

Bilingualism in Autism: Language Learning Profiles and Social Experiences

Bérengère G. Digard¹, Antonella Sorace², Andrew Stanfield¹, Sue Fletcher-Watson¹

¹ Patrick Wild Centre, University of Edinburgh

² School of Philosophy, Psychology, and languages sciences, University of Edinburgh

Introduction

- Autism:
 - 1% of the population;
 - various degrees of abilities and intensities;
 - associated with language and communication difficulties.
- Bilingualism:
 - 50% of the population;
 - profiles shaped by many features of exposure and use;
 - impacts social and cognitive processes.
- Autism x Bilingualism:
 - rise of the autistic population exposed to bilingualism;
 - families: concern that bilingualism will overload the autistic child¹;
 - first evidence: no delay in language development in autistic bilingual children compared to monolingual peers².

¹ Hampton, S., Rabagliati, H., Sorace, A., & Fletcher-Watson, S. (2017). Autism and bilingualism: A qualitative interview study of parents' perspectives and experiences. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research, 60*(2), 435-446.
² Drysdale, H., van der Meer, L., & Kagohara, D. (2015). Children with autism spectrum disorder from bilingual families: A systematic review. *Review Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 21*(1), 26-38.

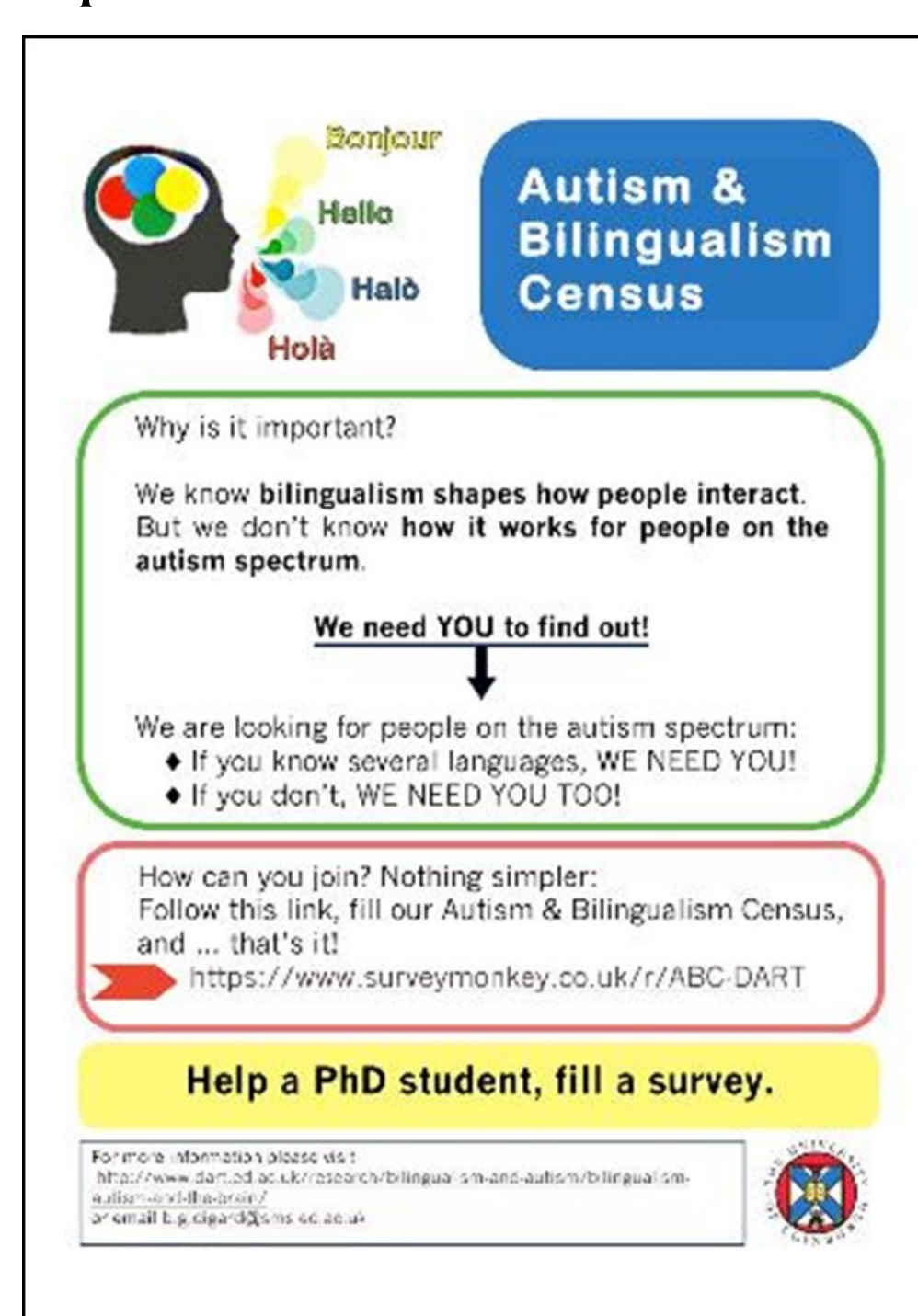
Objectives

- 1) Characterize the different language profiles of autistic bilingual adults.
- 2) Assess whether bilingualism influences the social life quality of autistic adults.
- 3) Understand how bilingualism and autism can influence each other's experience.

Method

- Autism & Bilingualism Census:
 - online survey circulated from 22nd February 2017 to 31st March 2017
 - part 1 - language history, proficiency and use
 - part 2 - self-rating of social life quality and social life habits
 - part 3 - free responses: bilingualism x autism experience

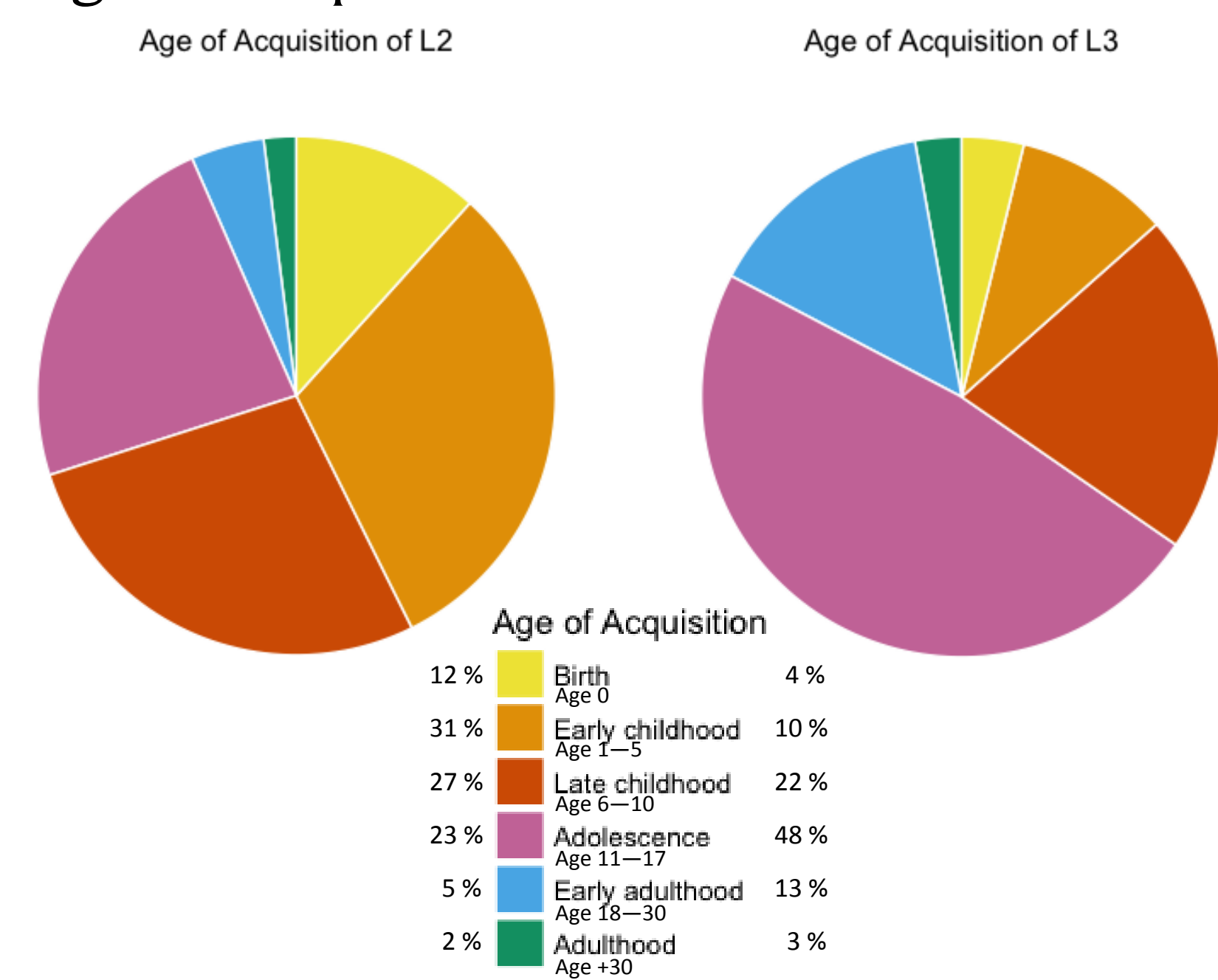
- 298 respondents:
 - 80% clinically diagnosed, 20% self-identified
 - 58% female, 23% male
 - mean age: 32.4 (SD = 12.2; range = 16—80)
 - 89 monolingual English speakers
 - 98 bilinguals
 - 56 trilinguals
 - 55 with 4 languages or more
 - over 50 languages represented



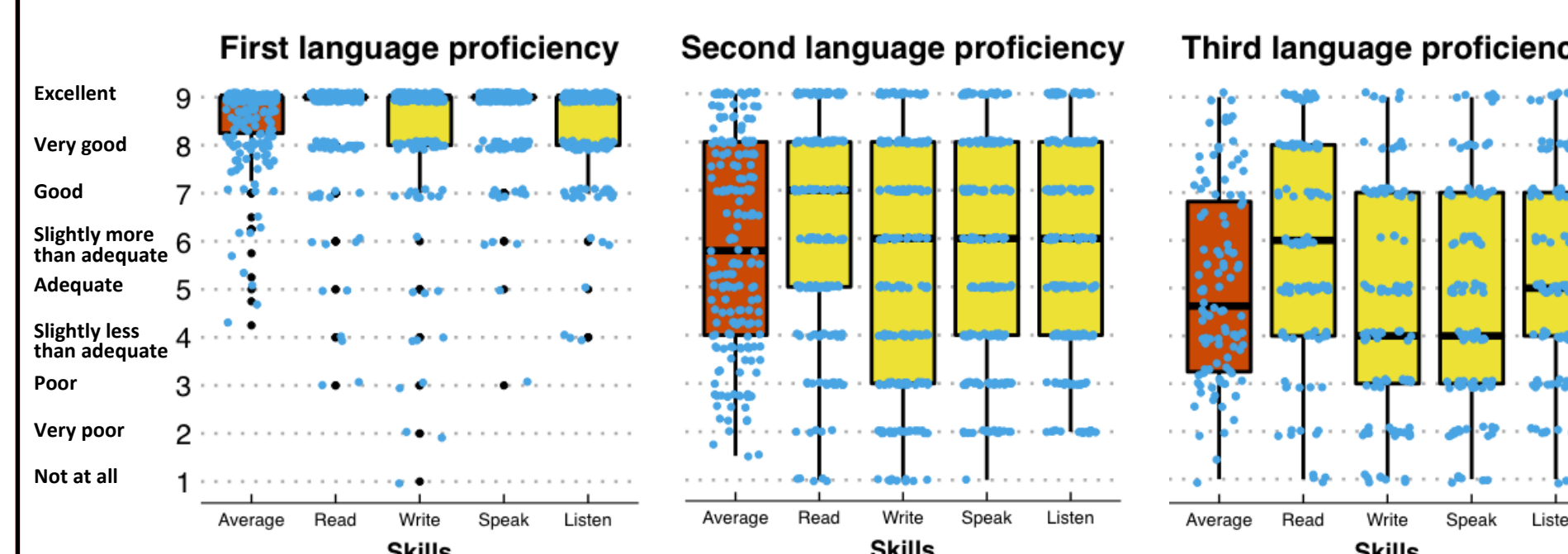
Results

1) Characterize the different language profiles of autistic bilingual adults.

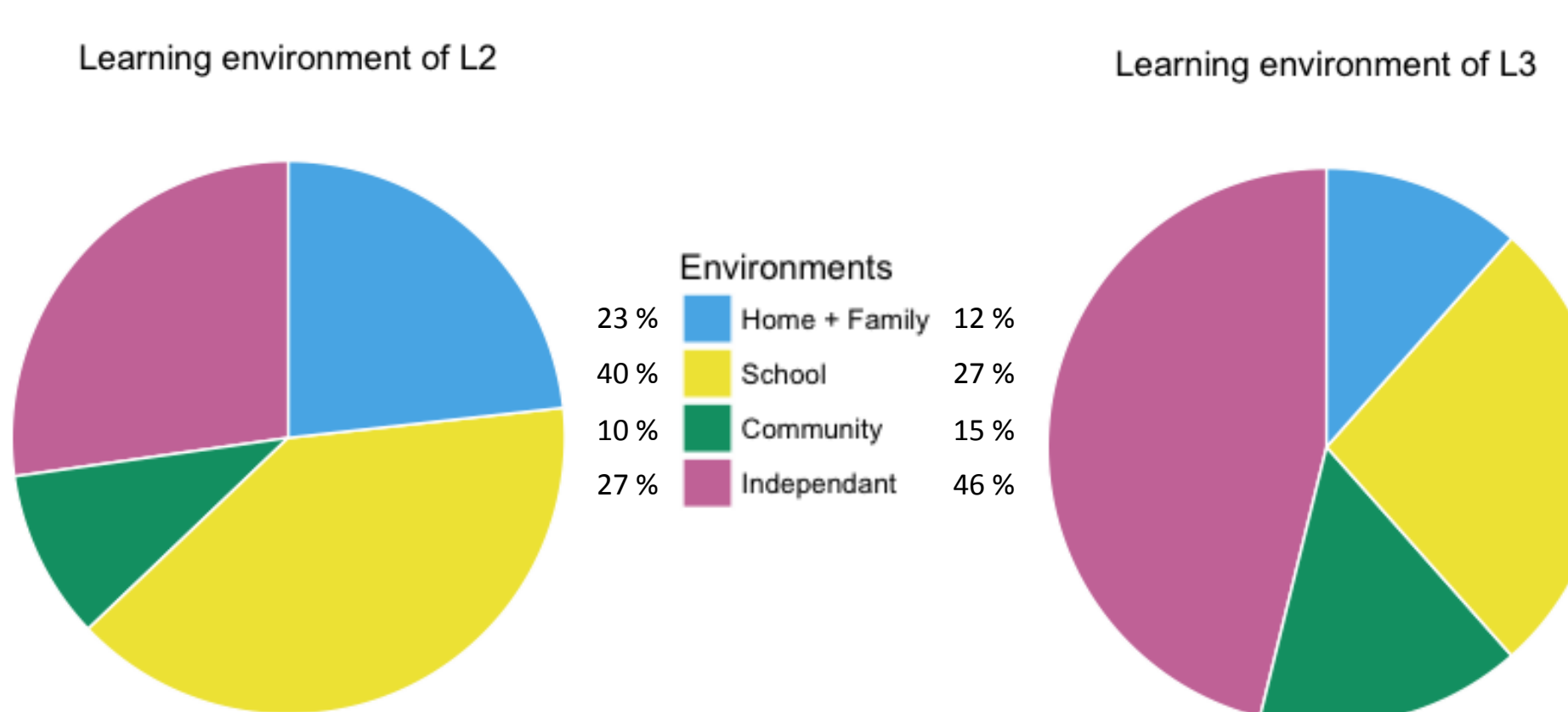
a. Age of Acquisition



b. Proficiency

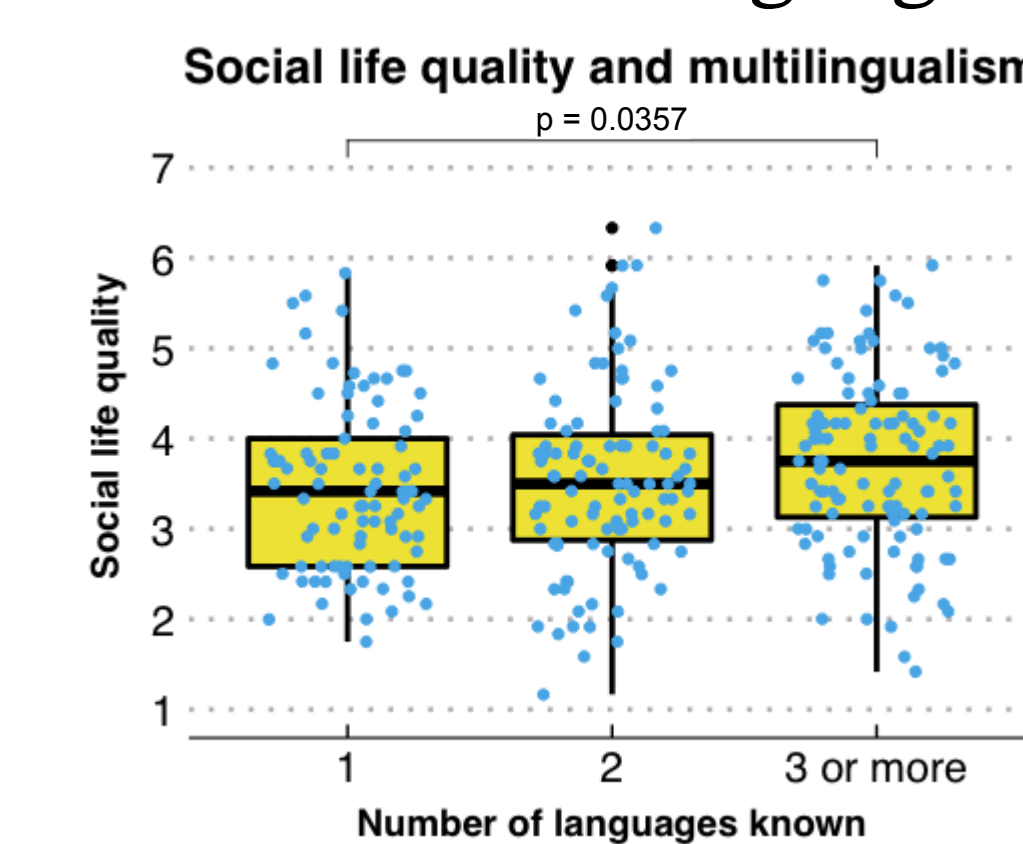


c. Environment of use while learning languages

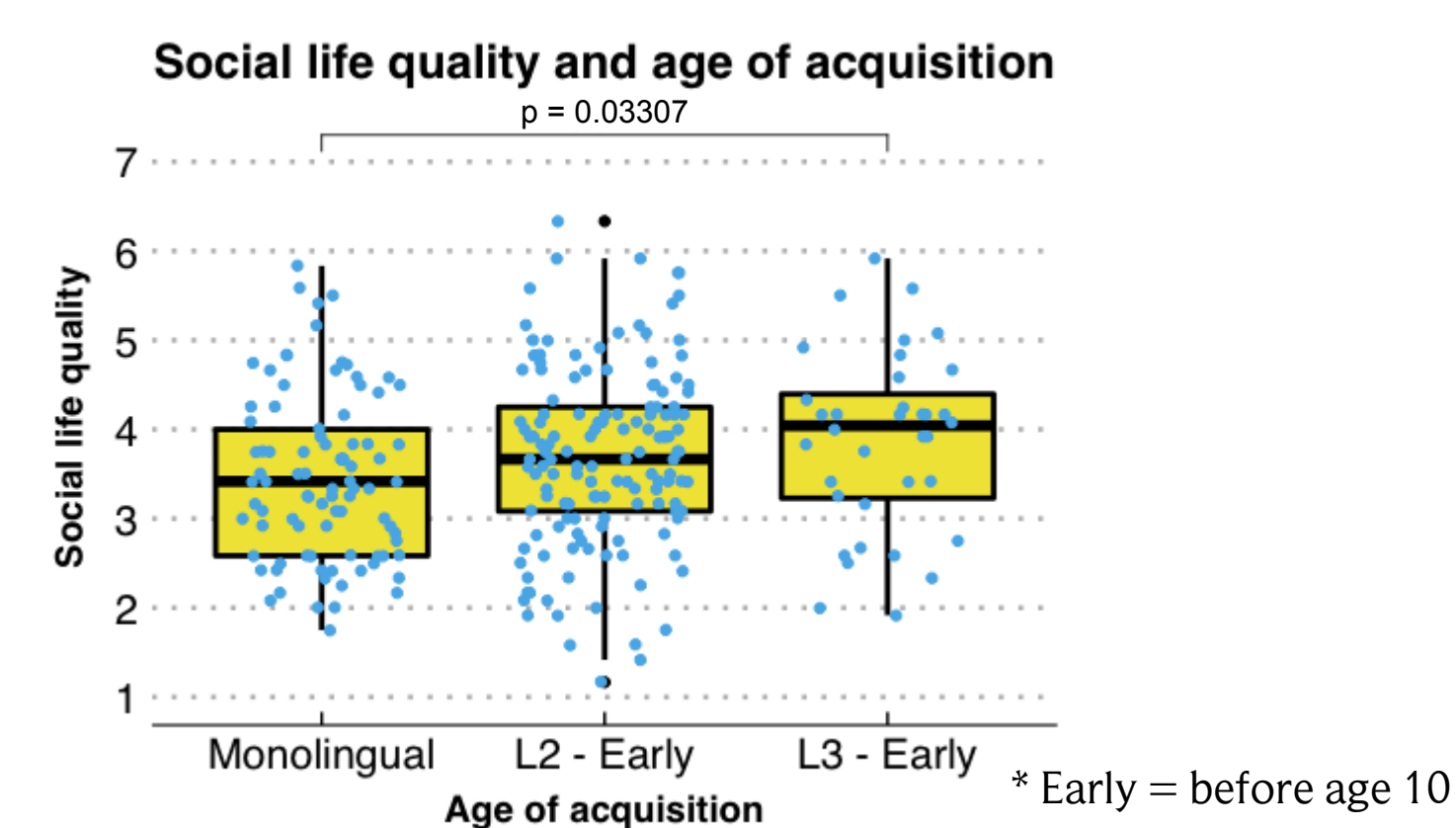


2) Assess whether bilingualism influences the social life habits of autistic adults.

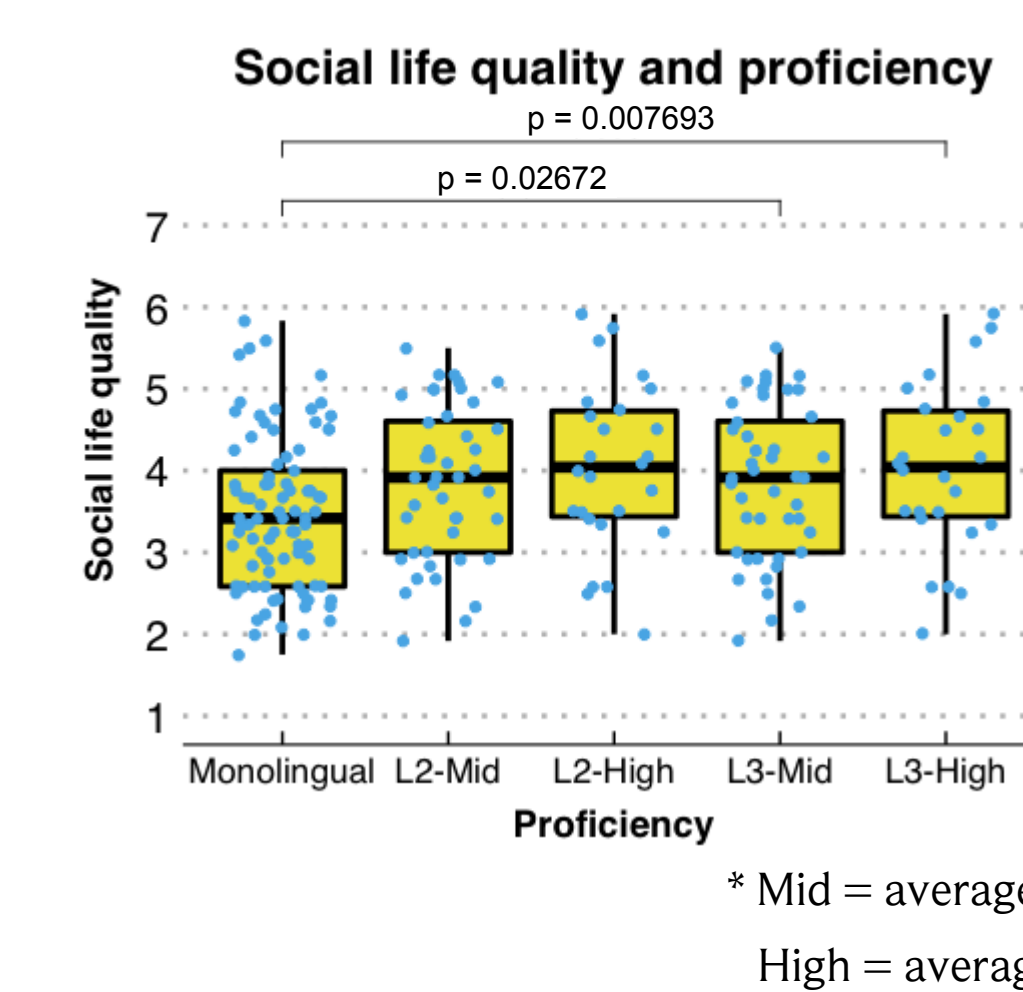
a. Effect of the number of languages known



b. Effect of age of acquisition



b. Effect of proficiency



3) Understand how bilingualism and autism can influence each other's experience.

What made language learning easy

- Environment (immersion): *Immersion from birth seems to have been key.*
- Language rules / patterns: *My memory and hyperfocus could influence the way I learn.*
- Memory skills: *Languages are like a jigsaw that I piece together.*

What made language learning complex

- Internal / external pressure: *The anxiety that comes along with getting it wrong discourages me.*
- Environment (school): *I found language classes stressful in school due to group work.*
- Oral comprehension / expression difficulties: *I need time to process [conversations] even in my native language.*

Skills learned by learning a language

- Identification / expression of thoughts / emotions: *Each language I know allows me to better express specific thoughts, emotions.*
- Explicit learning of social rules: *People respect you more and this gives you confidence. Apart from other's view, internally you feel more capable.*
- Understanding of other people: *It is useful to understand others and to perceive reality through different perspectives.*
- Self-confidence: *It is great to be able to communicate online with people about ourselves and our autism. It makes you feel less alone.*
- Understanding of other ways of thinking: *Learning languages opens up the world, literature, and even the internet.*

Opportunities brought by languages

- Feeling of community with autistic people and bilingual people
- Sources of knowledge and information

Discussion

- 1) Our sample of multilingual autistic adults reported a wide range of language learning profiles. Participants were introduced to their 2nd and 3rd languages from birth to adulthood, reaching on average "slightly more than adequate" and "adequate" levels of proficiency in their 2nd and 3rd languages, respectively. Participants reported learning their 2nd and 3rd languages in a variety of environments. The most common principal environment of use while learning the 2nd language was school, while for the 3rd language the most common principal environment was independent learning.
- 2) Language profiles were related to social life quality ratings. While bilingualism had no impact, multilingualism had. Participants knowing 3 languages or more, participants who acquired their 3rd language early, and participants with an average or high proficiency in their 3rd language rated the quality of their social life as significantly higher than monolingual participants.
- 3) Three main themes emerged from the thematic analysis. First, autism could both facilitate and complicate language learning. The learning environment was reported as being a key factor for successful language learning. Second, learning languages stimulated the acquisition of a wide range of social and communication skills, such as the ability to understand others' perspectives or the ability to identify and express their own emotions. Finally, knowing several languages widened their opportunities in terms of access to knowledge, and feeling of community.

Contact

Thank you to all the participants and services that contributed to this research!

Contact:

✉ b.g.digard@sms.ed.ac.uk

🐦 @BerengereDigard

🐦 @SueReviews

www.dart.ed.ac.uk

