

Title: Previous Language Experience Shapes Novel Language Learning

Abstract:

Learning a new language is a difficult task for many people, especially in adulthood. Adult learners' unique challenge is that they have already mastered at least one language, and this knowledge shapes acquisition. Similarities between one's native language and a new language can facilitate learning, whereas differences can result in interference. In this talk we will explore how two groups with different language backgrounds, monolinguals and bilinguals, learn vocabulary in a novel language.

The effect of cross-linguistic overlap was examined by teaching English monolinguals and German-English bilinguals words in an artificial language that were spelled similarly to one, both, or neither of their known languages. Both groups learned novel words that resembled English better than unfamiliar words. Bilinguals also benefited from German overlap, and received no added benefits for dual-overlap with English and German.

The effect of cross-linguistic interference was examined by teaching English monolinguals and Spanish-English bilinguals words in an artificial language with letter-to-sound mappings that mismatched English and Spanish (e.g., the word NAKE was pronounced /fuwɔ/). Word learning in both groups was disrupted by the conflicts in letter-sound mappings, although bilinguals were able to overcome the interference with training.

Together, these studies demonstrate that prior language use affects learning and processing of a novel language, and that bilingual experience can modulate the effects of positive and negative transfer.