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Language affects endorsement of misconceptions about bilingualism

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ABSTRACT

Bilingualism is associated with a number of false beliefs, myths and misconceptions, which carry implications for bilingual education and policymaking. While the language used, often in the media, to express such misconceptions may have become more subtle, a negative bias remains and is arguably more difficult to detect and defend against. The current study examined the endorsement of common misconceptions by bilingual and monolingual participants as a function of the phrasing used to construct the misconception statements. Participants ($N = 103$; 47% bilingual) completed an online survey comprising common misconceptions about bilingualism as well as filler items, rating their agreement with the statements using a 7-point Likert-type scale. The phrasing of the misconceptions was varied such that participants read either a strongly worded or weakly worded version of the statements. The results showed that participants gave higher ratings of the statements in the weakly worded condition. While overall the average endorsement of the misconceptions was low, 82% of participants agreed with at least one misconception and 29% agreed with half the statements or more. There was no significant difference between monolinguals' and bilinguals' ratings. The findings suggest that misconceptions about bilingualism remain prevalent and are readily detectable when worded ambiguously.

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Bilingualism; multilingualism; misconceptions; education; neuromyths; identity

Misconceptions can be defined as 'beliefs that are held contrary to known evidence' (Taylor and Kowalski 2004, 15). Bilingualism is associated with a number of misconceptions, false beliefs and myths that are at odds with an academic research literature documenting the positive effects of linguistic diversity (e.g. Lewis and Davies 2018). Misconceptions about bilingualism remain pervasive among the general public and professionals alike and have implications for parenting decisions and bilingual education and policy. For example, it is a commonly held belief that the early acquisition of two or more languages occurs at the expense of general cognitive development and represents an unwelcome, and perhaps damaging, burden for the developing cognitive system (Sorace 2007). Such misconceptions about bilingualism are among the many factors feeding into choices regarding maintaining bilingualism (e.g. Howard, Gibson, and Katsos 2021). For example, parents of autistic children and children with developmental delay are commonly advised to raise their child monolingually, despite the benefits inherent in maintaining a home language and its familial and cultural connections (Dai et al. 2018; Davis , Fletcher-Watson , and Digard 2021; Howard, Katsos, and Gibson 2019; Nolte et al. 2021; Peristeri et al. 2020; Uljarević et al. 2016). Even where parents hold

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positive views about the advantages of bilingualism, these do not necessarily translate into effective bilingual parenting practices (Piller and Gerber 2018). This contrast in attitude between a fear of language delay and yet an appreciation of the ease with which children acquire more than one language has been termed the 'bilingual paradox' (Petitto and Kovelman 2003; Sorace 2011).

Research with language professionals has also shown that misconceptions about early language learning can influence practice and policy. Children experiencing language delays or developmental challenges are encouraged to focus on one language only, the assumption being that exposure to two languages will cause confusion and further delay (Beauchamp and MacLeod 2017; Moore and Pérez-Méndez 2006). This position is based on outdated but engrained assumptions that are in contrast with current evidence (Beauchamp and MacLeod 2017). Negative attitudes towards bilingualism have also been reported in studies with teachers (e.g. Sook Lee and & Oxelson 2006). In some cases, outright rejection of bilingualism has been documented (Parba 2018) with risk of marginalisation of heritage languages (Gkaintartzi, Kiliari, and Tsokalidou 2015; Gu, Kou, and Guo 2019). Misconceptions can affect teachers' behaviours, and can, for example, lead to underestimation of students' abilities (MacGregor-Mendoza 2005; see also Park-Johnson 2020; Stamou and Dinas 2009). Understanding misconceptions about bilingualism and how they might be challenged therefore has important applications.

Bilingualism can be defined as the use of two or more languages in daily life (e.g. Grosjean 2010). About half of the world's population is bilingual. Despite this, a monolingual norm is assumed in many accounts of cognition and development, with negative consequences for our understanding of the bilingual experience (e.g. Grosjean 1989; see also Byers-Heinlein et al. 2019). Misconceptions about bilingualism reflect an underlying conceptualisation of the cognitive system as subject to finite resources, such that the learning of one skill reduces capacity for another (Souto-Manning 2006). They are also associated with a monolingual or fractional view, which portrays the bilingual as 'two monolinguals in the one person' (Grosjean 1989). This gives rise to other commonly cited negative misconceptions about bilingualism, sparking fears of a negative effect on the child's intelligence or that the child will become 'mixed up' through switching between languages (e.g. Bullock and Toribio 2009; Byers-Heinlein and Lew-Williams 2013; Grosjean 2010).

The monolingual norm assumes a high bar for bilingualism and is associated with several misconceptions about the features of an idealised or 'true' bilingual (e.g. see Grosjean 2010). For example, the myth that 'real bilinguals' speak with a native-like accent in both their languages is in contrast with the reality that accent is a normal part of the bilingual experience (e.g. Bijeljac-Babic et al. 2021; Grosjean 2010). Perceptions about accent and competence in turn affect bilinguals' identities as speakers and their positive self-image as bilingual speakers (e.g. Oliver and Exell 2020; Sung 2013). Perceptions about accent can lead to bias and educational disadvantage (see Chin 2010, for a review). For example, accent bias and linguistic profiling has been shown to affect teacher evaluations of students (Ford 1984) and perception of competence (Nelson, Signorella, and Botti 2016), as well as giving rise to other forms of linguistic discrimination such as ethnic accent bullying (e.g. Dovchin 2020; see also Bae 2015; Ros i Garcia 1984; Sridhara 1984; Zavala, 2011). Such bias affects interactions in a variety of contexts (Itzhak et al. 2017).

The research literature on misconceptions shows that they are resistant to change and can be confidently held despite being erroneous (Bensley and Lilienfeld 2015, 2017; Hughes et al. 2014). Attempts to counter misconceptions can instead strengthen them (Kowalski and Taylor 2009; Schwarz et al. 2007). One reason that may underlie this resistance to change is that many misconceptions contain a kernel of truth which forms the basis of an over-simplified generalisation (Hughes, Lyddy, and Lambe 2013; Lilienfeld et al. 2010). For example, some bilinguals, who acquired one language later than another, may show a preference for one language when expressing emotion, particularly when relating from autobiographical memory (e.g. Marian and Kaushanskaya 2008) or engaging in moral decision-making (Pavlenko 2017). This can give rise to a misconception that bilinguals essentially have two identities, with one preferred language reserved for the expression of emotion. In reality, bilinguals who acquired their two languages simultaneously have two languages available for the expression of emotions and other matters (e.g. see Grosjean

2010; 2011) and factors such as socialization into L2 culture and degree of L2 use have been shown to play a key role in the selection of language for communication of emotion (Ożańska-Ponikwia 2019; Pavlenko 2005).

Misconceptions about bilingualism stem from several sources, including the media. The mass media are important social institutions that shape and define social reality (e.g. see Gu and Tong 2018) and the media play a key role in disseminating inaccuracies and misconceptions about multilingualism (Johnson and Ensslin 2007; Kelly-Holmes and Milani 2011). Consumers place a high level of trust in media sources and exposure to stereotypes from popular media sources can reinforce negative views (Reny and Manzano 2016). While linguistic diversity is becoming more visible in the media (e.g. Androutsopoulos 2007), negative views of bilingualism remain commonplace and in contrast with the mainly positive views in the academic literature. Lewis and Davies (2018) evaluated academic and media articles published over a 10-year period (from 2006 to 2016) which referred to bilingual education. They found that 45% of the media articles, compared to 95% of academic articles, presented a stance that was in favour of bilingual education, while 39% of the media articles were opposed to bilingual education compared to 0% of the academic articles. While the proportion of pro-bilingual education academic articles increased in 2006–2016, media portrayals did not follow the same pattern. Lewis and Davies also found that anecdotal evidence formed the basis for the opinion in 52% of the media reports, an increase from 31% cited in an earlier study by McQuillan and Tse (1996), and suggesting that positive academic reports are not translating into positive media portrayals. Media discourse about bilingualism tends to focus on the educational context, and conveys on the one hand concerns about classroom interactions and on the other an association with elite language and prestige outcomes (Jaworska and Themistocleous 2018). This paradox has been described by Ruiz (2008, 182) as 'other languages are to be pursued by those who don't have them, but they are to be abandoned by those who do'.

The language used in the mass media has changed over time (e.g. Buntinx, Bornet, and Kaplan 2017; Carlquist et al. 2017; Matheson 2000; Roksvold 2010). However, even positive language can expose biases (e.g. Meier et al. 2020) and may, arguably, be more difficult to detect and defend against. Research has shown that the language used in misconception statements can affect participants' endorsement of the misconceptions and specifically that ambiguously phrased misconceptions can increase endorsement (Hughes, Lyddy, and Kaplan 2013). Such findings are consistent with research in the broader context showing effects of language on cognition. For example, Loftus and Palmer (1974) demonstrated the effect of wording of questions on response accuracy in an eyewitness memory task. Participants who were asked about the speed of cars that 'smashed' into each other gave consistently higher speed ratings than participants asked about cars that had 'collided' with or 'bumped' into each other. In a similar way, the phrasing of a misconception may influence agreement. Misconceptions about bilingualism often present as a categorical variable, rather than reflecting the multi-faceted and context dependant nature of the bilingual experience (Mann and de Bruin 2022; Surrain and Luk 2017; Wagner, Bialystok, and Grundy 2022; and see Lewis and Davies 2018, for examples of media representations of a 'language-as-problem' view). Misconceptions such as 'children raised in bilingual homes always mix their languages', 'Bilinguals have equal and perfect knowledge of their languages' and 'True bilinguals don't speak with an accent' (e.g. see Grosjean 2010), may be perceived differently if phrased in less absolute terms.

The current study presented monolingual and bilingual participants with a set of misconceptions about bilingualism along with some filler statements. The misconceptions were phrased as short, headline statements as might appear in a newspaper or online context (for example, 'It is impossible to fully acquire a new language later in life' or 'Bilinguals only speak in a perfect or native accent'). The language used to assert each statement was manipulated to create an unambiguous or 'strong' version (e.g. 'Bilinguals only speak in a perfect or native accent') and an ambiguous 'weak' version (e.g. 'Bilinguals tend to speak in a perfect or native accent'). It was hypothesised that endorsement would be higher in the weak wording condition and that bilingual participants would be less susceptible to misconceptions overall, based on these participants' personal experience with bilingualism.

Table 1. Participants' responses on weak and strong versions of the misconception statements.

Strong/weak version	Strong version – Mean (SD)	Weak version – Mean (SD)	Strong version – % of participants endorsing	Weak version – % of participants endorsing
Bilinguals always acquire their two languages in childhood/Bilinguals acquire their two languages in childhood	2.8 (1.9)	2.7 (1.6)	16	8
Bilinguals always have equal and perfect knowledge of their languages/Bilinguals have equal and perfect knowledge of their languages	2.8 (1.9)	2.9 (1.7)	10	9
Bilinguals express their emotions in their first language/Bilinguals tend to express their emotions in their first language*	4.3 (1.7)	5.3 (1.6)	27	29
Bilinguals only speak in a perfect or native accent/Bilinguals tend to speak in a perfect or native accent*	2.6 (1.3)	3.7 (1.6)	5	14
People who are raised bilingual have more difficulty with developing a strong identity/People who are raised bilingual tend to have more difficulty with developing a strong identity	3.0 (1.5)	3.3 (1.7)	13	10
It is impossible to fully acquire a new language later in life/It is almost impossible to fully acquire a new language later in life	2.4 (1.8)	2.4 (1.5)	11	8
Bilinguals develop dual or split personalities/Bilinguals are more likely to develop dual or split personalities	2.7 (1.6)	2.7 (1.4)	13	5
Speaking two languages causes children to feel confused/Speaking two languages can cause children to feel confused	2.2 (1.2)	2.5 (1.8)	4	9
Bilingualism involves fluency in more than one language§	5.6 (1.4)	5.7 (1.4)	49	37
Most people in the world are bilingual or multilingual§	4.0 (1.6)	4.5 (1.5)	26	25
The brain will benefit from learning a second language§	6.3 (0.8)	6.5 (0.7)	41	26
Language is organised differently in the bilingual brain compared to the monolingual brain§	5.0 (1.4)	5.0 (1.3)	58	39

§filler items.
*significant at $p < .01$.

Materials and methods

Participants

Participants ($N = 103$; 71% women) were adults, resident in the Republic of Ireland or Northern Ireland and most (80%) were current students at third level. They were recruited through social media invitations to an online survey tool. There were 55 monolinguals and 48 bilinguals as identified by self-report. Participants indicated their age by selecting from ranges and were mainly aged in the 18–32 years grouping (94%). Of the bilingual group, 65% of the sample had English as their first language, compared with 100% for the monolingual group. All but one participant rated their own proficiency in English at the highest level. Of the bilingual group, 44% rated their proficiency in the language other than English as native and a further 37.5% rated their proficiency as fluent.

Materials

A list of misconceptions about bilingualism was identified using the research literature. Eight recurring statements were selected for inclusion along with four filler items (see Table 1). Filler items were

chosen as true statements which should generate agreement, following the method in Taylor and Kowalski (2004). The wording of the misconception statements was manipulated to create a strong and weak version of each statement. An online survey tool was used to present the statements and to collect demographic data from participants anonymously.

Procedure

The study received approval from the departmental research ethics committee. Participants were recruited to an online survey via social media and snowball sampling and gave their consent to participate in a study about attitudes towards bilingualism. Participation was voluntary and all the data collected were anonymous. Participants were randomly assigned either to the strong or weak language condition by the survey software. They provided demographic information and reported whether they considered themselves to be monolingual or bilingual. This self-report information was used to assign participants to the monolingual or bilingual group. Participants also reported their proficiency in each language on a scale of 1–4, and reported whether English was their first language. The statements about bilingualism, along with filler items, were presented in randomised order and responses were given on a 7-point Likert-type scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Results

Participants' ratings for the misconception statements showed that, on average, endorsement with the statements was low in both language conditions and for both participant groups (see Table 2). The average rating for both bilingual and monolingual groups was 3 (SD = 0.84), falling under the midpoint of the 7-point Likert scale and indicating 'slight disagreement' with the statements. There was a modest difference between the average ratings for the weak ($M = 3.2$, SD = 0.80) and strong ($M = 2.8$, SD = 0.83) language conditions. Table 2 summarizes the data.

The data were analysed using a 2×2 (between subjects) analysis of variance. This revealed a small but statistically significant difference between the two language conditions, $F\ (1,99) = 4.894$, $p = .029$, $\eta 2 = .047$. This showed that participants were more likely to agree with the misconception statements when they were presented in the weakly worded or more ambiguous format. There was no significant difference between the responses of bilingual and monolingual participants, nor was there a significant interaction effect between participant group and language condition. A separate analysis of variance was carried out on the filler items, which were the same in each condition, and no significant effects appeared for any of the conditions here. This suggests that while the overall effect of language condition is modest, the phrasing used in the misconceptions did have a meaningful effect on responses.

While participants' endorsement of the misconceptions was low overall, none of the misconception statements met with outright disagreement (i.e. a rating of 1). The ratings for the individual misconception statements differed considerably and they were analysed separately (see Table 1). Two of

Table 2. Average ratings on the 7 point scale by participant group and language condition.

Language condition	Participant	Mean	SD	N
Weak	Bilingual	3.0536	.88262	21
	Monolingual	3.3274	.70874	21
	Total	3.1905	.80264	42
Strong	Bilingual	2.8796	.84244	27
	Monolingual	2.7684	.83719	34
	Total	2.8176	.83435	61
Total	Bilingual	2.9557	.85540	48
	Monolingual	2.9818	.83035	55
	Total	2.9697	.83806	103

the eight statements showed a statistically significant difference between the two language conditions, with higher endorsement of the misconceptions emerging in the weaker language condition. The statement 'Bilinguals express their emotions in their first language' (strong)/'Bilinguals tend to express their emotions in their first language' (weak) received average ratings indicating agreement with the statement, with means of 4.3 (SD = 1.40) and 5.3 (SD = 1.61) respectively. Endorsement was significantly higher in the weaker condition than in the strong condition, $F(1,99) = 8.95$, $p = .004$. Almost one-third of participants in both language conditions endorsed this misconception (see Table 1).

The statement 'Bilinguals only speak in a perfect or native accent' (strong)/'Bilinguals tend to speak in a perfect or native accent' (weak) received average ratings of 2.6 (SD = 1.26) and 3.7 (SD = 1.6) respectively; while these ratings remained below the midpoint, indicating slight disagreement with the statements overall, again ratings were significantly higher in the weak language condition compared to the strong condition, $F(1,99) = 15.14$, $p < .001$.

While analysis of the filler items showed no significant differences between conditions, endorsement of these items also showed considerable individual differences and low levels of agreement overall (Table 1). For example, only a quarter of participants agreed with the statement 'Most people in the world are bilingual or multilingual'. Of the filler items, statements such as 'The brain will benefit from learning a second language' and 'Bilingualism involves fluency in more than one language' might be expected to generate strong agreement, given that fillers were selected from the research literature as true statements. Yet fewer than half of participants agreed with these statements.

Finally, while there were no significant differences between monolingual and bilingual groups, there were considerable individual differences in the number of misconception statements agreed with. Almost a third (29%) of participants agreed with 3 or more of the misconception statements and 82% of participants agreed with at least one misconception. Just 19 participants (18%) disagreed with all of the misconception statements.

Discussion

The ratings for the misconception statements showed that, on average, participants tended towards disagreement; however, one statement generated agreement and there were considerable individual differences in participants' responses and between the statements themselves. Overall, 82% of participants agreed with at least one misconception and 29% agreed with half the statements or more. Participants, by average rating, endorsed the statement 'Bilinguals express their emotions in their first language', with close to a third of participants agreeing with this statement. This ties in with a common myth about bilingualism that has implications for the understanding of bilingual identity. It remains a challenging myth because it represents a simplification of a complex relationship between language and emotion and contains a 'kernel of truth' and, as noted by Grosjean (2011), 'Like all myths, there are instances when it is true.' The tendency to over-simplify a complex relationship is likely to have consequences for interpersonal interactions if a belief prevails that L1 is the language of emotion, without appreciation of the role of affective socialization and other factors (e.g. Pavlenko 2005).

Consistent with the first hypothesis, the phrasing of the misconceptions was shown to affect participants' responses, with statements couched in weaker phrasing attracting higher endorsement ratings overall. This is consistent with previous research showing the effect of ambiguous phrasing on endorsement of misconceptions generally (e.g. Hughes, Lyddy & Kaplan, 2013). While the overall effect was modest, analysis of the individual misconception items showed that this overall effect was stronger for two of the eight statements: 'Bilinguals express their emotions in their first language' and 'Bilinguals speak in a perfect or native accent.' Both of these statements relate to bilingual identity and such misconceptions can have harmful consequences, affecting self-image and self-efficacy (e.g. Sung 2013; Oliver and Exell 2020). For example, Dovchin (2020) reported that experiences of

linguistic racism, including linguistic stereotyping and ethnic accent bullying, were associated with a range of negative psychological sequelae, including low self-esteem, anxiety over speaking in English and mental health concerns (see also Bae 2015; Ros i Garcia 1984; Sridhara 1984; Zavala, 2011). The myth that 'real bilinguals' have no discernible accent in their different languages can be prevalent (e.g. see Grosjean 2010, 77) and has implications for bilinguals' identities as speakers and concerns over presenting a positive identity or self-image as bilingual speakers (e.g. Sung 2013). Further manipulation of the phrasing of the misconception statements might well augment this effect.

Contrary to the second hypothesis, no difference emerged between the bilingual and monolingual groups' ratings of the misconception statements. In the present study, language status was identified by self-report and it may be that this led to a diverse group falling within the 'bilingual' category. A variety of L1/ L2 combinations are likely to have been involved. Equally, it may be the case that personal experience of bilingualism does not confer a protective effect against biases and myths about bilingualism, as has been documented in other contexts (e.g. Howard, Gibson, and Katsos 2021; Piller and Gerber 2018). Further research might address this issue in more detail.

While, on average, agreement with the misconception statements was low, there were considerable individual differences, with almost a third (29%) of participants indicating agreement with 3 or more of the misconception statements. Furthermore, just 18% of the sample rejected all the misconception statements. However, ratings for filler items were also on the low side, and statements that might have been expected to meet with universal agreement did not achieve same. For example, the filler statement 'Most people in the world are bilingual or multilingual' was endorsed by just a quarter of the sample. The performance on the filler items taken along with ratings on the misconception items suggests that false beliefs about bilingualism remain prevalent, in both bilingual and monolingual participants.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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