Is There Really a Labor Market Advantage to Being Bilingual in the U.S.?

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Mounting evidence of bilingual benefits

- Cognitive (e.g., Bialystok et al.)
- Educational (Genesee et al, 2007; Umansky & Reardon, 2014; Steele et al, 2016)
- Socio-emotional (Portes & Hao, 1998)
- Family cohesion (Feliciano, 2001; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001)
- Social adjustment (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001)

Yet, a decline in bilingual education in the U.S.
Silly Question?

"for me, it was about setting my child up for success. All I could think about is him having a great paying job after finishing school."

—North Carolina Mother of dual Immersion Student

- Explosion of dual immersion programs among the monolingual middle class

- But . . Economic studies show no benefit, and often a penalty! If there is no economic benefit, will support for bilingual/dual language instruction wither?

- There MUST be something wrong with the economic studies!
Study #1: Questions

- Robinson- Cimpian, NYU
- U.S. Census data (ACS), 2006-2010, for Latino workers nationally, ages 24 – 64, citizens only

Questions
- Are there employment differences between monolinguals & bilinguals?
- Are there earnings differences?
- Are there gender differences in earnings or employment?

Methods: Regression analyses
Study #1: Findings

- “Male bilinguals earn slightly lower wages” (but not females)

- “Male bilinguals participate in the labor market at slightly lower rates” (but no difference for females)

- “Most consistent finding . . . is that bilingual and monolingual Hispanic individuals have remarkably similar labor market outcomes”

- Conclusion: Maybe it depends on labor sector?
Study #2: Questions

- Alarcon et al., U of Texas, University of Barcelona
- U.S. Census Data (ACS, 2006-2010), individuals who were bilingual/monolingual along the US-Mexico border with high public contact: criminal justice and health, ages 18-70

Questions:
- Will bilinguals in criminal justice and health IN HIGH NEED AREA earn more than monolinguals?
- Will bilinguals be placed in higher level jobs?

Methods: Regressions & Ethnographic interviews
Study #2 Findings

- **No earnings premium for bilinguals:** “bilingualism is treated as a freely available, naturally occurring resource of the border . . .”

- Higher level positions, e.g., management, were disproportionately held by monolinguals (other factors trumped bilingualism, even where language was key)

- Conclusion: Maybe where there is high demand for bilingualism **but also high supply**, there is no need to compensate bilinguals
Study #3: Questions

- Alarcon et al.
- U.S. Census Data (ACS, 2006-2010) for Dallas-Tarrant County–All health and criminal justice workers, between 18 – 70

Questions:
- Will bilinguals be compensated differently than monolinguals in a moderately high demand area where there are fewer bilinguals in the population?

Methods: Regression Analyses
Study #3: Findings

- “Workers with the highest quality of bilingualism do not receive higher wages than monolingual English speakers”
- “Our findings hold for both border and non-border regions”
- “Spanish speakers with very good skills in English experience a decrease of 6% in wages in comparison to monolingual English speakers.”
What happens if we measure literacy & age cohorts longitudinally?

- Census data doesn’t tell us about literacy in the non-English language – just whether it is spoken at home. Can other data tell us more?
- Most studies look at workers who have entered the labor market across many different time periods
- Are there different questions to be asked?
New questions

New data: Longitudinal, younger cohorts, measures of primary language and English literacy

New answers!
Are there costs to losing one’s primary language?

- **Orhan Agirdag**, University of Lueven:
- **Data**: Children of Immigration Longitudinal Study (CILS) & Educational Longitudinal Study (ELS)**.
- **Follows children of immigrants, various backgrounds**
- **Allows for assessment of primary language literacy as well as English literacy**
- **Longitudinal from high school to mid-20’s**
- **Methods**: Latent Class Analysis; Regressions
Agirdag’s findings

- **Balanced Bilinguals** earn about $5200 more annually at the beginning of their careers than do monolinguals; holds for different language groups.

- **That is, there is a substantial loss to the individual** in earnings from **losing the primary language**.

- And loss to the society in tax dollars!
Notes a social justice theme:

- “In short, linguistic assimilation policies not only steal from people, they steal from those who already have less.”
Is bilingualism related to dropping out, occupational status & earnings?

- **Ruben Rumbaut**, University of California, Irvine
- CILS and IMMLA longitudinal data merged, over 6,000 young adults (av age 27) in Southern California area followed from high school, various backgrounds
- 4 levels of bilingualism: fluent, moderate ("balanced"), limited (including literacy) and monolingual
- **Children of immigrants, various backgrounds**
- Methods: Regression analyses
Rumbaut’s Findings

- Monolingual and limited bilingual students are 66% more likely to drop out of high school than balanced bilinguals.

- Bilingualism is significantly associated with occupational prestige; Fluent bilingualism has the strongest effect.

- Earnings are positively associated with increasing levels of bilingualism (see table).
Regressions of annual earnings on levels of bilingualism

- **Fluent bilingual**: $2,827, $2,425
- **Moderate bilingual**: $1,258
- **Limited bilingual**: $2,234, $1,876, $1,078

1. Fluent bilingual: $2,827, Moderate bilingual: $1,258
2. Fluent bilingual: $2,234, Limited bilingual: $1,078

Levels: Fluent bilingual, Moderate bilingual, Limited bilingual.
Does bilingualism affect educational attainment, (and indirectly earnings)?

- Santibañez & Zárate, Claremont & CSU Fullerton

- ELS national data (2002-2006) – both Spanish and Chinese speaking (only groups with large enough Ns)
  16,000 students (approx 3000 immigrant/1.5 gen)
  10th grade to 2 years out of high school

- High use Bil, mod use Bil, L1 dominant & English only (assumed a basic level of education outside US)

- Methods: Regression analyses
“Spanish bilinguals are more likely to enroll in college than English monolinguals, all else held equal”

“the odds of going to a 4-year college are higher for high use Spanish bilinguals relative to English monolinguals, clearly highlighting the bilingual advantage.”

“the pressure of linguistic assimilation . . reduc[es] the chances . . to gain a college education, which increases their value in the U.S. labor market.”
What do employers say about language skills?

- Surveyed nearly 300 employers across all sectors of the economy, large and small firms, based in California, but in many cases with satellites out of state and multinationals; plus interviews with 10 bilingual workers across sectors.

- Do bilinguals have an advantage in hiring?

- Are bilinguals in certain positions paid more?

- Perceived value of bilingualism?

- Opportunities for advancement?
Do bilinguals have a hiring advantage? 2013

- 92% of employers said they would be hiring in the upcoming year; 56% said they would “seek out bilinguals” for at least some positions

- Most likely: arts, entertainment, recreation; transportation and warehousing; retail trade, health care & social services; educational services

- Least likely: Management and technical services (still two-thirds said yes)

- Bottom line: 66% of employers prefer to hire bilingual (all else equal)
Are bilinguals paid more?

- A little more than half the sample would not answer this question.

- Of the 131 that did answer, 56% said that they do pay more for bilinguals in certain positions. The highest:
  - Health care and social services
  - Public administration
  - Finance, real estate
  - Educational services
Do bilinguals have more opportunities for advancement?

- Between 63% and 80% of employers in Transportation Manufacturing/construction, Finance & real estate, Arts & entertainment, and Education

- Said there was greater opportunity for advancement for bilinguals

- But interviewees often said, “While I am not paid more, I earn more, I’ve been promoted more, and my job is more secure.” [Invisible compensation]
What employers say about the value of bilingualism

- 64% bilinguals provide “more effective customer service”
- 51% able to translate documents or help with advertising (literacy)
- 41% “better able to work in diverse environment”
- 25% multi-linguals “create a more welcoming environment”
Conclusions

- There are significant benefits, especially to biliteracy in education, earnings, and employment.

- And especially for those younger employees entering the labor market in a more global economy.

- And for Latinos to go to (4 year) college (BIG).

- *Transitional bilingual education* is NOT the avenue to benefits.

- The pay off comes from **maintenance** of the home language and development of literacy skills.

- We have a wealth of language assets but we need to act fast because of rapid language loss!
Further Reading


- Also: Abridged version from ETS: Is There Really a Labor Market Advantage to Being Bilingual in the U.S.? By Patricia Gándara