Processing sentences in two languages

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One of the most significant discoveries about bilingualism is that both languages are active when bilinguals listen to speech and read words in either one of their languages, and when they plan speech in each of the two languages (e.g., Kroll et al., 2006; Marian & Spivey 2003). The parallel activation of the two languages has been observed even when bilinguals are unaware of them. Bilingualism affects not only the activation of the two languages, but also the way in which each of the two languages is processed, suggesting a language system that is highly adaptive. The effects of this parallel activation on processing have been observed at every level of language use, in the phonology, in the lexicon, and the grammar.

In the area of syntactic processing, the vast majority of studies have mainly focused on questions concerning the influence of the first language on the processing of the second language. There is now compelling evidence from the literature on syntactic priming (e.g., Hartsuiker & Pickering 2008; Hartsuiker, Pickering, & Veltkamp 2004; Weber & Indefrey, 2009) for overlapping syntactic systems between the L1 and the L2, and for the claim that at least some syntactic information is shared between a bilingual's languages with similar syntactic structures. One important question is whether knowledge of a second language affects the processing of the native language.

In this talk I will discuss the consequences of bilingualism on the native language, focusing primarily on syntactic and morpho-syntactic processing. One significant insight from the L2 acquisition work is that prolonged naturalistic exposure can have profound effects on how a second language is processed, reversing processing strategies that result from transfer of L1 information or causing shifts in L2 processing strategies from lexically driven to structurally driven (Pliatsikas & Marinis 2013). Given this evidence, an important aspect of the comparison between L2 and L1 speaker performance is to consider how variable immersion experience might affect L1 processing. I also discuss work on processing mixed language and its implications for models of language processing, for our understanding of how bilinguals manage to negotiate their two languages, and for existing assumptions about the plasticity of cognitive and neural representations. The aim is to show that research on sentence processing in second language speakers has the potential to lead to significant changes in the conceptualization of the mind with two languages and in current views about the permeability of the first language system.