

Studies of multilingualism and cognition in the snow, mountains and cold

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Marlijne went to the University of Oslo (UiO) for an internship on linguistic and cognitive abilities in older multilingual adults.

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From November 2017 up until January 2018, I have been doing an internship at the Center for Multilingualism in Society across the Lifespan, at the UiO. As its name suggests, this center is devoted to studying different aspects of multilingual speakers' language competence and production, and management of multilingualism in society. For example, there are projects investigating language impairment in multilingual patients with aphasia and dementia.

The project of my internship was led by postdoc Valantis Fyndanis and focussed on linguistic and cognitive abilities in older multilingual adults. His project was based on previous research that suggests that multilingualism is associated with cognitive benefits. That is, when compared to monolinguals, multilinguals have been shown to have better inhibitory control (i.e. suppressing a reaction to interfering stimuli) and to switch more easily between tasks (e.g. Bialystok, 2017). Furthermore, it has been shown that being multilingual delays the onset of dementia (e.g. Craik, Bialystok & Freedman, 2010). By comparing older multilingual adults with matched monolinguals, this project aimed to investigate whether being multilingual also has beneficial effects in older multilingual participants and whether it is able to delay the onset of age-related decline in linguistic and cognitive abilities. The investigation of cognitive abilities focussed on verbal working memory capacity, semantic memory integrity, processing speed, and executive functions. At the linguistic level, the project tested morphosyntactic, syntactic and lexical abilities in production and comprehension.

Before turning to what I did during my internship and how I have experienced it, I would like to tell a little bit more about why I chose to do my internship at this project. First of all, I really wanted to do something abroad. After studying in Utrecht for almost five years, I saw this as the perfect opportunity to get out of my comfort zone and to explore another country and culture. I started looking in Scandinavia because of its beautiful nature and because I really liked the idea of being in a Nordic country during winter. Second, within the field of linguistics I am especially interested in cognitive linguistics and multilingualism. Hence, when I found the Center for Multilingualism at the website of the UiO, it felt like fate. I had been interested in the cognitive effects of multilingualism for several years, I even wrote my BA thesis about this topic, so when I read about the research project of Valantis Fyndanis, it was an easy decision. I sent him an email with the question if he could host me as an intern, and got a positive reply the next day.

9 months later (I took the 'start early' advice very seriously), it was time to go to Oslo. I was very nervous to go to a strange city on my own. Luckily, I had a friend who was coincidentally living in Oslo for a year, so my nerves were actually not needed at all (Sien, if you are reading this, thank you so much for making my stay in Oslo so amazing!). A few days later the internship really started. I had two main tasks. The first one was to contribute to the research project by extracting reaction times in Praat from audio files that were recorded during one of the tasks of the research project. This specific task measured the participants' linguistic abilities. Participants heard sentences in future or past tense and then had to repeat those sentences while changing the future tense to past tense, and vice versa. Unfortunately, I could not contribute to the project by testing participants because I do not speak Norwegian. However, by attending the experiment sessions I could still learn a lot about the different tasks that are used within this field of research, and about conducting experiments in general. My second task was to write a proposal for my MA thesis. I have had many discussions with my supervisor and got helpful feedback from him, which was great. Although I am not going to carry out the original plan I wrote, it still helped me to understand the rather confusing literature and arguments within this field of research. I also got many opportunities to talk to the other researchers in the research center. I had a very interesting conversation with a researcher that investigated linguistic abilities in people with Alzheimer, a research topic that I am now seriously considering to also be involved with one day.

Besides working, I had a lot of free time to explore the city. Oslo is an amazing city with many touristy hotspots, beautiful nature and hills. I got used to the cold surprisingly fast, the great amount of snow and the slipperiness that the snow caused. It was funny to see how Norwegians did not care about the snow at all: they threw some gravel on it to prevent people from falling and moved on with life. Big contrast with The Netherlands where this amount of snow would cause an enormous chaos. The gravel helped though, I only slipped once (I am quite proud about that). I will definitely return to Oslo during the summer.

To conclude, I have had a great time during my internship in Oslo. I would really recommend doing an internship abroad, as it is a good opportunity to get out of your comfort zone, get to know another culture, learn how linguistic research is done in other parts of the world and also learn more about yourself. ■