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Review Article

A Review of the Neurobiology of the Bilingual Brain: What Have We Learned from the Last Two Decades?

Seyma Inan

Assistant Professor of Psychology, The Department of Psychology, Mercyhurst University, Pennsylvania

***Corresponding author**: Seyma Inan, Assistant Professor of Psychology, The Department of Psychology, Mercyhurst University, Pennsylvania

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Abstract

The field of contemporary neuroscience has shown increasing interest in the functional representation of multiple languages within the human brain. This review synthesizes literature from the last twenty years, examining the neurobiological underpinnings of bilingualism. It offers a comprehensive analysis through various perspectives in neuroscience and concrete experimental findings. The paper discusses: (1) the intricate nature of bilingual language processing as evidenced by brain activity; (2) cognitive and neurological outcomes associated with bilingualism; (3) the evolution of bilingual capabilities throughout the human lifespan, with a focus on individual variability; (4) current neuroimaging techniques employed in bilingual studies; and (5) the relationship between language exposure and neural adaptability, culminating in key conclusions.

Keywords: Bilingualism; Neurobiology; Bilingual brain; Cognitive developmental psychology

Introduction

In an era marked by the rapid diversification of populations and the expanding reach of globalization, bilingualism has emerged not merely as a commonality but as a pivotal aspect of contemporary life. The drive toward learning and utilizing additional languages, fueled by motives ranging from tourism and cross-cultural interaction to migration, is on the rise. Notably, a significant proportion of the global youth, approximately two-thirds, are nurtured in environments where bilingualism is the norm. Reflecting this trend, data from the 2010 US Census highlighted that nearly one-fifth (19.7%) of children over the age of five are engaging with languages other than English within the United States [1]. This shifting linguistic landscape has catalyzed an array of research endeavors across multiple psychological domains, including neuropsychology, cognitive psychology, and linguistic psychology, particularly over the past two decades [2]. These investigations aim to delineate the neurobiological underpinnings of the bilingual brain, exploring the breadth of cognitive and neurobiological ramifications tied to bilingualism [3].

A growing body of evidence suggests that bilingual individuals, by virtue of juggling multiple languages, exhibit enhanced cognitive control compared to their monolingual counterparts. Moreover, the engagement with dual linguistic systems appears to extend its influence beyond cognitive faculties, impacting the neural circuits of the brain [4]. This raises a critical inquiry: does bilingualism confer distinct cognitive and neurodevelopmental benefits or drawbacks upon individuals immersed in multilingual contexts?

Understanding the intricacies of bilingualism necessitates a comprehensive examination of various interrelated factors, including the age at which a second language is acquired, and the proficiency achieved in both languages. Notably, demographic variables such as age (comparing individuals in their twenties to those in their thirties) and gender have been shown to influence neural structures, manifesting in significant variations in cortical thickness [5]. These distinctions underscore the necessity of comparing bilingual individuals with their monolingual counterparts to elucidate the potential structural and functional variations in their brains.

Bilingualism serves as a pivotal avenue for exploring the realms of language, cognition, and neurological structures [4]. Scholars in the field of neurolinguistics have dedicated efforts to understand how bilingualism might shape the brain's architecture and operational dynamics. Their research primarily focuses on identifying changes in connectivity among specific brain regions and the development of neural circuits within these areas [6]. Empirical studies consistently indicate that the extent and nature of second language (L2) acquisition have profound impacts on the brain's structure and functionality [7]. To this end, researchers have utilized a variety of neuroimaging techniques, including functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), its adaptive counterpart (fMRI-a), event-related potentials (ERPs), whole-head magnetoencephalography (MEG), and diffusion tensor imaging (DTI), to probe the bilingual brain [3].

Analyzing the nuances of the brain's structure and function in response to bilingualism requires intricate analytical frameworks to comprehend how distinct experiences shape cerebral modifications [6]. The field of Cultural Neuroscience (CN) posits that the mosaic of life experiences plays a pivotal role in the maturation of the human brain. This organ is dynamic, continually morphing in reaction to the nuances of environmental stimuli [8]. The journey of language acquisition transcends the mere understanding of vocabulary, syntax, and script; it encompasses the assimilation of cultural ethos, ideologies, and divergent life narratives. Hence, immersion in cultural practices exerts a dual influence on the brain, modifying its functionality and architecture. Illustratively, the cognitive challenges faced by London's taxi drivers in maneuvering through the city's labyrinthine streets [9], and the linguistic dexterity demanded by multilingualism, serve as quintessential demonstrations of neuroplasticity [10].

The neurobiology of bilingualism delves into a plethora of inquiries concerning the cerebral ramifications of bilingual proficiency. Such studies typically scaffold their investigations around key questions, including the mechanisms through which bilingual individuals comprehend and articulate language, the cognitive disparities between monolinguals and bilinguals, the brain's response to multilingual stimuli, and the observable variations in neural engagement among bilinguals with different linguistic pairings, for example, Chinese English versus German-English speakers, in relation to linguistic diversity. Additionally, the methodologies employed by neuroscientists to explore the effects of bilingualism are of significant interest.

This review scrutinizes the literature over the past two decades regarding the neurobiology of bilingualism. It delves into how bilingualism influences the brain's structural and functional architecture, guided by recent advances in neuroscientific research. A particular emphasis is placed on understanding language representation within the neural framework and the transformative impact of multilingual proficiency. Additionally, this paper explores the variances attributed to developmental trajectories across different life stages, aiming to elucidate potential individual disparities among bilinguals. An overview of common methodologies employed in contrasting bilingual and monolingual subjects is presented, highlighting the role of neuroplasticity fostered by active engagement in multiple languages. Concluding remarks address the lifelong implications of bilingualism, including its effects on specific neural networks and enhanced cognitive functions such as executive control, while underscoring the pivotal role of neuroplasticity in the bilingual brain and mind.

Language Representation in the Brain

Language serves as a fundamental medium for human communication, entailing a multifaceted interplay of neural mechanisms. The intricate process of language acquisition and utilization necessitates a sophisticated neural framework to facilitate effective communication [4]. Grasping the neural underpinnings of language is crucial for a comprehensive understanding of its representation within the brain. Developmentally, infants acquire their first language through exposure, without the need for explicit instruction in grammatical rules, a phenomenon Chomsky, as cited by Rosenberg [11], attributes to an innate linguistic capability. The complexity of this behavioral system poses challenges in pinpointing the origins of linguistic aptitude, especially in the absence of advanced tools like fMRI and EEG in early neuroscience, which could illuminate brain activity during language processing.

Historically, insights into the brain's language centers stemmed from the study of individuals with brain lesions, leading to the identification of critical areas such as Broca's and Wernicke's regions. Broca's discovery in the mid-19th century revealed a specific brain locus for speech production, located in the left inferior frontal gyrus, while Wernicke's work later delineated the site responsible for language comprehension at the left temporo-parietal junction [4]. These findings laid the groundwork for further explorations into language neurobiology.

The advent of neuroimaging has expanded our understanding of bilingualism, revealing distinct neural activations associated with the management of two languages. This divergence possibly arises from different cognitive control mechanisms governing the switch between the first (L1) and second language (L2), as well as between linguistic and non-linguistic tasks. Research in this domain suggests that bilingual individuals may leverage cognitive control networks more efficiently than their monolingual counterparts, a notion supported by findings of shared activation patterns in the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC) across both groups, indicative of cognitive control [2,12,13]. This review aims to synthesize these advancements, offering insights into the neurobiological implications of bilingualism over the past two decades.

What are the Cognitive and Neural Consequence of Bilingualism?

Exploring the cognitive and neural repercussions of bilingualism has become an increasingly vibrant area of study. Recent research has started to unravel the neural dynamics associated with bilingual processing through behavioral experiments [14]. Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) techniques are commonly utilized to delve into the complexities of bilingualism. These studies often involve tasks where participants are prompted to name images or words in response to cues, facilitating the examination of both single and mixed-language performance. A notable study by Hernandez et al. [12] revealed that tasks requiring language switching activate the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (DLPFC), a region implicated in the broader executive control system.

Further evidence from cognitive and cultural neuroscience suggests that bilingualism may confer advantages in various executive functions, including inhibition, task-switching, attention control, and working memory, cumulatively enhancing mental agility. This enhanced flexibility denotes the capacity to adeptly navigate frequent changes and process information efficiently [14].

Additional research has expanded these findings across diverse linguistic pairings, including German French [15], Spanish-Catalan [16], Chinese-English, and Spanish-English bilinguals [17-19]. Language switching in these contexts is associated with specific patterns of brain activation, notably in bilateral frontal, precentral, caudate, pre-supplementary, and temporal regions, underscoring the frontal systems' pivotal role in executive control during bilingual language processing.

Mechelli et al. [8] and Krizman et al. [20] have both contributed to our understanding of the functional and structural brain adaptations attributable to bilingualism. Notably, Krizman et al. [20] discovered parallels between bilinguals and musicians in terms of auditory and executive system benefits, emphasizing the biological underpinnings of enhanced auditory processing efficiency and flexibility in both groups. This analogy draws on the shared requirement of both musicians and bilinguals to interpret and make meaningful auditory signals, suggesting a universal aspect of language and music processing.

Furthermore, empirical research indicates that bilingual individuals may exhibit superior cognitive skills compared to monolingual counterparts [21], attributed to the necessity of inhibiting one language while using another. This cognitive advantage appears to transcend socioeconomic status, suggesting inherent benefits to executive functions such as attention switching, working memory, and problem-solving. Pascale et al. [21] specifically investigated whether bilingual benefits extend to cognitive skills among low-income children, comparing results with those from more affluent backgrounds. Despite similar performance in abstract reasoning and working memory between bilingual and monolingual children, bilinguals demonstrated superior executive function, hinting at the potential of bilingualism to mitigate the negative cognitive impacts associated with poverty.

This collective body of research underscores the profound and multifaceted influence of bilingualism on the mind and brain, highlighting significant advancements in our understanding over the past two decades.

Developmental Changes across Lifespan in Bilingualism

Exploring the impact of bilingualism encompasses not only the examination of how proficiency in more than one language influences behaviors such as language skills, brain activity, and overall cognition but also how bilingual individuals navigate and apply their linguistic abilities amidst a variety of interactive and developmental contexts. The intricate variability in cognitive development throughout one's life implies that bilinguals exhibit diverse patterns in the utilization and purpose of their linguistic repertoire. Factors such as proficiency levels, dominance in one language over another, demographic influences, aptitude for acquiring new languages, as well as age and gender, play significant roles in this diversity [2,6].

Empirical evidence underscores the sensitivity of linguistic competencies to the timing of language exposure. Early versus late language acquisition markedly affects proficiency, attributed to the extension or limitation of the critical period for second language learning [22]. Supporting this, Yang et al. [23] elucidated the heightened cognitive and linguistic demands placed on adults learning a second language. Their research, utilizing a novel learning paradigm, aimed to delineate the brain networks and neural adaptations in late language learners. The study contrasted neural responses between participants undergoing a short-term second language training program and those without such exposure, highlighting significant variances in processing novel linguistic elements in the secondary language, thus evidencing the brain's plasticity in response to new linguistic experiences.

Further complicating the landscape, the adaptive control hypothesis, and findings by Garcia-Penton et al. [5] shed light on the disparate results from structural imaging studies in bilingualism and the cognitive variances among bilingual individuals. These discrepancies are attributed to the unique linguistic experiences encountered by each bilingual, influencing structural and functional brain adaptations, and potentially altering brain networks in response to specific linguistic experiences [6]. Notably, distinctions have also been observed between healthy aging bilingual individuals and those experiencing cognitive decline, with bilingualism playing a pivotal role in mitigating symptoms associated with dementia [24].

These developmental intricacies necessitate a robust theoretical and methodological framework to understand the multifaceted effects of bilingualism on the brain and mind. It is imperative to recognize that bilingualism's influence may not uniformly confer advantages or produce discernible effects, with some studies finding negligible impact [24]. The nuanced interplay of bilingual language use and its modulation of brain networks related to cognitive control underscores the complex relationship between bilingualism, cognitive development, and brain structure throughout the lifespan.

Neuroimaging Tools to Study Bilingualism

Numerous functional neuroimaging studies have delved into the intricacies of language organization within the human cerebrum. Through a variety of methodologies, neuroscientists explore the dynamic interplay between linguistic faculties and cerebral structures. Predominant among these methods are functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), which delineates the cerebral responses during second language vocabulary acquisition, and its variant, fMRI adaptation (fMRI-a), elucidating the cerebral encoding and representation of multiple languages (Chee, 2008). Additionally, diffusion tensor imaging (DTI) offers insights into the microstructural distinctions in white matter between bilingual and monolingual individuals, highlighting the unique neuroanatomical adaptations in bilingual brains (Kuhl et al., 2016). Complementing these, event-related potentials (ERPs) and whole-head magnetoencephalography (MEG) furnish nuanced analyses of bilingual language processing, blending high spatial resolution with real-time monitoring of neural activities.

Illustrative of this research domain, the works of Kim et al. (1997) and Perani et al. (2003) stand out for their exploration of bilingual language production. Employing fMRI, Kim et al. investigated sentence formulation in both the first (L1) and second languages (L2) among early and late bilinguals, revealing differential activations in the left inferior frontal cortex, or Broca's area, while noting overlapping activations within Wernicke's area for L1 and L2 across both participant groups. Perani et al. focused on the environmental influences on language proficiency among early bilinguals, uncovering that less exposed individuals exhibited more extensive neural activation, suggesting increased cognitive effort in language processing among this cohort.

These methodological approaches allow for a granular understanding of how linguistic activities—ranging from production to comprehension—engender specific neural activations, thereby advancing our comprehension of the cognitive and neural mechanisms underpinning bilingualism [25,26]. Through such investigations, neuroscience continues to unravel the complex web of interactions between language and the brain, offering profound insights into the neurobiological substrates of bilingualism.

Language Experience and Neuroplasticity

The cerebral cortex, a fundamental structure of the human brain, exhibits a remarkable capacity for modification in response to various experiences. Notably, the prefrontal cortex undergoes transformations throughout an individual's lifespan, influenced by a range of environmental experiences from prenatal stages onward [10,27]. A significant body of research highlights the profound impact of both positive and negative experiences on brain structure and behavior, as observed in animal and human studies alike. The application of neuroscience allows for the examination of brain structures pre- and post-intervention, offering critical insights for children raised in stressful or deprived environments. Therefore, understanding the developmental trajectory of the brain and its potential for change is crucial for identifying effective interventions.

The influence of environmental conditions, including diverse cultural settings, extends to the neural architecture and functionality of the brain. Studies have elucidated the relationship between cultural and environmental experiences and brain development, presenting empirical evidence on how activities like navigating complex urban environments or engaging in musical training can alter brain function and structure [9,10,27,28]. In this context, bilingualism emerges as a particularly unique experience, with its active engagement in two languages offering implications for cognitive processes and brain network configurations [6,12].

The acquisition of a second language has been shown to modulate neural activity in specific brain regions, with the nature of language exposure shaping neural pathways in diverse ways. Individual language experiences, ranging from early bilingualism to later language acquisition without regular practice, impact neural activities in distinct brain regions. Cultural neuroscientists suggest that similar experiential patterns can influence brain structure and function, positioning bilingualism as a distinct cognitive experience that utilizes mental resources differently from monolingualism [27].

Over the past two decades, a significant paradigm shift has occurred within cognitive and brain sciences, acknowledging the extensive potential for plasticity at cognitive and neuronal levels [2]. Neuroimaging studies have documented considerable neural plasticity resulting from varied language experiences, paralleling findings in animal research where enriched environments lead to enhanced synaptic density and maze performance, compared to those in isolated conditions [27]. These findings mirror the influence of socioeconomic factors on child development, underscoring the role of environmental enrichment (Farah et al., 2006).

Neural plasticity, particularly as it relates to prenatal stress exposure, offers a lens through which to observe the brain's adaptability to experiences and environmental factors, leading to neural changes [10]. The concept of neuroplasticity, driven by sustained experiences and functional connections, encapsulates the dynamic interplay between the brain and its environment, highlighting the transformative power of experiences on brain structure and function [14].

Conclusion and Future Direction

An examination of neuroscientific literature reveals the profound influence bilingualism exerts on the brain. This review synthesizes findings from both theoretical and empirical studies to illustrate the dual impact of bilingualism: it not only alters brain structure but also enhances neural processing efficiency. A pivotal role is ascribed to the anterior cingulate cortex, which mediates the linguistic and cognitive complexities inherent in bilingualism [12]. Furthermore, Zou et al. (2012) demonstrate that proficiency in a second language can remodel the neural circuitry originally developed for the first language.

The interplay between language acquisition and neural development invites further inquiry, particularly in comparing bilingual individuals with musicians, who may exhibit similar neural adaptations at subcortical levels. This raises intriguing questions about the ease with which musicians might acquire additional languages. Additionally, the potential of foreign language learning programs to enhance executive function in socioeconomically disadvantaged children warrants attention, albeit with consideration of the potential counter-effects of language learning-induced anxiety on neural well-being.

This review underscores the cognitive ramifications of bilingualism, substantiated by neurobiological research. While the affirmative cognitive impact of bilingualism on human faculties is well-documented, the intricate relationship between bilingual experiences and neural architecture remains an area ripe for further exploration. The advent of sophisticated neuroscientific methodologies has enriched our understanding of bilingualism, highlighting the role of language use in cognitive advantage, and showcasing the brain's adaptability through neuroplastic changes [25]. Future research, leveraging advanced neuroimaging techniques, promises to unravel the nuanced mechanisms underpinning bilingualism, thereby enriching our comprehension of neural adaptability in the face of diverse linguistic experiences.

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Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest.

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