

The relationship between meta-linguistic awareness and advanced theory of mind in bi/multilingual and monolingual children

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Abstract

There is some evidence that children who speak more than one language have better theory of mind (ability to understand and take into account another person's mental state) compared to monolingual children. Explanations include enhanced executive function (Bialystok & Senman, 2004), better meta-linguistic awareness (Diaz & Farrar 2018) and greater sociolinguistic awareness (Cheung et al, 2010). However, competing theories have not been investigated together, and no work has yet focused on later-developing advanced theory of mind (AToM) skills.

The current study will trace the development of AToM in monolingual and bi/multilingual children ($n \geq 100$) between school Years 1 and 2 (ages 5-6 to 6-7). We will compare levels of AToM and its developmental trajectory between bi/multilingual and monolingual primary school aged children, investigate whether any differences can be explained with reference to executive functioning, metalinguistic awareness, and sociolinguistic awareness, and examine the degree to which sociolinguistic background (e.g., degree and profile of bi/multilingualism) plays a role.

Analyses using Time 1 data will be available at the time of presentation, and will focus on the role of two facets of meta-linguistic-awareness in predicting AToM: analysis of linguistic knowledge (using a word order correction task) and control of linguistic processing (using a symbol substitution task) (Bialystok and Ryan, 1985). Stimuli for the symbol substitution task were taken from Diaz & Farrar (2018), who found that bilingual children outperformed monolingual peers on both meta-linguistic awareness and ToM, and that metalinguistic awareness was the only significant predictor of bilingual children's early ToM. As well as addressing more advanced ToM, the current study tests a more diverse group of bi/multilingual children, reflecting the diversity of language backgrounds of many English urban primary school classrooms.