

Am I Really Monolingual? The Importance of Understanding Linguistic Experiences in Monolinguals

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Monolingualism, in contrast to bilingualism, has been usually understood as a homogeneous phenomenon. The linguistic experiences of monolinguals tend to be overlooked when analysing the impact of current and prior foreign language experience on language processing and domain-general cognitive functioning. Nevertheless, recent studies with monolinguals have found that short-term second language learning, as well as foreign language exposure, can influence other cognitive processes. To understand how different language experiences in monolinguals might impact other cognitive functions, it is necessary to grasp the diversity of these experiences within the monolingual population. To better understand monolinguals' linguistic experiences, we analyse and describe the linguistic and communicative experiences of a large group of English-speaking monolinguals (n = 962) from the United Kingdom (UK) through an online survey.

We found that, despite considering themselves monolinguals and declaring the knowledge of only English, more than 80% of respondents learned at least one foreign language, dialect, or jargon at some point in their lives. Although their reported proficiency was overall low, around 53% of the monolinguals that learned at least one foreign language actively used these languages (or dialects and jargons) at some point in their lives. Regarding foreign language exposure, nearly 40% of participants confirmed the present and/or past exposure to foreign languages or dialects in their environment. Moreover, approximately 24% of participants who declared exposure to foreign languages (or dialects) confirmed the active use of at least one of them in the course of their lives. Furthermore, the majority of activities that involved passive use of languages (e.g., listening to music or watching TV) were carried out in English, but not always exclusively, and other languages were occasionally reported. Lastly, around 58% of participants who lived in one or more non-English speaking countries declared the active use of languages during their stay, although the percentage of monolinguals who lived abroad was small.

Taken together, these results suggest that the linguistic and communicative experiences of English-speaking monolinguals from the UK often include the presence and use of foreign languages. This presents a challenge to the assumption of homogeneity that surrounds the monolingual population and highlights the importance of considering the details of the monolingual language experience when analysing the impact of foreign languages on cognitive functioning. Moreover, these results show the need for developing questionnaires that target the specific linguistic and communicative experiences of monolinguals, as it is typically done in the case of bilinguals.

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