Why are they so similar? The impact of extra-linguistic variables on monolingual and bilingual learners of English.

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The current study investigates the relationship between linguistic as well as extra-linguistic variables and proficiency in the foreign language English. Based in the Germany context, we assess whether proficiency in the background languages (German for all participants, German and either Russian or Turkish for the bilingual participants), cognition (visual-spatial ability), type of school, gender, socio-economic status, self-concept, motivation, and self-efficacy function differently in predicting English language proficiency when monolingual German learners of English are compared to their bilingual peers. The comparison is based on 1,403 secondary school students attending school years seven or nine (German monolinguals: n = 849, Russian-German bilinguals: n = 236, Turkish-German bilinguals: n = 318). With two comprehensive structural equation models we aspire to capture the multitude of factors influencing foreign language acquisition and analyze how each of them contribute to explaining the observed variance in English proficiency. A secondary aim is to contribute to the discussion on multilingual advantages or effects.

The results based on comparisons between the monolinguals and unbalanced bilingual heritage speakers reveal that almost all variables make a statistically significant contribution. Moreover, overall, the structural equation models function similarly across the three language groups; yet, group specific minor differences can be identified. By and large, we submit that the three groups are more similar than different, which means that the heritage languages Russian and Turkish add comparably little to predicting English language proficiency.

Finally, we discuss why the participants of the current study are so "similar". By that, we do not mean that the participants are a homogenous group of participants. Quite the opposite: there is lots of internal variation within each language group and also across the language groups, for instance in terms socio-economic status. On average, the German monolinguals come from families with a higher socio-economic status compared to their bilingual peers. Nevertheless, we argue that all three groups are highly similar in terms of language background, even though we considered them as separate language groups in the structural equation models. In our understanding, there are three main reasons for that, namely i) the status of the bilinguals as unbalanced bilinguals, ii) the institutional environment in German schools, and iii) that non-linguistic variables "override" language effects.