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Rethinking Difference: How Bilingualism Research Helps Us Combat Linguistic Bias

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You have likely heard the claims before—*“Bilingual children don’t fully learn either language.” “Bilingual children will struggle more in school.” “Learning more than one language can disrupt language development.”* While those of us dedicated to supporting bilingualism and bilingual education know these statements are false, such misconceptions remain commonplace among the general public and for many educators as well. The pervasiveness of these myths makes it difficult to provide adequate educational support to bilingual children and their families, often compounding the legacy of linguistic oppression that many speakers of minority languages continue to face. By focusing our research on bilingualism and childhood acquisition of minority languages in New Mexico—especially ASL, Navajo, and Spanish—the Lobo Language Acquisition Lab at the University of New Mexico aims to dispel these harmful misconceptions, shifting the focus instead towards bilingualism’s numerous benefits. This article provides a brief overview of some of our findings and looks at

the origins of these myths, demonstrating how research into bilingual language development is a vital part of combating linguistic bias and supporting bilingualism within our state.

Before we can challenge bilingualism myths, it is important we begin with a more general understanding of where negative perceptions about language variation come from. As anyone involved in language education or linguistics can tell you, the way we talk is not a socially neutral activity—prejudicial attitudes towards different social groups are often

reflected in our perceptions about the languages people use and the ways that they use them. As such, linguistic bias can take many different forms in different situations. Speaking a minoritized language, for example, can carry a stigma when the people who speak it are marginalized in society. In New Mexico, this is a common experience within Indigenous, Hispanic, immigrant, and Deaf communities who have long faced oppression of their languages under prejudicial policies and English language dominance. But just as using a particular language can incur discrimination, so too can using certain variants or dialects—whether of dominant or minority languages—and for similar reasons. Thus, the most stigmatized language variants tend to be those used by groups with low socioeconomic status, such as the Spanish varieties spoken by many Latinx immigrants (Otheguy, 2016) or varieties of African American English spoken by many Black Americans (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 2015).

Whether aimed at a language or a language variant, the justifications given for these different forms of linguistic bias typically follow the same argument—that socially disfavored ways of speaking are stigmatized not because of who the speakers are but because they are ungrammatical, unsophisticated, or in some way deficient. What these claims fail to address, however, is that such assessments are contingent upon a comparison with some form of standard—be it a dominant language or a standard language dialect—and that these standards are determined and enforced by the speakers with the most power

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(Potowski & Shin, 2019; Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 2015). Thus, a language variety becomes the standard against which other varieties are measured simply because it is the variety used by the socially dominant group, not because it is in some way superior or more grammatical. In fact, linguistic research has demonstrated that all languages and their variants are equally systematic and complex, with language variation being a normal and essential quality of all human languages. Ascribing value to different ways of speaking according to how closely a language or variant aligns with a standard has less to do with the quality or correctness of specific language features and more to do with how society values different groups of speakers.

Unfortunately, often neglected within the linguistic bias conversation are bilinguals, their distinctive language variants, and the complex forms of prejudice they face. This is particularly true for heritage bilinguals, defined as those who grow up learning a minority language at home (Valdés, 2005), many of whom experience a dominance shift to a majority language after beginning school (Shin et al., 2019). Not only are heritage bilinguals likely to encounter one or more types of negative linguistic bias for speaking a minority language and possibly one or more stigmatized variant, but they can come under additional scrutiny when their language development is assessed using monolingual speakers as a baseline for comparison (Otheguy, 2016; Kupisch & Rothman, 2016; Tseng, 2021). Instead of focusing on how their unique linguistic experiences shape their language development, heritage bilinguals are often evaluated according to how well they align with monolingual trajectories, with divergence from this standard being treated as ‘incomplete acquisition’ rather than as occurring along the natural spectrum of language variation. Such bias in favor of monolingual standards has its roots in the early research into child language development—research that tended to come from monolingual-dominant societies like the U.S. and the U.K.—which posited that bilingualism has a

negative impact on linguistic development because it ‘confuses’ children (Kupisch & Rothman, 2016). While this view has long since been refuted by more recent scholarship and research, it endures in the myths about bilingualism that remain popular today. Consequently, this bias continues to impact how we assess and perceive bilinguals and the ways that they speak.

Now that we have established some of the common bilingualism misconceptions and their origins,



Lobo Language Acquisition Lab investigators, faculty, and students meet to discuss ongoing research.

we can turn our attention to what our research reveals about bilingual language development in its own right. Focusing again on heritage bilinguals, a recurring finding shows us that the unique linguistic environments characteristic of these speakers impact their developmental trajectories and individual language

variation. In particular, amount and type of language input are key, as these factors tend to vary within this population, who are, by definition, exposed to their two languages differently. For example, while most child heritage speakers in New Mexico receive a high level of English exposure at school, the amount of input they receive from their minority language at home varies from child to child. Unsurprisingly, this variable input quantity is correlated with their rate of acquisition—the more exposure children have to a language, the quicker they will learn it (Dijkstra et al., 2016).

But our research suggests that input quantity also influences the pathways of development that a child’s language learning takes. For instance, a study on the use of Spanish demonstratives—such as ‘*esta*’ (this) and ‘*esa*’ (that)—among child heritage speakers in New Mexico found that children with restricted Spanish input followed a different learning trajectory than children with abundant input did (Shin et al., 2021). While those with more Spanish input mirrored Spanish monolinguals in their development and produced a mix of proximal and distal demonstratives to refer to objects both near and far from them,

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children with restricted input relied almost entirely on the demonstrative *‘esa.’* As previous research has suggested that Spanish monolinguals tend to rely more on proximal demonstratives like *‘esta’* in their early development of this feature, the opposite finding for restricted-input speakers indicates that input quantity influences not just the rate at which children learn but also the direction that their learning takes.

Like quantity, input quality also matters, as the different language variants that children are exposed to influence the types of variants that they themselves speak. This impact is twofold—children naturally emulate the variants in their environment, but these variants can also exert influence on one another. For example, another factor that may contribute to the overreliance on *‘esa’* seen in the heritage speakers with restricted Spanish input is the influence of English, since English monolingual speakers similarly produce high rates of distal demonstratives—in this case *‘that’*—in their early development (González-Peña et al., 2020). Importantly, our research indicates that such interaction between a bilingual’s two languages is variable and can affect distinct types of linguistic phenomena differently (Shin et al., 2019; Shin, et al., under review). For instance, we have found that the amount of exposure to English at home is positively correlated with the rate of gender mismatches for Spanish direct objects, as in *¿Qué hace con la ventana? Lo abre* ‘What does she do with the window? She opens it’, where we expect feminine pronoun *la*, but bilinguals sometimes produce masculine pronoun *lo*. In contrast, while the omission of Spanish direct objects, as in *¿Qué hace con la ventana? Abre* ‘Opens’ instead of *La abre* ‘Opens it’, is more frequent among bilingual children than monolingual children, this phenomenon is not due to influence from English; bilingual children who omit many objects in Spanish omit very few in English (Shin, et al., 2019; Shin et al., under review). Furthermore, the durability of cross-linguistic influence can also vary, with English influence on certain aspects of Spanish fading as children age but persisting for others (Shin, 2018). While our research clearly indicates that there are key differences in the ways bilinguals use and develop their languages, it is important to emphasize that difference is not the same as delay. Bilinguals’ developmental pathways and language variants may diverge from those of monolingual speakers, but this is a natural product of their

unique linguistic environments and not an indication that the ways they talk are somehow deficient or underdeveloped. In fact, sometimes bilinguals add additional complexity to language (Shin, 2014). As with the other forms of linguistic variation we have discussed, assessing bilingual language variants solely in terms of deviation from a standard—whatever that standard may be—is a flawed method of evaluation that often stigmatizes the most marginalized speakers and fosters harmful misconceptions about bilingualism. Improving how we teach and assess bilingual children begins with shifting our attitudes toward language variation—changing how we think about difference—and advancing our understanding of what makes bilingual varieties unique through research that focuses on bilingual language development in its own right. As our knowledge and insights into language variation grow, so does our ability to support bilingualism and cultivate healthy language diversity.

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