

Is Bilingualism Really an Advantage?

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The New Yorker:

In 1922, in “Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus,” the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote, “The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.” The words that we have at our disposal affect what we see—and the more words there are, the better our perception. When we learn to speak a different language, we learn to see a bigger world.

Many modern language researchers agree with that premise. Not only does speaking multiple languages help us to communicate but bilingualism (or multilingualism) may actually confer distinct advantages to the developing brain. Because a bilingual child switches between languages, the theory goes, she develops enhanced executive control, or the ability to effectively manage what are called higher cognitive processes, such as problem-solving, memory, and thought. She becomes better able to inhibit some responses, promote others, and generally emerges with a more flexible and agile mind. It’s a phenomenon that researchers call the bilingual advantage.

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For the first half of the twentieth century, researchers actually thought that bilingualism put a child at a *disadvantage*, something that hurt her I.Q. and verbal development. But, in recent years, the notion of a bilingual advantage has emerged from research to the contrary, research that has seemed both far-reaching and compelling, much of it coming from the careful work of the psychologist Ellen Bialystok.

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From the age of eleven, Angela de Bruin spoke two languages. Born in the nineteen-eighties in Nijmegen, a small town in the Netherlands, de Bruin spoke Dutch at home, and, in school, immersed herself in English. She became fascinated by bilinguals, and read avidly about the cognitive advantages that being fluent in more than one language was supposed to provide. In college, she took up linguistics and neuroscience. And, in 2012, de Bruin enrolled in the psychology graduate program at the University of Edinburgh to further pursue the link between bilingualism and cognition.

Read the whole story: [*The New Yorker*](#)