

Dissertation evaluation

Reviewer: Márta Lesznyák

*Rabeb Ghanmi*

**Exploring the multilingual mind: Metalinguistic abilities and language learning motivation in Hungarian trilingual learners decoding an unfamiliar language system**

Overall evaluation

In her Phd-dissertation, Rabeb Ghanmi investigates how metalinguistic and crosslinguistic awareness are utilized when decoding a text in an unfamiliar language (here: Italian). In addition, language learning motivation is drawn in as a background factor and correlations between some dimensions of motivation and decoding performance are examined. Finally, the factor structure of the Dörnyei model is re-examined in the context of the present sample and structural equation modelling was carried out to analyse the relationship among dimensions of motivation and effort. Given the importance of foreign language learning, the research questions are relevant. In general, the dissertation is of high quality and it brought novel and valuable results. Nevertheless, there are some minor shortcomings I will detail below together with the strengths of the dissertation.

In detail:

**The structure of the dissertation and some general issues:**

The dissertation is clearly and coherently structured, with each chapter logically building upon the previous one. The proportions of the individual chapters are well balanced, which further contributes to the overall coherence and clarity of the work.

Yet, the dissertation has some weaknesses that cannot be linked to a particular chapter. I will outline these problems here.

First, the paper seems to have a double focus. The title and the abstract suggest that metalinguistic awareness is in the centre of the investigation. In the dissertation itself, however, the exploration of the factor structure of the motivation questionnaire and the implementation of structural equation modelling take up so much space that they create a separate line of inquiry within the work. This line of inquiry is also relatively unrelated to the primary goal of the research. While associations are indeed established between metalinguistic awareness and some aspects of motivation, these links look more like a narrow bridge between two huge pieces of land and they cannot turn the dissertation into a coherent whole. This does not mean that these two parts of the research would not be excellent in themselves but they somehow look somewhat separate.

Second, the researcher is an outsider to Hungarian culture, which is an advantage on the one hand, as she has a neutral approach and can handle information objectively. On the other hand, she lacks the insider's perspective and may partly misinterpret some findings, or miss

some important details. I will refer to this general issue below when discussing specific problems in the individual sections. Here, I would like to mention only one problem. For an outsider, it is very important to support their judgements or statements about certain cultural practices with data or references. The author characterizes the Hungarian education system as one having a “monolingual mindset”. This claim is repeated several times throughout the dissertation (see e.g. Introduction, Discussion) and is never supported by data or references. As a private person, I fully agree with you, but as a researcher I would not dare to write it down without sufficient justification.

Finally, although the work is written in clear and objective Academic English, the abstract contains some overstatements (e.g. “The results show *a significant relationship* between metalinguistic abilities and...” or “Linguistic self-confidence is shown to have a *robust connection* with metalinguistic and crosslinguistic thinking and reasoning.”). The term “significant relationship” implies statistically significant correlations between two variables but metalinguistic abilities were not quantified in the study, so no correlation analysis was carried out with it. Therefore, the wording is somewhat misleading. The “robust connection” is a reference to a correlation of .278, which the author herself labels moderate in the Results chapter. In addition, the correlation is calculated between linguistic self-confidence and the “unknown language test”, and not metalinguistic thinking directly. It would be very important to avoid such overstatements in the future.

### **Introduction and Literature review**

The introduction effectively establishes the research context and objectives. I have just a few minor remarks on it. First, it is somewhat confusing that no reference is made to how metalinguistic and crosslinguistic abilities are operationalized in the study (although it is suggested how it is not assessed). This makes it very difficult for the reader to construct a rudimentary picture of the investigation.

Second, the phrasing ‘with the change of the regime in 1987’ on page 2 may reflect some cultural and linguistic unfamiliarity. For Hungarians, however, the general (political) change of regime is more linked to 1989-90. The context itself suggests that the author was referring to the 1987 regulation of the Ministry of Culture that permitted bilingual educational programs in Hungarian secondary schools.

Finally, in the Introduction, Section 1.4, the candidate presents her hypotheses. While they are generally appropriate, it is not always clear how certain hypotheses were derived. For example, the rationale for hypothesizing that motivation would be higher for learning French, or that the factor structure of the motivation questionnaire would differ from that reported in Dörnyei’s original study, is not explained.

### **Literature review**

The theoretical review is clear, well-structured, and easy to follow. Right at the beginning, a distinction is made between bilingualism and multilingualism. Complexity is highlighted as the central difference between the two phenomena (concepts) but no further details or analysis

is provided about their core differences, which I found somewhat lacking. In the next chapter, several influential models of multiple language acquisition are presented including Hufeisen's factor model, Williams and Hammarberg's role-function model, Meißner's multilingual processing model, and the Dynamic Model of Multilingualism. Next, metalinguistic and crosslinguistic awareness are defined and discussed in relation to multilingual language acquisition and crosslinguistic influence. The review also addresses the role of language distance, similarity, and psychotypology, as well as multilingual and multicompetence approaches to language teaching. Additionally, assessment methods of metalinguistic awareness are described in detail, with special attention to decoding tasks, supported by relevant research findings.

The chapters focusing on previous empirical research present a number of studies on the relationship between multilingual awareness and language proficiency. Research on prior language proficiency is also discussed, suggesting that proficiency level and typological closeness may play a key role in facilitating decoding in an unfamiliar language. This is followed by a general overview of the concept of language learning motivation, its historical development and some related research findings. Finally, Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System is presented. The structuring of this chapter is somewhat confusing, however, as research on the relationship between metalinguistic skills and motivation is discussed earlier than motivation itself, and the models or assessment methods underlying these studies are not clearly specified. Nevertheless, a strong point of the literature review is the thoroughness and the depth with which the L2MSS model is presented. The author goes beyond the usual "ideal-self, ought-so self etc" description and provides a detailed account of the Language Disposition Questionnaire and related studies.

Overall, the literature review provides a comprehensive, well-structured, and insightful foundation for the empirical investigation

## **Methodology**

The methodology of the research is generally well designed and clearly presented, though a few minor issues remain, which I will outline below.

The participants are characterized in detail, but it is not made clear where the information concerning language dominance, cultural identification etc. in Section 3.4 comes from. A search within the document suggests that these data must come from the LEAP-Q questionnaire, but this should be made explicit by the author. In addition, references should be made to the Appendix where the questionnaire can be found. Unfortunately, such cross-referencing is missing throughout the dissertation.

The tests and questionnaires used in the data collection are appropriate for assessing the constructs involved in the research. I only have one question and some thoughts related to it: why didn't you ask students about their attitudes towards Italian? I would think that the success of decoding Italian may be more closely linked to attitudes towards Italian than to attitudes towards French or English. In fact, my assumption would be that motivation to learn English or French is not necessarily related to decoding Italian.

This reminds me of an important point that remains unaddressed throughout the dissertation. Both multilingualism and motivation to languages are embedded in specific social, cultural and political contexts. An individual's willingness to mobilize crosslinguistic awareness to decipher a language may be strongly affected by their emotional resistance to any of the languages involved in the process. The languages selected for this research are relatively neutral in present day Hungary, which is advantageous. However, it should be acknowledged that there must be countries around the world where some languages may be resisted because of political and emotional reasons and the findings would therefore not be directly generalizable to such settings. (As an Eastern-European I immediately remembered the status of Russian in the 1980s in Hungary). The lack of discussion of these issues suggests that your choice of languages was not conscious from this respect.

Another point that is not explicitly discussed concerns the languages of the tests and questionnaires, although these are of key importance in bilingualism research. While an examination of the questionnaires shows that appropriate languages were used, a clear description of this is missing.

The validity and reliability of the instruments were also addressed. In terms of validity, most tasks were either reused from previously established instruments or newly constructed on the basis of existing ones, which ensures acceptability. Regarding the retrospective questionnaire, the only justification provided is the author's own, which may be acceptable, but ideally the involvement of another expert would have been required. Reliability, as far as can be seen, was assessed only in the pilot study (the exceptions are the motivation questionnaires). This constitutes a minor limitation, as the pilot was conducted in another country with a much smaller sample, which raises questions about the extent to which its findings can be transferred to the Hungarian context. For future research, piloting should be carried out within the social and linguistic context of the main study, and reliability measures should also be reported for the final sample.

## Results

The results are presented in a clear and systematic way, with appropriate precision.

One issue that arises is related to the comparison of French and English proficiency test scores. Given the candidate's demonstrated competence in statistics, it is not clear why no statistical test was carried out to examine whether the difference between the two test scores is significant. Such a test would have strengthened the interpretation of the results. The same applies to comparing the French and English motivation scores.

The section describing students' reported metalinguistic and crosslinguistic decoding strategies is one of the most valuable parts of the dissertation. It contains a large number of illuminating examples and explanations.

Regarding motivation, the factor analysis is competently conducted, but some methodological details are missing. Specifically, the KMO-index and Bartlett's test results should have been reported, and the use of .30 as a cut-off point for factor loadings is somewhat low, as .40 is

more typically applied. While this choice can be accepted, the implications of using a lower threshold should be explicitly discussed in relation to the robustness of the findings.

Furthermore, some motivation subscales have very low reliability. The possible reasons for this should be addressed, together with the consequences for how these results are interpreted.

As suggested above, motivation towards English and French may not be directly related to decoding an Italian text. This assumption is supported by the lack of significant correlations. Only linguistic self-confidence, which is not a language-specific variable, shows a correlation with the Italian reading test scores. This may be an important finding that the author needs to re-consider.

## Discussion

The Discussion section is well-argued and offers thoughtful interpretations of the findings. Nevertheless, there are a few points on which I would like to provide comments.

In sections 5.3.1 and 5.3.2, the author analyses participants' language use in everyday life. This is where the lack of familiarity with the context mentioned above comes into play. As a reader, I have the impression that she highly overestimates the use of English in students' everyday life. Just to illustrate the point, a quote from page 120:

*“The data analysis has shown the participants' inclination towards using English in communication in their everyday lives.*

On the same page, students' reported interactions with family and friends in English are presented as if they were a common phenomenon. While these accounts may reflect students' self-reports, the frequency of such interactions seems somewhat overstated and may be influenced by social desirability effects. I live my life surrounded with Hungarians who speak good English but my experience is that the regular use of English in family is typically limited to bilingual households. Nevertheless, it is plausible that students engage in English use more frequently than in French. It is also possible that it is just inaccurate wording that made me misunderstand what the author wanted to imply. More generally, the interpretation of the data appears different from what a Hungarian would come up with, and a certain degree of critical reflection on the data seems to be missing—for instance, with regard to the potential discrepancy between social desirability and “reality”.

Nevertheless, one of the most important findings of the investigation is that English emerged as the primary source for crosslinguistic comparisons for a number of participants, in spite of French being structurally more similar to Italian. It is highly plausible that the frequency of the use of English and the associated confidence of use may explain this phenomenon.

The correlation between multilingual awareness and linguistic self-confidence is interpreted in the context of previous research findings. What is missing is an explanation for why other motivation factors did not show associations.

Overall, the findings lead the candidate to emphasize the importance of raising multilingual awareness.

## Conclusions

In the conclusion, the author summarizes her main findings and proposes several suggestions for language teaching in Hungary. While I agree that a multilingual approach would be beneficial, I would like to highlight some possible concerns. At present, we do not yet have a clear understanding of how multilingual awareness operates in practice, particularly given the low correlations with Italian performance in this study. It is also possible that such an approach may benefit some learners—for instance, those with a particular cognitive profile or higher language aptitude—while placing an additional burden on others. The proposal also raises practical concerns: how could this be implemented in an English classroom, where English is typically taught as a second language (i.e. no other foreign language to rely on), or in an L3 classroom where students have diverse L2 backgrounds? Furthermore, there is the question of feasibility, as it may be challenging to find language teachers qualified in more than one foreign language. Raising such questions, however, does not diminish the value of the proposal; rather, it highlights important areas for further research and discussion. Finally, I would like to recommend the PhD dissertation of my colleague, Ágnes Balla, and some of her publications that address the same topic. Approximately ten years ago, she tested a teaching method in a secondary school in which learners' knowledge of English was extensively utilized in the teaching of German.

### **Formal issues:**

There are a few minor formal inconsistencies in the dissertation.

For example, on page 68 some characters appear incorrectly,

and on page 72 a superfluous diagram is included, which seems to be an unintended duplicate of Figure 3.

In addition, figure captions are not consistently placed, appearing above the figure in some cases (e.g., Figure 3) and below in others (e.g., Figure 7).

Finally, Figure 7 is difficult to interpret, as the categories 'Milieu' and 'Linguistic Self-confidence' are not supported by an explanation of color coding.

To summarize, the candidate demonstrated the ability to carry out independent research. Her study is well-designed, logical, focuses on an important topic and is carried out professionally. Overall, it makes a valuable contribution to the field and reflects a high level of scholarly competence.

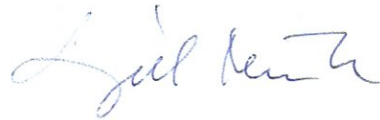
To conclude, the thesis fulfils the criteria of a doctoral dissertation, as a result, I recommend the award of a PhD degree to the candidate.

**Questions:**

On page 76 you write: "that other important determinants might influence the decoding process." What may be those factors?

On page 119 you highlight the importance of reading and written language in general in incidental learning. How do you see the future of incidental learning in a world dominated by AI and LLM use?

Szeged, 10.09.2025.



Lesznyák Márta

reviewer