

Scientists find connection between mental fitness and multi-lingualism

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Children who speak a second or third language may have an unexpected advantage later in life, a new Tel Aviv University study has found. Knowing and speaking many languages may protect the brain against the effects of aging.

Dr. Gitit Kavé, a clinical neuro-psychologist from the Herczeg Institute on Aging at Tel Aviv University, together with her colleagues Nitza Eyal, Aviva Shorek, and Jiska Cohen-Manfield, discovered recently that senior citizens who speak more languages test for better cognitive functioning. The results of her study were published in the journal *Psychology and Aging*.

However, Kavé says that one should approach these findings with caution. “There is no sure-fire recipe for avoiding the pitfalls of mental aging. But using a second or third language may help prolong the good years,” she advises.

Exercising the Brain

A person who speaks more languages is likely to be more clear-minded at an older age, she says, in effect “exercising” his or her brain more than those who are monolingual. Languages may create new links in the brain, contributing to this strengthening effect.

The research was based on a survey taken in 1989 on people between the

ages of 75 and 95. Each person was asked how many languages he or she knew, what his or her mother tongue was, and which language he or she spoke best. The researchers compared bilingual speakers to tri- and multilingual speakers.

Analyzing the results, the researchers found that the more languages a person spoke, the better his or her cognitive state was. A person's level of education was also strongly associated with cognitive state, but the number of languages contributed to the prediction of cognitive fitness beyond the effect of education alone.

A Matter of Words, Not Degrees

Although the easiest way to explain the findings was to point out the relationship between higher education and number of languages, this was not the whole story. In fact, Dr. Kavé says, "We found that more languages were most significantly correlated with cognitive state in those people who had no education at all."

Dr. Kavé, however, adds a note when interpreting the statistics. "The study looked at the final result and not the cause," she says.

Use It or Lose It?

A future question for research, according to Kavé, is whether languages reflect an initial potential for prolonged mental fitness, or that learning and speaking more languages actually do something to the brain over time.

While the controversy continues as to whether or not parents should introduce their young children to a second language, Kavé thinks that learning a new language is only a good thing, even if it isn't intended to

stave off mental decline in old age.

“In my professional opinion, learning a new language can only do good things,” she believes. “Other languages are good for you at any age. They allow for a flexibility of thought and a channel for understanding another culture better, as well as your own,” says Kavé.

Source: American Friends of Tel Aviv University

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