

Gibberish test can expose real language disorders in children

April 23 2015, by George Wigmore

Children with different home languages pose a particular challenge for speech and language therapists. If a child has problems with language, is this due to limited experience of the language, or does the child have a language disorder? If – as in most cases – clinicians know nothing about the child's home language, and there are no clinical assessments in that language, how can they find out?

A five-year EU Cooperation in Science and Technology project, in which City's Language and Communication Science department played an important role, was tasked with addressing these challenges. The results of this project are drawn together in a new book, 'Assessing Multilingual Children', published this month.

Heading up one of four working groups together with Dr Ewa Haman of Warsaw University, Professor Shula Chiat, from City University London, was responsible for co-ordinating the development of so-called 'nonword repetition tests'.

In these tests, children are simply asked to copy nonsense words – words that are gibberish in any language. This type of test is particularly appropriate for assessing children in different languages because, unlike other language assessments, it does not rely on knowledge of a particular language, yet it draws on important language skills and has proved to be a good indicator of language impairment in several languages.

Speaking about the book, Professor Chiat said: "This is the culmination

of a collaboration across Europe that has generated a new international network, bridged gaps between east and west, and grown a new generation of researchers in the field. Most importantly, the assessments disseminated in the book will reach children not previously reached, helping to identify language disorders and provide the support [children](#) need in our own and other countries."

Professor Chiat's group was the first to explore the clinical potential of a nonword repetition test across multiple languages belonging to diverse [language](#) families.

The Crosslinguistic Nonword Repetition Test reported in the book was the result of collaboration between colleagues spanning the whole of Europe and beyond – from Ireland to Russia, from Iceland to Turkey, as well as Israel, Lebanon, and South Africa. In the course of this collaboration, the Division of Language and Communication Science at City hosted visits from researchers in Denmark, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, and Serbia – and the visits continue, with a PhD student from University of Vienna currently taking up a one-year international scholarship.

International interest in the nonword repetition test also continues, with researchers in the USA and Canada as well as EU countries now trialling it and contributing vital evidence on its universal potential.

More information: Armon-Lotem, S., de Jong, J., & Meir, N. (Eds.) *Methods for assessing multilingual children: Disentangling bilingualism from language impairment*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

Provided by City University London

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