



Review

In what language do you speak to yourself? A review of private speech and bilingualism



Jeremy Sawyer*

The Graduate Center, City University of New York, 365 5th Ave, New York, NY 10016, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 26 September 2015

Received in revised form 9 January 2016

Accepted 16 January 2016

Available online 22 February 2016

Keywords:

Private speech

Bilingualism

Bilingual advantage

Vygotsky

Verbal mediation hypothesis

ABSTRACT

Private speech and bilingualism have been fruitful but generally separate avenues for investigating the relations between social interaction, language, and cognition. Surprisingly, the private speech of bilinguals has received little attention outside the context of second language acquisition. This paper reviews extant research regarding (1) how the developmental trajectory and general purposes of bilinguals' private speech compare to that of monolinguals, (2) how bilingual linguistic and social interactions influence bilingual private speech, and (3) potential bilingual advantages in the use of private speech. The small number of relevant studies tentatively suggest that bilinguals' private speech follows a similar trajectory to that of monolinguals, and that bilinguals use private speech for the same general purposes as monolinguals. The social origins of private speech are evident in some bilinguals' propensity to switch languages during private speech, and language switching appears more common in balanced bilinguals than less-balanced bilinguals. Evidence on bilingual advantages in private speech is mixed. In some studies, balanced bilinguals have demonstrated a wider variety of private speech uses, and more developmentally advanced private speech than less-balanced bilinguals. Balanced bilinguals appear capable of carrying out reasoning using private speech in two languages, while less balanced bilinguals may rely primarily on one language for complex verbal thinking. A case is made for reviving and elaborating the *verbal mediation hypothesis* as a unified explanation for reported verbal and nonverbal bilingual cognitive advantages. Future research on bilinguals' development of unique forms of private speech and verbal mediation is recommended.

© 2016 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Contents

1. Introduction	489
1.1. Key theoretical questions	491
2. Method	491
2.1. Location and selection of studies	491
3. Results	491
3.1. Developmental trajectory and general purposes	491
3.2. Social origins and code-switching	493
3.3. (Balanced) bilingual advantages in private speech?	496
4. Discussion	499
Acknowledgement	501
Appendix A	501
References	504

1. Introduction

Multiple branches of psychology and philosophy have long grappled with questions about the relationship between thought, language, and purposeful action. An important theorist and investigator of the developmental relations between these domains was

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: jsawyer@gradcenter.cuny.edu

Lev Vygotsky, who proposed that a fundamental transformation occurs as a child nears age two, when preintellectual speech and prelinguistic thinking merge to create verbal thought (Vygotsky, 1934/1986). One of Vygotsky's central claims was that this new verbally-mediated thought originates in speech used during social interaction, then passes through a transitional stage of self-directed *private speech* before becoming fully internalized, *inner speech* (silent self-dialogue 'in the mind'). Private speech is defined as talking to oneself aloud (audible speech not addressed to others), usually while engaging in activity. Vygotsky and his colleagues studied how children use private speech during various activities to plan, guide, and monitor their actions, as well as to produce creative task solutions. Vygotsky regarded private speech as a tool for thinking, self-regulation, and children's emerging mastery over their own behavior. Thus, private speech is centrally connected to uniquely human modes of thought, speech, and goal-directed activity.

Private speech provides an important empirical vantage point on the process of internalizing social speech that, for Vygotsky and other developmentalists, is vital to the creation of uniquely human higher psychological functions (e.g. voluntary attention, purposeful memory, verbal thought, executive functions). Rather than measuring cognition as a static, finished entity, investigating private speech offers a glimpse into the "living process" (Vygotsky, 1930-35/1978, p. 69) of cognitive development. Berk (1992) has argued that research into private speech provides one of the best opportunities for a thorough empirical test of Vygotsky's ideas on the relations between thought and language. Perhaps in recognition of this point, the past fifteen years have seen renewed interest in Vygotsky's insights on private speech, and the majority of private speech research has been conducted from a Vygotskian framework (Winsler, 2009). This framework views private speech as a pivotal link in the transition from collaboration with others through social speech to collaboration with oneself through private speech, and the eventual formation of silent, inner speech (verbal thought).

A related, and also longstanding area of psychological interest, is how the acquisition of more than one language relates to cognitive development. Among the world's population, monolingualism is actually the exception rather than the norm (Tucker, 2003), and in the United States, 21% of people over age 5 speak a language other than English at home. This number continues to grow (Ryan, 2013), making bilingual and multilingual development an increasingly important topic, both theoretically and in terms of educational and public policy. Historically, however, bilinguals have often been viewed with suspicion in Europe, England, and the United States (where they have often been immigrants), and the impact of multiple languages on development was viewed negatively (Hakuta & Diaz, 1985). For instance, Epstein (1915) argued that bilingualism slowed down thought processes and was a general "social ill," while Jespersen (1922/2013) saw bilingualism as diluting children's command of each language, and leading to "inner conflict." In Nazi Germany, Jespersen's negative view of bilingualism was developed further, associating Jews, Poles, and other bilingual minorities with moral and intellectual deterioration and inferiority (Pavlenko, 2014). In psychology and linguistics, a double standard was evident, with generally negative views of the bilingualism of immigrants and working-class children, but positive views of bilingualism among children of the elite (Pavlenko, 2014). At present, schools in the U.S. generally do not consider the development and maintenance of bilingualism among immigrant populations to be a fundamental goal (Pease-Alvarez & Winsler, 1994), but rather follow an assimilationist policy of developing students' English proficiency and quickly immersing them in English-only curriculum (Moll, 1992).

In an article entitled "Multilingualism in Children," Vygotsky (1935/1975) critiqued the negative works above, contrasting them

with the findings of Ronjat (1913) and Pavlovitch (1920), whose case studies found positive benefits to bilingual development. Vygotsky concluded that the key to the positive effects of bilingualism was a proper pedagogical approach, and he recommended that an extensive program of empirical study on the relation between multilingualism and thought be undertaken, without overreliance on standardized testing or assumptions of bilinguals' racial and social inferiority that were common to Western research. As fate would have it, this program was never initiated by Vygotsky, as multilingual education had already been embraced in the Soviet Union following the Russian Revolution, and literacy campaigns and rebuilding society were the societal priorities (Pavlenko, 2014). Considering Vygotsky's theoretical and empirical work, however, it seems likely that an investigation of bilinguals' private speech would have figured prominently in his proposed research program on bilingual development.

Considerable research since Vygotsky's time has examined the cognitive correlates of learning more than one language. Peal and Lambert (1962), in which bilingual (French/English) Canadians outperformed monolinguals on a variety of verbal and nonverbal measures, is considered a major turning point in research addressing the positive aspects of bilingualism. Based on their findings, Peal and Lambert proposed that "balanced bilingual" children (defined as children with equal experience and proficiency in each language) may actually demonstrate enhanced cognitive flexibility in working with symbols and forming concepts (Barac, Bialystok, Castro, & Sanchez, 2014). This research has been followed by studies with children showing what has become known as the "bilingual advantage" in two general domains (Bialystok & Barac, 2012). First, bilinguals appear to show enhanced *metalinguistic awareness*, which allows children to understand the underlying structure of language and includes skills in deciphering language patterns and controlling attention to various linguistic features (e.g. sentence form or meaning). This allows bilinguals, for instance, to selectively attend to one aspect of language (e.g., grammar) while ignoring another (e.g., meaning). Interestingly, this metalinguistic advantage was predicted by Vygotsky (1934/1986) on the basis that, through understanding one language system in relation to other systems, bilingual children would develop a special awareness and control over linguistic symbols and operations. Bilingualism has also been associated with improved nonverbal *executive control* (executive functioning), which has been defined in various ways, but often includes *inhibition* of irrelevant information or responses, holding and manipulating information in *working memory*, and *cognitive flexibility* in adjusting to changes in demands, priorities, or goals (Barac et al., 2014). Evidence suggests that these bilingual advantages may be enhanced by an early age of bilingual acquisition, regular social use of the two languages, and average or better proficiency in each language (i.e. balanced bilingualism) (Yow & Li, 2015).

Given the importance of private speech as a developmental phenomenon, combined with growing interest in bilingual education, development, and potential advantages associated with bilingualism, it appears that examining the private speech of bilinguals could provide vital insight into the best ways to help bilingual children reach their full potential. Studying bilinguals' private speech may reveal developmental paths, patterns, or advantages unseen in the private speech of monolinguals, providing a unique vantage on the formation of the "bilingual mind" and its unique forms of verbal mediation. At the same time, investigating processes of semiotic internalization in bilinguals may help to illuminate what is common about this process across monolingual and bilingual populations, and what is unique to particular forms of linguistic experience.

Considering the potential at the crossroads of private speech and bilingualism, it is surprising that the vast majority of related

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/353682>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/353682>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)