Bilinguals get the blues

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Learning a foreign language literally changes the way we see the world, according to new research.

Panos Athanasopoulos, of Newcastle University, has found that bilingual speakers think differently to those who only use one language.

And you don't need to be fluent in the language to feel the effects - his research showed that it is language use, not proficiency, which makes the difference.

Working with both Japanese and English speakers, he looked at their language use and proficiency, along with the length of time they had been in the country, and matched this against how they perceived the colour blue.

Colour perception is an ideal way of testing bilingual concepts because there is a huge variation between where different languages place boundaries on the colour spectrum.

In Japanese, for example, there are additional basic terms for light blue (mizuiro) and dark blue (ao) which are not found in English.

Previous research has shown that people are more likely to rate two colours to be more similar if they belong to the same linguistic category.

"We found that people who only speak Japanese distinguished more between light and dark blue than English speakers," said Dr

Athanasopoulos, whose research is published in the current edition of Bilingualism: Language and Cognition. “The degree to which Japanese-English bilinguals resembled either norm depended on which of their two languages they used more frequently.”

Most people tend to focus on how to do things such as order food or use public transport when they learn another language to help them get by, but this research has shown that there is a much deeper connection going on.

“As well as learning vocabulary and grammar you’re also unconsciously learning a whole new way of seeing the world,” said Dr Athanasopoulos. “There’s an inextricable link between language, culture and cognition.

“If you’re learning language in a classroom you are trying to achieve something specific, but when you’re immersed in the culture and speaking it, you’re thinking in a completely different way.”

He added that learning a second language gives businesses a unique insight into the people they are trading with, suggesting that EU relations could be dramatically improved if we all took the time to learn a little of each other’s language rather than relying on English as the lingua-franca.

“If anyone needs to be motivated to learn a new language they should consider the international factor,” he said. “The benefits you gain are not just being able to converse in their language - it also gives you a valuable insight into their culture and how they think, which gives you a distinct business advantage.

“It can also enable you to understand your own language better and gives you the opportunity to reflect on your own culture, added Dr Athanasopoulos, who speaks both Greek and English.

Medical Xpress

More information: Panos Athanasopoulos, Lubica Damjanovic, Andrea Krajciova and Miho Sasaki (2011). Representation of colour concepts in bilingual cognition: the case of Japanese blues in Bilingualism: language and cognition, Volume 14, pp 9-17 doi:10.1017/s1366728909990046

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