Do dialect speakers really have a harder time learning to read and write?

This may depend at least to some extent on how well these children know the standard language and how well they are able to cope with tricky aspects of letter-to-sound matching.

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Over 7,000 dialects are spoken worldwide, but little has been written in the literature about how growing up speaking a dialect affects the way children learn to read and write. My research looks at whether children who grow up speaking a German dialect have difficulty with reading and spelling because their spoken language does not match the spelling of the written language.

How children learn to read and write

Generally, reading and spelling acquisition begins with learning the alphabet and recognizing that each letter represents a specific sound. Children then learn to piece together this knowledge and understand that, for example, the sound /p/ corresponds to the initial letter in the word pizza. So literacy development is strongly influenced by the interplay between knowledge of letters and understanding of the phonological aspects of language.

This is especially true for languages with relatively consistent pronunciation and spelling, i.e., transparent orthographies. Studies have shown that children who learn to read in such languages, such as Greek, German or Spanish, depend largely on the strategy of matching letters to sounds.

Speaking a dialect seems to make literacy acquisition more difficult

Several studies have investigated how literacy-specific learning processes take place in children who speak a dialect of a standard language, and have sought to determine whether dialect-based differences in language structure affect the development of early reading and spelling skills. It appears that reading acquisition is more challenging if printed language does not directly correspond to how the language is spoken.

So children who grow up speaking a dialect encounter a higher level of complexity when learning to read and write because of a linguistic mismatch between their speech and the standard written language. This mismatch may occur at the level of phonology, vocabulary or even sentence structure.

In a study that compared African American English (AAE) with mainstream American English (MAE), researchers found that children who speak AAE at home and are taught in MAE at school have more difficulty with word decoding, i.e., reading, because certain words are pronounced much differently in dialect than they are spelled.
Is this also true for German dialects?

The above-mentioned studies focus primarily on the English language, in which spelling and pronunciation are often quite dissimilar, and on what speaking a non-mainstream variant means for literacy acquisition in that context. They report that speakers of non-mainstream English have weaker reading and spelling skills. Less attention has been devoted to whether similar dialect-based difficulties are found in the case of languages like German, where words are pronounced much as they are spelled. This is the subject of my research.

Comparing children who speak Swiss German with Standard German-speaking peers

I am interested in finding out whether children who speak a dialect of German that differs substantially from standard German have more difficulty learning to read and write. To that end, with the help of several research assistants I examined a sample of over 70 children in Switzerland and Germany shortly before school enrollment and then one year later, at the end of first grade. Children either grew up speaking Swiss German (CHG) dialect with little exposure to Standard German (StG) before formal education, or were raised in StG-speaking households (in Switzerland or Germany).

In the German-speaking region of Switzerland, most children grow up speaking CHG dialect at home but are required to use spoken and written StG as soon as they enter school. There they encounter a significant linguistic mismatch, as CHG and StG differ considerably in phonology, vocabulary and syntax. Children who grow up speaking StG, in contrast, experience a much smaller gap between the language they speak at home and the one spoken and written in school.

To investigate how these two groups differ in terms of literacy acquisition, we used standardized reading and spelling tests administered at the end of first grade as well as measures of literacy precursor skills, such as phonological awareness (PA). Preliminary results show that both groups performed equally well in reading and spelling at the end of first grade, but that CHG-speaking children scored much higher on literacy precursor skills (e.g., PA skills).

No difference in reading and spelling at the end of first grade

The results for reading and spelling were surprising, given that several previous studies have found that children who grow up speaking CHG achieve relatively low scores on standardized tests of early reading and spelling skills. There is also a widespread assumption that CHG speakers have weaker StG skills than those who grow up speaking StG.

Native CHG-speaking children encounter a higher level of complexity when they begin first grade, relative to StG-speaking children, since in addition to being introduced to reading and spelling, they also need to learn the StG pronunciation and vocabulary equivalents of words they know in their native dialect.

A firm grasp of letters and speech sounds is very helpful

Differences in PA skills are somewhat easier to explain: Children in Switzerland receive some instruction in the alphabet by the end of preschool, so they have already begun to learn strategies for mapping phonemes and graphemes. In Germany, however, where children are more likely to speak StG, preschool is not mandatory nationwide, and as a result there may be greater variability in the PA skills of StG-speaking children. Because reading and spelling in German are closely related to letter-to-sound mapping, it is highly likely that the CHG-speaking children in our study had a slight head start in pre-literacy skills.

Nevertheless, differences in the two countries’ educational systems do not fully explain the higher PA scores for CHG-speaking children at the end of first grade, since by that time most children have gained a similar grasp of the alphabet and have begun to use it for reading and spelling.
exercises.

It is possible, however, that CHG-speaking children make more use of phonological processing mechanisms in their early attempts at reading and spelling, because of their constant need to be aware of the phonological and lexical differences between CHG and StG. As a result, they practice these skills more extensively.

**Swiss German first graders are highly aware of dialect-based differences**

Because German spelling is relatively transparent, words are usually spoken as they are spelled. However, because of the mismatch between their dialect and StG, CHG-speaking children are required to pay more attention to phonological language cues when reading or spelling than their StG-speaking peers. They appear to use this as a compensatory mechanism to achieve the same level of early reading and spelling accuracy as StG-speaking children, who do not encounter as large a gap between spoken and written words.

Overall, the preliminary results of my study suggest that while speaking Swiss German (and the linguistic mismatch between that dialect and standard German) may be associated with certain difficulties in learning to read and write Standard German, it may also provide some benefits.

References:


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