

66 Are multilingual individuals more creative?

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It is often claimed that diversity breeds creativity. This, however, is a vast question that gives rise to considerable debate. The specific question of the multilingualism-creativity link is part of this debate. If multilingualism is found to be positively related to creativity, this could help justify promoting the learning and use of several languages in various contexts – from education to business and personal life.

This question is conceptually and empirically challenging, and raises a number of related questions: What is creativity? How can we measure it and quantify its relationship with multilingualism? Can we specifically target linguistic diversity, and distinguish it from other forms of personal experience related to cultural diversity? Can results found at the individual level be generalised to other levels (such as small groups or entire societies)?

What does research tell us?

Essentially, creativity can be seen as a complex cognitive ability: the integration of several abilities (e.g. divergent thinking, reasoning, general and domain-specific knowledge), together leading to the production of new ideas, as well as their evaluation, selection, and elaboration. Many other factors, such as personality traits or environmental opportunities, are closely related to creativity. However, a definition focusing on the cognitive aspects of creativity certainly captures many of its essential dimensions. Studies on the impact of bilingualism on *cognition* have shown that bilingualism, manifested through language switching, was positively related to cognitive processes such as attentional flexibility and the ability to filter out irrelevant information.

Moreover, the benefits of bilingualism for such cognitive processes seems to generalise quite well to other cognitive processes, both in verbal and non-verbal domains (Bialystok, 2017).

However, the specific study of the link between *creativity* (as distinct from *cognition*) and *multilingualism* (as opposed to *bilingualism*) has received little attention so far. Some pioneering studies suggest that bilingualism is indeed conducive to creativity, but many of them are exclusively focused on specific populations such as immigrants, children, or high-proficiency bilinguals. Moreover, it is also often unclear, in these studies, whether it is actually the language skills *per se* that are conducive to creativity or the overall multicultural experience that often comes with multilingualism.

Illustration and evidence

Original empirical research carried out in the context of the MIME project has allowed further testing of the multilingualism-creativity hypothesis, avoiding the limitations mentioned above. The data collected in four mutually compatible studies (with a total sample size of 592 persons) has been used to test a variety of models with advanced statistical methods.

In this study, multilingualism was conceptualised as a set of aptitudes, combining the total number of languages known, as well as productive and receptive abilities in a second, third and fourth language (assessed with a standard instrument based on *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*).

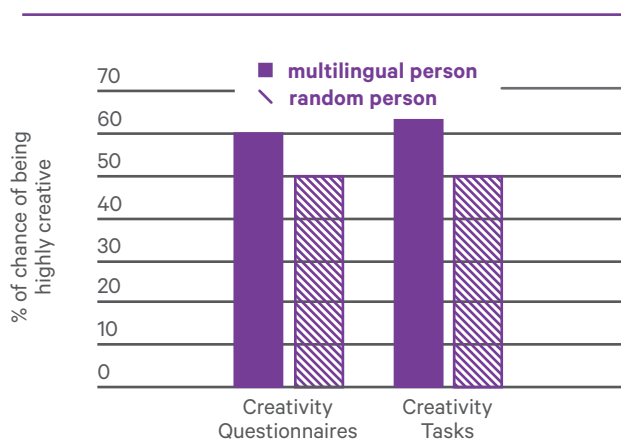
Creativity was assessed with two sets of variables: (1) creativity questionnaires, which combine information on overall idea generation and idea selection ability, as well as information on creative activities and achievements in several domains (e.g. visual arts, music, science); and (2) creativity tasks, which combine the scores obtained in three different tasks (these scores were based both on peer rating and on objective rating procedures).

Summarising these results, the figure below shows that, for both sets of creativity measures, a person randomly selected in the population has a 50% chance of having a creativity score above the mean, while if this person is multilingual, this probability increases to about 60%. These are average values, and the more multilingual a person is, the higher the chance of her being creative.

Multilingualism is also related to foreign experience. Multilingual people, on average, tend to have travelled and lived abroad more often, and additional analyses show that such experience is also positively related to creativity. Even when taking this and additional factors such as age, gender or education into account, the impact of multilingualism remains positive and significant, especially on creativity tasks.

Policy implications

At this point, we can say that it is very plausible that, at the individual level, multilingualism favours creativity – directly, but also indirectly through multicultural experience.



In other words, designing policies aimed at increasing multilingualism should translate into higher creativity. In particular:

- ▶ foreign language learning may be advocated on the grounds of its likely beneficial impact on creativity and general cognition, and for the “boost” effect it provides to multicultural experience, which is, in turn, also related to creativity;
- ▶ this effect is clearer for skills in a broader range of languages, suggesting that exposure to more than one foreign language is particularly beneficial.

Even though a positive correlation between multilingualism and creativity was found at the individual level, the transposition of these findings to groups (and, by extension, to an entire society) is not straightforward. However, desk research suggests that multilingualism and, more generally, cultural diversity are also positively related to creativity at the group level, and may then be conducive to innovation. Contributions in social psychology have shown that groups with no internal diversity are very vulnerable to groupthink; people in such groups often strongly desire consensus, leading to premature and often suboptimal decisions. Conversely, groups including at least one minority member appear to be more creative, arguably because minorities stimulate divergent thinking and multiple perspectives.

References and further reading

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