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

Ph.D. Dissertation

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## **Abstract**

Building on prior research highlighting the role of multilingual awareness in multiple language learning and use, this research aims to unravel Hungarian secondary school students' use of their multilingual background to decode texts in an unfamiliar language. This study explores whether a heightened level of meta- and crosslinguistic awareness correlates with stronger decoding skills, and how this awareness is connected to the motivational constructs that are identified in this study based on Dörnyei's language disposition questionnaire.

The study involves 134 Hungarian high school students, speakers of L2 English and L3 French, who are enrolled in a Hungarian-French bilingual program. Participants were administered the Language Experience and Proficiency Questionnaire, a language motivation questionnaire, an English proficiency test, a French proficiency test, a reading comprehension test in Italian, which is an unfamiliar language to them, and a retrospective questionnaire, investigating the process of decoding the novel language.

The results show a significant relationship between metalinguistic abilities and the ability to decode an unknown language. Students with heightened metalinguistic abilities show greater success in deciphering the Italian texts, as they reflected on similarities between their previously learnt languages and the Italian language at lexical, structural, morphological, and phonological levels. Linguistic self-confidence is shown to have a robust connection with metalinguistic thinking and crosslinguistic reasoning. L2 and L3 proficiency also correlated with the students' ability to decode the unfamiliar language structures.

With relation to motivation, the findings reveal a complex motivational profile, where students, despite being enrolled in a French bilingual program, exhibited greater motivation towards learning English, due to its global dominance across various media and digital platforms. The study yielded different results regarding the different motivational constructs originally defined by Dörnyei, as some discrepancies were observed in factor loadings which consequently created a difference in the motivational models subsequently developed. The Ideal Ln Self emerged as a central construct that not only influenced intended effort but also had close associations with other motivational dimensions.

In conclusion, the results of the current research highlight the importance of meta- and crosslinguistic awareness and language motivation in Ln learning, underlining the value of developing a rich linguistic background and adopting multilingual teaching strategies.

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## **1. Introduction**

Given the prevalence of studies investigating cognitive and metacognitive phenomena, including metalinguistic abilities, in monolingual and bilingual contexts, this study elucidates the effect of metalinguistic awareness, intertwined with crosslinguistic awareness, on the decoding of an unfamiliar language system from a dynamic and complex theory perspective in a Hungarian-French bilingual context where English is learnt as a foreign language. This dissertation also probes into the relationship between language motivation and meta- and crosslinguistic awareness, while revising Dörnyei's seven motivational constructs within the L2MSS framework. Language proficiency is another variable that is studied in connection with the latter constructs. Investigating the interplay of these factors in L<sub>n</sub> learning lends insight into the inherent complexity of multiple language learning and underscores the need for a revamped pedagogical approach that fosters multilingual development.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. Dynamic Model of Multilingualism (DMM)**

Herdina and Jessner (2002) have introduced a holistic approach to multilingual development that views language systems within the multilingual system as dynamic and interdependent, interacting and influencing each other over time. The DMM maintains that complex and dynamic interactions between multiple languages in the brain influence the development of the entire multilingual system (Jessner et al., 2016). From a DMM perspective, multilingual acquisition processes are enhanced by strong synergetic effects developed in experienced multilingual learners who seem to accumulate metalinguistic and metacognitive knowledge as multilingual learners and users (Jessner, 2018).

### **2.2. Metalinguistic and crosslinguistic awareness**

A key concept in the DMM is the M-factor which comprises a set of multilingual and metacognitive abilities in a multilingual speaker/learner and has a priming effect in L3 and L<sub>n</sub> learning (Jessner & Allgäuer-Hackl, 2020). The core component of the M-factor is multilingual awareness which consists of metalinguistic (MLA) and crosslinguistic awareness

(XLA) and has a catalytic effect in multilingual learning and use. MLA refers to the ability to abstractly think about language and consequently manipulate languages while XLA is the ability of multilinguals to make explicit or implicit use of the connections and interactions between their language systems. These abilities enable learners to approach an unfamiliar or a novel language analytically and strategically, drawing on their existing linguistic repertoire for decoding and problem-solving.

### **2.3. Language Learning Motivation**

While both MLA and XLA play a cardinal role in multiple language learning, the relationship between these metalinguistic abilities and affective factors involved in the learning process, such as language motivation, has not been thoroughly studied. Motivation, often viewed as a key characteristic that can drive and determine L<sub>n</sub> learning success (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021), is closely connected to learners' emotional and cognitive engagement with language. This study approaches L2 and L3 motivation through Dörnyei's seven motivational constructs identified in a longitudinal study (Dörnyei et al., 2006) conducted in the Hungarian context. These motivational components fall within the framework of the L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS) that was developed to offer a more self-based understanding of language motivation. This study applies these dimensions identified in the original model: integrativeness, instrumentality, attitudes toward L2 speakers/community, vitality of the L2 community, cultural interest, milieu, and linguistic self-confidence, to both L2 English and L3 French, within the L2MSS framework. The aim is to examine the stability of the constructs and investigate the motivational differences between a global lingua franca (L2) and a less globally dominant but more academically relevant (L3) language.

### **2.4. Decoding a novel language: metalinguistic abilities, motivation, and proficiency**

Decoding an unfamiliar language is a complex process that draws on learners' previously learnt languages, cognitive flexibility, and multilingual skills. previous research presented in this section reveal that learners' awareness at the meta- and crosslinguistic level of the similarities and overlaps between their languages is fundamental in

decoding and comprehending a new and unfamiliar language system. These metalinguistic abilities allow learners to recognize crosslinguistic similarities, identify morphological, lexical, phonological, and syntactic patterns, and make informed guesses about meaning (Smidfelt & van de Weijer, 2019; Spechtenhauser & Jessner, 2024). These skills are enhanced through prior language learning experiences, which expand the range of potential transfer sources.

The ability to decode unfamiliar linguistic structures and use transfer strategies can be significantly influenced by the proficiency of the different languages of one's repertoire. Proficiency in previously acquired languages equips learners with cognitive and linguistic tools that can be utilized to decipher new linguistic patterns (Mieszkowska & Otwinowska-Kasztelanic, 2015). In fact, both MLA and XLA appear to have a connection with language proficiency (De Houwer, 2017; Pfenninger & Singleton, 2016) although results in the literature are somewhat inconsistent. Motivation is another variable that can be connected to metalinguistic abilities and affect the degree of effort invested in the decoding process. Metalinguistic and even crosslinguistic awareness might promote motivation by fostering a sense of competence or achievement while motivation in turn can expedite the development of metalinguistic abilities, as learners who are intrinsically motivated are more likely to engage eminently in language analysis and reflective learning processes.

The interaction of all three constructs in the deciphering process could demonstrate that successful decoding, and L<sub>n</sub> learning in general, is not solely a matter of linguistic similarity, but rather an integrative, complex process shaped by cognitive, affective, and experiential dimensions of language learning.

## **2.5. Research questions**

Based on the existing research gaps, the current research aims to answer the following questions:

RQ1: How do learners apply their metalinguistic abilities in decoding an unfamiliar language system? What is the relationship between L2/L3 proficiency and metalinguistic and crosslinguistic skills applied in decoding an unfamiliar language system?

RQ2: How would the original factor structure of the motivation questionnaire change in light of the current study's circumstances?

RQ3: What would learners' motivations and attitudes be towards learning French (L3), the language of instruction in their bilingual program, and English (L2), the more globally dominant language?

RQ4: What is the relationship between the different motivational dimensions in learning L2/L3 and the unfamiliar language test scores which reflect metalinguistic and crosslinguistic reasoning?

RQ5: What is the connection between the various motivational dimensions and L2/L3 proficiency?

### **3. Methods**

This study uses a cross-sectional mixed-method approach that combines quantitative and qualitative methods. This approach can provide an overarching framework for addressing the research questions and allow generalizations (Hua & David, 2008), thereby contributing valuable insights into the existing literature.

#### **3.1. Participants**

The study was conducted in three Hungarian public high schools in three different vibrant regions in Hungary. 10th, 11th, and 12th graders (N=134) were recruited to participate in the study through purposive sampling. They predominantly learned French as L3 starting from the 9th grade as part of the French bilingual program and English as L2 from primary school. During the first year of the program (grade 9), the participants received an intensive training in French with the aim of enabling them to start content learning in the foreign language from grade 10 onwards. From grade 10 to grade 12, students receive 5 to 6 hours of French instruction and 3 hours of English language classes per week. The age of participants ranges between 16 and 19 years (M=17.67). 37 participants are in grade 10, 35 are in grade 11, and 62 are in grade 12.

#### **3.2. Instruments**

Six instruments were used in this study:

*Language Experience and Proficiency Questionnaire (LEAP-Q)*: widely recognized as a validated questionnaire tool that provides comprehensive data about a multitude of language-related aspects. To

tailor the LEAP-Q for the specific aims of this study, questions 6-7-8 in the original version were excluded from this study owing to their irrelevance.

*French proficiency test:* designed at a B2 level ( $\alpha=.82$ ,  $SD=3.44$ ), as defined by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The test consists of a reading comprehension task and a lexical grammatical task containing 7 and 10 multiple-choice questions, respectively.

*English proficiency test:* developed ( $\alpha=.79$ ,  $SD=2.96$ ) to assess learners' English language competence at B1-B2 levels, as defined by CEFR measures. The test consists of a reading comprehension section and a grammatical section with 7 and 10 multiple-choice questions, respectively.

*Italian reading comprehension test:* designed at an A1 level ( $\alpha=.80$ ,  $SD=3.16$ ) to measure students' ability to decode an unfamiliar language system. By choosing Italian, a language that is significantly different from the participants' L1 Hungarian yet typologically closer to their L2 and L3, the study maintains a balance where students can still rely on their existing linguistic knowledge to make meta- and crosslinguistic reflections. The decision to use Italian was also motivated by practical factors pertaining to the study's design. The test consists of three reading comprehension tasks with multiple-choice questions.

*Retrospective questionnaire:* aims to capture the involvement of MLA and XLA in the decoding process as it provides access to learners' processing of the different Italian texts and not only to the final product. Participants were encouraged to give as many examples as possible of how they could understand the Italian texts in order to gain a deeper insight into the strategic processing methods used in the process.

*Language Disposition Questionnaire:* adapted to examine the participants' motivation in learning French and English. Although the original questionnaire includes background questions, only the items related to the motivational constructs are used in this study.

### **3.3. Data analysis and coding criteria**

Quantitative data from proficiency tests, the Italian test, motivation questionnaire, and LEAP-Q were analyzed using SPSS, Excel, and

SmartPLS, while qualitative data from the retrospective questionnaire were examined using Qualitative Content Analysis (Mayring, 2014).

## **4. Results**

### **4.1. Multilingual awareness and the strategies employed to decode Italian**

Students employed a range of strategies drawing on prior language knowledge and contextual inferencing. The main categories were:

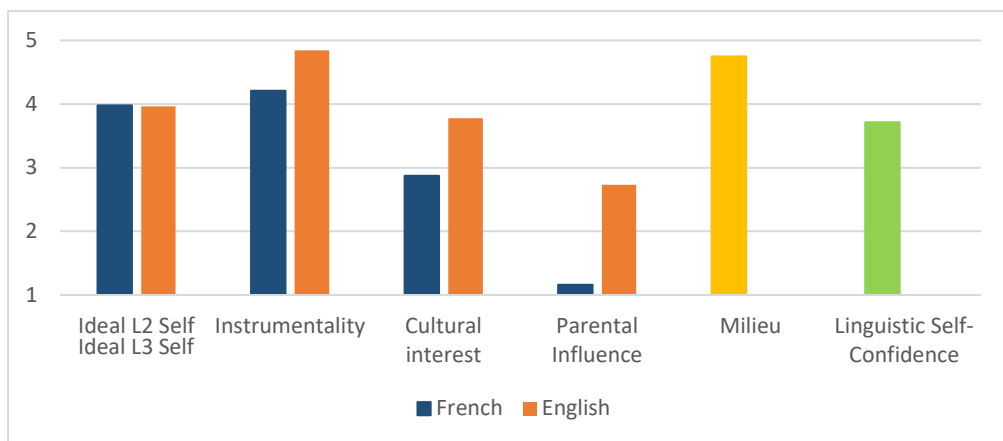
- Lexical awareness: true cognates supported meaning reconstruction, while false cognates occasionally misled learners (e.g., *libri* misinterpreted as *libre/free*).
- Grammatical awareness: recognition of similar word order (SVO) and verb conjugation patterns between French/ English and Italian (e.g., *frequenta-fréquente*).
- Phonological awareness: perception of similar sounds between Italian and French words (e.g., *famiglia-famille, giorno-journée*).
- Awareness of typological proximity: French (L3) was the most frequently reported support, due to its typological closeness to Italian while English (L2) was the primary support language for learners with higher English proficiency and linguistic self-confidence.
- Contextual inferencing: keywords, proper nouns, geographical references, temporal and numerical markers, lexical cognates, and task-driven text navigation helped understand surrounding words.

Regarding L2/L3 proficiency, a correlation analysis indicated the connection between French ( $r=.20, p=.01$ ) and English proficiency and metalinguistic abilities, although the relationship was weaker in the case of English ( $r=.17, p=.03$ ).

### **4.2. Differences in motivational dimensions across the original and current motivation model: English vs French**

Based on the exploratory factor analysis run for both French and English, a unified six-factor structure was established. The final model consists of Cultural Interest, Instrumentality, Ideal Ln self which merges what used to constitute Integrativeness and Attitudes towards Ln speakers, Parental Influence merging as a new construct, milieu, and linguistic self-confidence. These constructs are used to explore learners' motivational

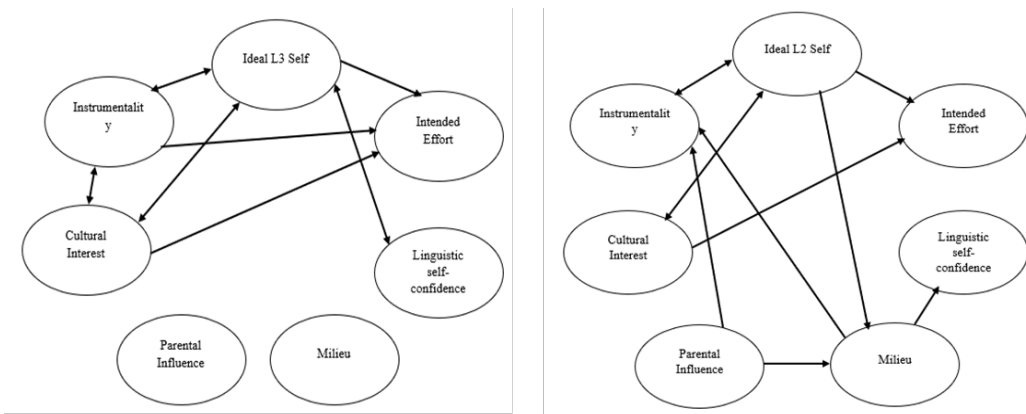
dispositions across French, the language of instruction, and English, the more globalized language as shown in figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Learners' motivation and attitudes towards learning both French and English

The motivational profile shows that English scored higher on Instrumentality, Cultural Interest, and Parental Influence, while ideal L2 and L3 selves appear almost equally significant. A moderate degree of confidence in learning a foreign language without feeling anxious is observed, while Milieu seems to be highly influential and supportive of foreign language learning.

Exploring the relationship between all motivational dimensions, a PLS-SEM analysis was conducted across both languages, showing an interconnection between all dimensions with few constructs directly influencing intended effort. Figures 2a and 2b illustrate the strongest and most significant paths observed in the analysis. The following path models visualize the key motivational links that influence learners' intended effort.



**Figure 2.** Path analysis models for French (left, 2a) and English (right, 2b) motivation

### 4.3. The connection between multilingual awareness and motivation

Linguistic self-confidence was the only dimension correlating with multilingual awareness, i.e., the extent to which the participants engage in metalinguistic and crosslinguistic reasoning, as reflected in the participants' Italian test scores. The correlation analysis ( $r=.27$ ,  $p=.001$ ) suggests that any increase in either variable is linked to an increase in the other.

### 4.4. The connection between the different motivational dimensions and Ln proficiency

Correlation analysis indicated that French proficiency was positively associated with the Ideal L3 Self, self-confidence, and intended effort, while English proficiency mainly correlated with the Ideal L2 Self and self-confidence. Instrumentality, Cultural Interest, Parental Influence, and Milieu showed no significant correlations with proficiency in either language. These results highlight that the ideal Ln self, self-confidence, and effort are key drivers of a successful learning experience.

## **5. Discussion**

### **5.1. The role of multilingual awareness in the decoding process**

The study findings show that the participants' metalinguistic reasoning and search for crosslinguistic equivalences between languages led to higher scores on the unknown language test, supporting the notion that bi- and multilingual education enhances metalinguistic awareness and thus the ability to decode novel structures, which is consistent with Ter Kuile et al. (2011) and Spechtenhauser and Jessner (2024). The participants used various techniques and were able to draw on certain dimensions of their background linguistic knowledge when deciphering Italian. This was particularly pronounced in their use of lexical, syntactic, and phonological crosslinguistic similarities between their known languages and Italian. Their reliance on contextual cues was also notable, proving their ability to strategically integrate prior linguistic knowledge with situational information to infer meaning. Learners' L2 and L3 proficiency was positively linked to their use MLA/XLA, with French offering typological advantages and English benefiting from stronger media-driven exposure.

### **5.2. A revised model of L2 and L3 learning motivation**

The study reveals a number of significant differences in the dimensional structure of language learning motivation for both French and English. While the original model identified seven key dimensions, the factor structure that emerged from the current investigation unravels a somewhat different motivation model shaped by educational, contextual, and sociolinguistic circumstances. The final suggested model consists of Cultural Interest, Instrumentality, Ideal Ln Self, Parental Influence, Milieu, and Linguistic Self-Confidence, where ideal Ln self emerges as a central factor associated with various other dimensions and influencing intended effort.

### **5.3. Comparing motivational dispositions: English vs French**

Although enrolled in a French bilingual program, students showed greater motivation for English than for French possibly due to its pragmatic value and ubiquity across various platforms. Motivation towards French was largely shaped by the Ideal L3 Self, instrumentality, and cultural interest,

with intended effort reflecting the language's academic role in the bilingual program. In contrast, motivation for English was more strongly tied to internal factors mainly the Ideal L2 Self and cultural interest, with instrumentality influencing effort indirectly through self-concept. This implies that French learning is sustained mostly by academic requirements, whereas English motivation draws more on personal aspirations, emotional engagement, and its instrumental value as a global lingua franca.

#### **5.4. Multilingual awareness and linguistic self-confidence**

Linguistic self-confidence emerged as a salient factor strongly connected to participants' engagement with the decoding process. The relationship between linguistic self-confidence and meta- and crosslinguistic awareness appears to be symbiotic, although the influence of self-confidence on awareness is more pronounced. Participants with higher levels of self-confidence in their language abilities tend to actively engage in crosslinguistic processing and reflect on and manipulate their languages in the face of a challenging language task (cf. Choi et al., 2020). Conversely, linguistic self-confidence can be reinforced by multilingual awareness; being cognizant of the structural, lexical, and phonological similarities and differences between languages might provide learners with a sense of mastery, substantiating their existing linguistic knowledge and boosting their confidence in navigating unfamiliar language structures.

#### **5.5. The relationship between motivation and Ln proficiency**

The study indicates that only the ideal Ln self and linguistic self-confidence are connected to both French and English proficiency. Participants who envision themselves as competent users of the target language, hold positive attitudes towards the target community and language, and show self-belief in their language abilities are more likely to have higher proficiency. Their future self-image as proficient speakers of the target language encourages them to engage in language activities that enhance their skills, thereby reaching higher proficiency levels as reported in Ghasemi (2018). Conversely, higher proficiency can enhance learners' ideal selves as observable, tangible Ln development offers

concrete evidence of the progress made to reach the desired competency level. Furthermore, the connection between linguistic self-confidence and L<sub>n</sub> proficiency appears to be reciprocal as linguistic self-confidence encourages learners to engage in communicative activities, thus improving language proficiency, while in turn gains reinforcement through successful language practice.

## 6. Conclusion

This study contributes to the evolving nature of multilingualism research and L<sub>n</sub> motivation theory, especially within the Hungarian educational context which remains underrepresented particularly in MLA literature. The study lends meaningful insights into the ways learners draw on their background languages to strategically process and decode an unfamiliar language, highlighting the need for teachers to raise students' metalinguistic and crosslinguistic awareness in the classroom through DMM-based teaching approaches.

This study also revisited Dörnyeiian motivational dimensions within the L2MSS which yielded a modified model where Ideal L<sub>n</sub> Self and Parental influence emerged as new constructs. The findings underline the importance of fostering learners' ideal L2 and L3 selves, while highlighting linguistic self-confidence as a robust construct closely tied to multilingual awareness. Additionally, students exhibited an overall stronger motivation towards L2 English than L3 French, emphasizing the need to adopt more engaging, multilingual pedagogical approaches to sustain interest in languages other than English.

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Ghanmi, R. (2023). An examination of motivation and proficiency as individual difference variables associated with metalinguistic awareness among adult learners of Hungarian. *A Pannon Egyetem Modern Filológiai és Társadalomtudományi Karának tanulmánykötete “Humán tudományok: jövőbe vezető utak”*

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