leena Huss thinks that Sweden should create more opportunities for children to become multilingual and continue to be so.

Provided by Uppsala University

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