

How Brains Seamlessly Switch between Languages

December 08, 2021

Billions of people worldwide speak two or more languages. (Though the [estimates vary](#), many sources assert that [more than half of the planet](#) is bilingual or multilingual.) One of the most common experiences for these individuals is a phenomenon that experts call “code switching,” or shifting from one language to another within a single conversation or even a sentence.

This month Sarah Frances Phillips, a linguist and graduate student at New York University, and her adviser Liina Pykkänen published findings from brain imaging that [underscore the ease with which these switches happen](#) and reveal how the neurological patterns that support this behavior are very similar in monolingual people. The new study reveals how code switching—which some multilingual speakers worry is “cheating,” in contrast to sticking to just one language—is normal and natural. Phillips spoke with Mind Matters editor Daisy Yuhás about these findings and why some scientists believe bilingual speakers may have certain cognitive advantages.

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