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## The gift of a language, or many of them!

On 21 February 2011, International Mother Language Day, COST Action IS0804 helps to explore language impairment afflicting children growing up in an increasingly multilingual society.



### Language impairment in societies that change, migrate and blend

Due to the large migration waves in Europe many children grow up bilingual or multilingual, meaning that they speak two or more languages. This does not necessarily mean that they are equally good at both (or more) languages. In acquiring the second language, they may fall behind their monolingual peers – an issue which is not uncommon in second language learners. The delay is, however, often temporary.

Nevertheless, some children will *not* catch up due to an underlying language impairment which will make their delay persistent. In order to detect a case of language impairment, it is important to examine whether the child also shows difficulties in acquiring his or her mother tongue; if this were not the case, the delay would not constitute a genuine language disorder.

A complicating factor in the diagnosis of language impairment is a possible difficulty in diagnosing issues in the child's first language. Indices of the disorder are therefore often derived from the child's performance in the second language. To add to the confusion, characteristics related to normal second language acquisition and those of language impairment overlap, so it is not easy to identify children who have a specific language disorder. This leads to misdiagnosis, mistreatment, and misplacement in the educational system.

### It's all about science...

Finding a path to reliably diagnose bilingual children with language impairment is the ultimate goal of COST Action IS0804, 'Language Impairment in a Multilingual Society'.

An additional, ambitious goal is to extend this objective to the whole range of widely varying language situations which exist throughout Europe.

This Action is at the crossroads of several disciplines which are involved in research on language impairment and bilingualism, such as linguistics, psychology, language pathology and education.

The Action aims to answer questions on the nature of specific language impairment in bilingual children, such as: how do bilingualism and language impairment, respectively, affect the performance of bilingual children with language impairment? And also, how do differences in structure between the two languages influence the manifestation of the disorder in each language?

The results of this Action will affect the lives of many bilingual or multilingual children throughout Europe, as it will help provide a clearer process of assessment for diagnosis. This specific research will serve speech and language professionals, as well as doctors whose assessment of a child's linguistic ability determines what the educational future of the child will be. It is their role to establish the correct diagnosis and thus refer the child to the proper type of intervention. In doing so, they must have clear, sensitive guidelines to determine which child is developing normally and to assign the correct diagnostic label to bilingual children with language impairment. Ultimately, the research carried out within this Action is aimed at benefitting multilingual children affected by language impairment, as a better assessment of their situation will lead to a more targeted and effective intervention.

### ...and more is yet to come.

The Action is now half-way through its duration, and it has already

### Related Links

- ▶ [Frequently Asked Questions \(FAQ\) for parents](#)
- ▶ [Website of COST Action IS0804](#)

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delivered some valuable results in providing cross-disciplinary, international achievements. Its key target audience consists of speech and language professionals. In 2010, over 200 European speech therapists gathered for a 'Professionals' day' organised by the Aalborg University, Denmark, within the framework of a conference on Language Impairment in Monolingual and Bilingual Society (LIMOBIS), where the Action – together with other invited researchers - presented its latest findings. A similar practitioners' event will take place shortly in Eskişehir, Turkey, and more dissemination activities are planned throughout Europe; a testament to the Action's dedication to spreading knowledge among professionals in all the regions that the Action represents. This Action includes scientists and researchers from 35 countries, and just as many (or even more) languages.

Another target group of the Action is parents of bilingual children, as they are often the first to observe their children's language development and to voice concern. One of the first deliverables of the Action has been a substantial list of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) for parents, as well as for clinicians and educators, which go some way to providing certainty for those questions that science is ready to answer. These are now available on the Action's website and will soon be translated in all languages involved in the Action.

The workings of this Action are set to be concluded in 2013. As a final result, the Action will deliver a clear scientific distinction line between bilingual phenomena and language impairment; sound guidelines for diagnosis; test instruments that are able to distinguish typical development from language impairment in bilinguals; as well as science-based advice to decide whether to provide bilingual children with monolingual or bilingual input, at home or in school. This is where the main quest of the Action lies: discovering whether bilingualism affects children with language impairment in a negative way, or perhaps even in a positive way. Follow the Action's workings and find out!

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