

Bilingualism is good for you! ... if you are a girl ...



Both studies use data from the US [National Education Longitudinal Study \(NELS\)](#). This is a nationally representative dataset based on a longitudinal survey of 12,144 young US Americans who were first surveyed in 1988 when they were in eighth grade. Subsequent follow-up surveys were conducted biennially until 2000, when the respondents were in the mid-to-late twenties.

NELS includes full-data sets (the participant has taken each survey and parent survey data are also available) for 1,245 Latinos, and this subset is the focus of the recent study by Jennifer Lee and Sarah Hatteberg. Like Agirdag (2013), the researchers ask whether bilingualism during adolescence has a long-term influence on education, occupation, and income. Additionally, they examine whether this relationship varies by gender.

The authors measure bilingual proficiency as follows:

- A *biliterate* is someone who has high levels of oral and written proficiency in both English and Spanish. 303 respondents (just under 25%) were biliterate.
- A *fluent oral bilingual* is someone who has high levels of oral proficiency in both English and Spanish but has little or no written proficiency in Spanish. 237 respondents (19%) were fluent oral bilinguals.
- A *passive bilingual* is someone who is English dominant but understands Spanish well without speaking Spanish well. 151 respondents (13%) were passive bilinguals.
- In contrast to a passive bilingual, an *English dominant* person does not understand Spanish well. 456 respondents (32%) were English dominant.
- A *limited language proficient* person is someone who is fluent in neither language. 71 respondents (6%) had limited proficiency in both languages.

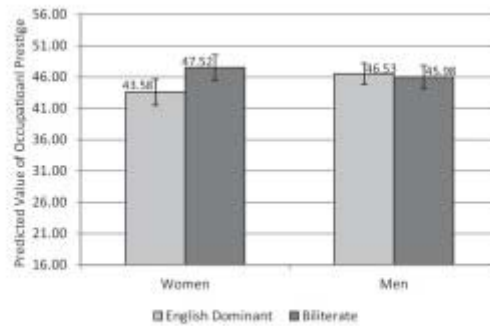


FIGURE 2. Predicted values of occupational prestige by language proficiency and gender.

Boys and girls in the sample were equally likely to be English dominant and limited language proficient. However, there were notable gender differences related to bilingualism: girls were a lot more likely to be biliterate than boys (30% for females vs. 20% for males); but boys were more likely to be fluent oral bilinguals (22% for females vs. 27% for males) and passive bilinguals (9% for females vs. 16% for males).

What does this finding of gendered bilingualism mean for future life chances? Do girls' higher biliteracy rates translate into higher high school completion rates, higher status occupations and higher incomes? The literature on the multiple benefits of bilingualism – [for an overview of the cognitive, educational, and economic benefits of high level bilingual proficiency you can listen to this podcast on the *Bilingual Avenue*](#) – would lead us to assume so.

Well, it did not quite turn out that way.

The researchers found that biliteracy did indeed do wonders for the high school completion rates of girls: biliterate girls in the sample were five times more likely to complete high school than English dominant girls. However, it did not work this way for boys: the high school completion rates of biliterate boys were almost identical to those of English-dominant boys. What is more, orally and passively bilingual boys were *less likely* to complete high school than their English dominant peers.

With regard to occupational prestige in young adulthood the findings were similar: biliterate women were significantly more likely to be employed in roles with higher occupational prestige than English-dominant women. Biliterate men, by contrast, were slightly less likely to be employed in roles with high occupational prestige than English-dominant men.

How can bilingualism be advantageous for females but detrimental to males? Surely [the cognitive benefits of bilingualism – greater brain plasticity and better executive control](#) – accrue to males and females equally.

The answer to this conundrum is that 'bilingualism' does not equal 'bilingualism.' The benefits of (high-level) bilingual proficiency are not absolute but social. What it means to be Hispanic in the USA is different for men and women. As the authors point out, "men and women experience race and ethnicity differently and indicators of ethnicity, like language, have different meanings for boys and girls, and for men and women" (Lee and Hatteberg 2015, p. 21).

That bilingualism is gendered is not a new finding (two overview articles about bilingualism and gender research by Aneta Pavlenko and myself are available [here](#) and [here](#)).

Girls in migrant families often act as language brokers and mediate between their family and mainstream institutions. Maybe such practices socialize them into the 'feminine' communicative styles built on cooperation, rapport building, sympathetic listening and showing empathy that are highly valued in contemporary service work, as Deborah Cameron has pointed out in [Good to talk?](#) Where such 'feminine' communicative styles are valued – as they are in schools and the workplaces of the service economy – it is perhaps not surprising that being able to deploy such styles in more than one language confers advantages.

By contrast, Spanish-speaking boys in the US schools are often stigmatized as trouble makers. For Latino boys and men, speaking Spanish is associated with working-class 'macho' styles that are not valued in educational environments nor in occupations that carry conventional prestige. Rather than being advantageous, bilingualism thus becomes a liability for Latino boys and men because it is associated with the 'wrong' kinds of masculinity; masculinities neither appreciated by school teachers nor by employers in the tertiary sector.

So, what about income? Does biliteracy pay? At least for the women? Unlike [Agirdag \(2013\), whose research answered this question in the affirmative for participants from a variety of language backgrounds](#), Lee and Hatteberg (2015) found no relationship between bilingualism, including biliteracy, in English and Spanish, and income.

While surprising at first blush, this finding is really not unexpected. We know that “men have higher incomes than women despite having lower average levels of educational attainment and that the attributes that benefit women in school do not necessarily translate into labor market rewards” (Lee and Hatteberg 2015, p. 19). We also know that middle-class feminized work in education, health care or retail may be relatively prestigious but poorly remunerated compared to equally prestigious jobs in male-dominated industries.

Hispanics' high-level bilingual proficiency in English and Spanish in the USA may well go the way of nursing and teaching: once it becomes feminized, it may well become 'respectable' and 'prestigious' but it will also become devalued economically.



Lee, J., & Hatteberg, S. (2015). Bilingualism and Status Attainment among Latinos *The Sociological Quarterly* DOI: [10.1111/tsq.12097](https://doi.org/10.1111/tsq.12097)