

PUBLIC LECTURE

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Institute of Multilingualism | University | HEP Fribourg
Rue de Morat 24, 1700 Fribourg, Room K0.02

Multilingualism in preschoolers and first-graders: Typical development vs language impairment

Prof. Ute Bohnacker
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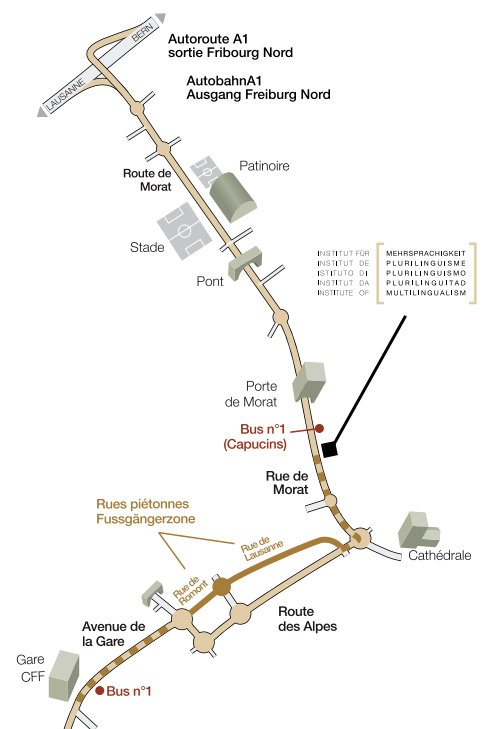
Summary

Due to increased mobility and migration, the number of children growing up in multilingual settings in Europe has increased substantially over the past decades. Some of these multilingual children are slow in their language development and need appropriate educational support or clinical intervention. Correct and early assessment is vital here, as undiagnosed or untreated language impairment often leads to dyslexia and learning difficulties in school. Yet for most countries and language combinations, our knowledge base for the assessment of young multilingual children's language competencies is poor. Many tools available today are inappropriate as they are based on results from monolingual children. But what can we expect of a 'typically developing' bilingual or trilingual child at a certain age? Which language tests or assessment tools should be used, and what exactly should be assessed? These questions are not only asked by researchers, but by practitioners in the education and child healthcare sectors, such as preschool staff, teachers, paediatric nurses, and speech-language pathologists and therapists (SLPs).

In this talk, Ute Bohnacker pinpoints some of the challenges for linguistic research on multilingualism and language impairment in 4-7-year-old children, as well as recent developments, from an international and a Swedish perspective. She reports on new multilingual assessment tools that were developed as part of the European BiSLI COST Action IS0804 (on bilingualism and specific language impairment, www.bi-sli.org), and on expert consensus recommendations from that Action.

Homing in on the situation in Sweden, she reports on an ongoing research project at Uppsala University (BiLI-TAS, 2014-2019), involving multilingual preschoolers and first-graders with three different language combinations: Turkish/Swedish, German/Swedish and Arabic/Swedish. All

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Plan: www.institut-mehrsprachigkeit.ch

three are sizeable immigrant groups in Sweden, yet next to nothing is known about their language acquisition. The project investigates the children's oral development in their home language (Turkish, German or Arabic) and in the majority language (Swedish) in relation to age, exposure and certain background factors. The project targets comprehension and production of vocabulary, narrative ability (picture-based fictional story telling), and phonological processing (nonword repetition). Employing new methods and materials from COST Action IS0804, linguists and SLPs on the project study the core linguistic features of 'typically developing' bilingual children age 4-7. These data will then be compared to children with alleged language impairment, in order to identify clinical markers of language impairment in Swedish, Turkish and Arabic.

As the project now enters its third year (running time: 6 years), much work is still in progress. The talk sketches methods and set-up of the project and points out some of the particulars of the Swedish setting for child multilingualism. The talk also provides a first glimpse of preliminary results concerning vocabulary and narratives for the German/Swedish and Turkish/Swedish groups, where data collection and analysis has come furthest.

👉 Lecture in English