

Merel Keijzer (University of Groningen): Language learning as a vaccine to promote healthy aging: the linguistic, social and cognitive effects of third-age language learning

Bilingualism has been put forward as a life experience that, similar to musical training or being physically active, may boost cognitive performance and slow down age-related cognitive decline. In more recent years, bilingualism has come to be acknowledged not as a trait but as a highly individual experience where the context of use strongly modulates any cognitive effect that ensues from it (cf. van den Noort et al., 2019). In addition, modulating factors have been shown to interact in intricate ways (Pot, Keijzer and de Bot, 2018). Adding to the complexity is the fact that control processes linked to bilingualism are bidirectional—just as language control can influence cognitive control, individual differences in cognitive functioning predict language learning outcomes and control. The aim of this paper is to shed light on the bidirectional and individual cognitive, social and linguistic factors in relation to bilingualism and second language learning, with a special focus on older adulthood. On the basis of past and ongoing studies conducted at the Bilingualism and Aging Lab (BALAB) at the University of Groningen, (1) we first show the intricate clustering of modulating individual factors as deterministic of cognitive outcomes of bilingual experiences at the older end of the lifespan; (2) we then briefly present a meta-study of work in the emergent field of third-age language learning, the results of which are related to lifelong bilingualism. We focus on linguistic, cognitive and social outcomes of third-age language learning; (3) we then turn to our own (ongoing) studies which make use of randomized controlled trials to show the cognitive and social effects of introducing a bilingual experience later in life as opposed to other intervention types such as musical training. We investigate this in healthy older adult cohorts but also in (pre)clinical populations of elderly experiencing memory and/or mood problems. By investigating the effects of late-life second language learning as opposed to lifelong bilingualism, we aim to shed more light on the mechanisms underlying the benefits of bilingualism as a life experience, especially as it pertains to cognitive reserve in older adulthood.