All our experiences contribute to the way our minds and brains develop, but intense experiences have a special role in shaping our cognitive systems. As humans, no experience is more intense or pervasive than our use of language, so a lifetime of learning and using (at least) two languages has the potential to leave a profound mark on human cognition. Research with infants shows that those exposed to two languages from birth demonstrate more control over attention than do infants in monolingual environments, and young children learning two languages show precocious development of essential cognitive processes. These effects can also be found in school, particularly for children in bilingual education programs. Thus, development through childhood is shaped by the linguistic environment. The most dramatic findings, however, are found in older age where lifelong bilingualism protects cognitive function in healthy aging and postpones symptoms of dementia and other neurodegenerative diseases. This talk will review the evidence from these studies and propose an explanation for how exposure to and use of two languages leads to these cognitive and brain consequences.

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