

The flexibility of the bilingual phonological system

Mark Antoniou

ARC Research Fellow (DECRA), The MARCS Institute, University of Western Sydney, Australia

Adjunct Assistant Professor, Department of Linguistics and Modern Languages, Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong S. A. R.

Speech perception (and language learning more generally) by bilingual individuals is often characterised as incomplete, tainted, or imperfect. Some say that in order to be considered ‘truly bilingual’, an individual must have an equal command of both languages. This conclusion is drawn based on the assumption that bilinguals must function as two monolinguals within the one person, and that their performance be compared to monolinguals who serve as yardsticks or standard bearers. However, this assumption is problematic because it fails to take into account the unique perceptual complexities faced by bilinguals, such as the phonological organisation that is necessary to accommodate the phonological systems of two languages, and the subsequent and ongoing interaction between these systems. For instance, there is now compelling evidence that a bilingual’s two languages are always activated to a degree and are constantly influencing one another. Further, this is thought to occur at all levels of language processing, from phonetics to semantics. I will outline a program of research in which I have probed the flexibility of the bilingual phonological system by examining both native and nonnative speech perception under systematically varied social contexts, namely whether the bilingual is interacting in a monolingual or bilingual fashion, referred to as language modes. These language modes alter the level of activation of each language, the effects of which may be observed in the perception (and production) of speech by bilinguals. My work demonstrates that certain aspects of bilingual perception vary systematically according to the relevant context, whereas other aspects are more rigid and resistant to such dynamic changes. Further, I will also discuss my recent work examining a possible bilingual advantage in foreign language learning and whether such an advantage may stem from a bilingual’s cumulative language experience, or more domain general cognitive advantages that have been associated with bilingualism.