

Does the age when bilingualism starts influence how well immigrants maintain their first language?

What this research was about and why it is important

Maintaining your first language can be important for immigrants and their children, especially when the first language is needed to communicate with relatives in the country of origin. It could be that exposure to a second language at the time of immigration might influence how well immigrants can maintain their first language. To explore this, we compared the Turkish speech of immigrants who had arrived in the United Kingdom at different ages with the Turkish speech of monolinguals living in Turkey. We examined (a) their use of Turkish complex grammar structures and (b) how much immigrants sounded like native Turkish speakers. We found that all immigrants used grammar structures similarly, regardless of the age at immigration. The chances of sounding like a native Turkish speaker were reduced if immigration happened at younger ages. However, more exposure to the first language increased these chances, among other factors.

What the researchers did

- To get samples of speech in Turkish, the researchers interviewed 86 participants who were all born in Turkey and had learned Turkish as their first language:
 - 29 were Turkish monolinguals living in Turkey;
 - 57 were adult long-term Turkish immigrants around London. These immigrants had different ages of first exposure to English (their second language), having arrived in the United Kingdom between 7 and 34 years old.
- Participants were asked about everyday topics (such as health and education), their linguistic and cultural preferences (such as how often they used Turkish with friends and family), and about events in their past.
- Participants' Turkish speech was analyzed in two ways:
 - how often they used complex grammar structures;
 - how nativelike their speech sounded, based on ratings by 28 university students in Turkey.

What the researchers found

- All immigrants used as many complex structures as the monolinguals living in Turkey, regardless of the age at which the immigrants arrived in the United Kingdom.
- Age of exposure to the second language affected whether immigrants' first language sounded nativelike:
 - immigrants who were older than 13 when they started exposure to their second language sounded the same in their first language as the Turkish monolinguals;
 - however, immigrants with exposure to their second language before age 13 were perceived, in general, to sound "accented" in Turkish (their speech did not sound the same as the speech of Turkish monolinguals).
- Immigrants who were young when they immigrated could sound native in Turkish if they had been exposed to their first language a lot (e.g., via the media) and if they had been more proficient to begin with.
- Generally, while older immigrants tended to maintain their Turkish fully, younger immigrants' Turkish was more variable and was influenced by several additional factors.

Things to consider

- Being exposed to a second language at a young age does not necessarily lead to loss of the first language. Given adequate exposure to the first language, children of immigrants can fully learn it.
- Similarities between first and second languages might impact the maintenance of the first language, as the languages may interfere with each other. In this study, early exposure to a second language had a negative impact on pronunciation, which has similarities between Turkish and English. In contrast, there was no negative impact on complex grammar structures that are different across the languages.

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