

Bridging the divide: Enhancing the scientific and public understanding of bilingualism

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There are two types of “bridges” that can foster the scientific and public understanding of bilingualism. The first type links different research disciplines in the effort to address particular research questions. I will illustrate this with examples of convergent developmental paths in the pronominal domain attested in advanced adult second language (L2) speakers and in speakers experiencing native language (L1) attrition due to long-term use of a second language. Reference tracking requires the language user to infer appropriate pronoun-referent mappings and dynamically update the discourse model following a change of referent status. Recent research shows that pronouns and other referring expressions requiring efficient updating of context-dependent information remain variable even in highly proficient L2 speakers and become unstable in L1 attrition. In both cases, variability manifests itself as ‘over-explicitness’ and higher tolerance of redundancy. I will first explore possible explanations focusing on the interaction of language with non-linguistic cognitive control, which especially affects the construction of reference. I will then consider the possibility that the convergence between L1 attrition and L2 acquisition may ultimately reflect a cognitive reconfiguration that allows successful late bilinguals to efficiently handle cross-language competition. In other words, the ‘good language learner’ may be the one whose native language is most open to change.

The second type of bridge connects research to the community: the aim to enable people from all sectors of society to make informed decisions based on research rather than misconceptions. I will briefly describe how the research and information centre *Bilingualism Matters* is successfully addressing this challenge in Scotland, Europe, and the US, and how the scientific and public understanding of bilingualism can benefit each other.