Bilingualism in Autism: Language Learning Profiles and Social Experiences

Berengère 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

Objectives

Method

Results

Discussion

Contact

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 child 1;
- first evidence: no delay in language development in autistic bilingual children compared to monolingual peers 2.

2 Bérengère G. Digard, School of Philosophy, Psychology, and languages sciences, University of Edinburgh

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

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

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

Introduction

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

Method

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) 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 their 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 1st language early, and participants with an average or high proficiency in their 2nd 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.

Discussion

Contact

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

Contact: bg.digard@sms.ed.ac.uk
@BerengereDigard
www.dart.ed.ac.uk

The Patrick Wild Centre