

# the bilingual family newsletter

MULTILINGUAL  
MATTERS

news and views for intercultural people

editors: sami grover and marjukka grover

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2004  
Volume 21  
Number 4

## editorial

We open with Iman Makeba-Laversuch's look at an unpleasant aspect of intercultural life—conflict. Whilst the positive benefits of bi/multilingualism are worth celebrating, we must not lose sight of the negative experiences that we may possibly be faced with. Conflict can occur in a number of situations, not only when someone is singled out by their peers or by the wider community as being 'not one of us'. It can also flare up within the intercultural home as splits in family relationships can become ingrained along linguistic or cultural 'fault lines'. As Iman points out, the point of examining such situations is not to cause undue concern, but to strengthen our resolve to eliminate conflict wherever possible.

Ray Smith's article also touches on conflict, exploring how an Alsatian family's national allegiances have had to change over the years according to the political context of the time.

Meg Valenzuela's article explores the practicalities of bilingual life - showing how her family have had to adapt their language strategies as they have moved from country to country.

We have also included a short news section in this issue, highlighting some of the latest research which appears to show that bi/multilingualism can bestow distinct advantages in terms of brain function, and even structure. So, at the risk of sounding smug, it would appear that some of us truly are blessed with bilingual brains!

Sami Grover

## SPEAKING THE LANGUAGE OF THE ENEMY Conflict inside and outside the bilingual home

Dr. Des I.M. Laversuch



*By talking early with our children about intercultural strife, we can do much to protect both them and others who may become targets.*

For many children in bicultural homes, one of the biggest obstacles to developing bilingual fluency or comfort has absolutely nothing to do with language and everything to do with loyalty. Where the parents come from two cultures in conflict, language choice is often interpreted as a public statement of cultural allegiance. Unfortunately, this conflict is not at all unusual. All over the world, young people who are raised in culturally polarized environments may quickly be made to feel (directly and/or indirectly) that speaking the language of their mother's culture is in some way betraying their father's culture, or visa versa. As a result, many children eventually feel that no matter which language they chose, they are speaking the enemy's language.

There are several ways in which children may respond. Some may give in to the outside pressure and hide one of their parental heritage languages. As the 41-year-old German-English woman living in Germany answered when asked whether she had been discriminated

against: 'Yes, during school, other kids made remarks, insults, drawings against my German heritage. As a result I kept it a secret from all but my closest friends.'

By contrast, other children may develop two different monolingual personas. People who chose this path often have two, mutually exclusive sets of friends to match. Such is the case with a 30-year-old Finnish-German multilingual I interviewed in Germany:

*Whenever I am with my Finnish friends I speak Finnish and as soon as I am with my German friends, I completely switch over to German. I used to try to expose my Finnish friends to my German side and visa versa but I figured out pretty quickly that neither side was interested. They already had their stereotypes and that was enough for them. So, after a while, I just gave up. And mostly that's okay but sometimes it still hurts 'cuz it makes me think none of my friends really knows who I am.*

While the above two strategies are common, they are by no means the only option. Others may completely reject both parental languages, taking on a third.

To date, it is still unclear why one double heritage child will take one path to identity formation and another child will take a completely different road. What does seem clear, however, is the importance of personal freedom. People who are forced as children to take one path over another may discover once they reach adulthood

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## Language of the Enemy...

Continued from page 1



Photos by Marion Widmer. Photos are of staged fights for the camera.

that the price they have paid in terms of their personal happiness is higher than anyone could have imagined. For this reason, psychologists routinely stress the importance of parents' recognizing and respecting the developmental process of each individual child. Furthermore, parents who have chosen to overcome the intolerance of their two native cultures are regularly warned to prepare their children for the fact that not everyone welcomes, let alone respects, cultural diversity.

For example, there is some research and quite a bit of anecdotal evidence to show that bicultural children are not infrequently targets of bullying. As one 20-year-old Welsh-English bilingual living in Great Britain explained: 'people tease you as a child 'cause they don't understand. As a child, it can be upsetting and confusing[...]' This bullying can take several forms. There are rather overt, obvious forms such as name calling, shoving, chasing, and hitting. Bullying can also take more covert forms such as menacing stares or organized ostracization. As one Finnish-German-English woman from Switzerland described, sometimes this form of discrimination among children is a function of prejudiced adults:

*Some kids in town were forbidden by their parents to have contact with me. That meant that I could talk with them in school but never at home (Silent friends). That made me very sad [...] This led me to my sometimes keeping my bicultural heritage secret until I knew people better and sometimes I did not tell them at all. It was not until later in my adolescence that I found the courage to always 'stand by' my bicultural heritage.*  
(Author's translation)

Although less talked about, these silent forms can be just as devastating, if for no other reason than because they tend to go unnoticed longer.

*...bullying can take several forms [...] name calling, shoving, chasing, and hitting. Bullying can also take more covert forms such as menacing stares or organized ostracization.*

Parents are encouraged to be vigilant. Even if children are not victims of bullying today, this does not mean that they will not be tomorrow. And if it never happens, the chances are unfortunately still rather good that your children will witness someone else being bullied. By talking early with our children about intercultural strife, we can do much to protect both themselves and others who may become targets. Just as importantly, we can also decrease the chances that they will join groups of bullies in the hopes of securing their own safety.

Parents of children who are being raised with two cultures at odds are therefore strongly encouraged to talk openly with their children not just to them. Listen attentively, not only to what they say, but also to what they don't say. And don't be afraid to ask questions. If you do find that some form of discrimination is taking place, don't be afraid to step in. Sometimes adults are too shy to intervene, fearing that they will only make matters worse. If you are in this situation, tell yourself this: 'If you as an adult feel paralyzed, just imagine how your child must feel!' By stepping in, you can become an instrument of change by communicating that no form of discrimination is acceptable.

Parents must also be vigilant not to accidentally downplay or excuse abusive behaviour children may report by using such platitudes as 'they don't understand' or 'they did not mean to hurt you.' While ignorance may explain abuse, it can never excuse it. And therein lies another important point: we must be willing to confront it whenever and wherever it appears... even when it occurs in the most unlikely of places... our homes. All across the planet, some of the worst cultural battles are being fought not in the streets but in our homes. Consequently, each year, countless families in the BFN community will come to the conclusion that divorce is the best, or only, solution. Unfortunately, the information that is available to help bilingual/bicultural families in crisis is still disappointingly meagre, despite the fact that local and virtual bookstores are filled with guides to help co-parents help their children survive separation and divorce. Nevertheless, personal observation teaches us that there are some very special issues which confront our families.

Before divorce, many families freely switch languages. After a divorce, these homes may split into two separate

possibly be a foreigner in your own country, as the author seems to imply. Finally, as reflected in the Spanish Constitution, both Catalan and Spanish are co-official in Catalonia. It is not true that "Spanish... [is] not official in Catalonia at the same level as Catalan is."

I would like to applaud the efforts of the editors of the Bilingual Family Newsletter to address individual questions raised by its readers. However, I would humbly recommend that they only publish those sections in readers' queries that have to do with the issues at stake. This would help prevent cases like the one I mention here, where what seemed to be innocuous questions about bilingualism are impregnated with personal political statements describing a reality that, so far, does not exist.

**Francisco Ramos, Ph.D.**

## Letters



### Response to "Bilingualism and Catalan"

I would like to make a few comments regarding Toni Fernandez' query "Trilingualism and Catalan" (BFN 21:3), since it contains a number of statements that I found both misleading for readers who may not be aware of the political situation in Catalonia as well as insulting for Spanish nationals like me.

First, to date, Catalonia is an autonomous community in Spain. Therefore, the author cannot possibly be a "Catalan national". He can feel as such, but he really is a Spanish national born in Catalonia. Second, again, since Catalonia is part of Spain there are no "massive amounts of Spanish immigrants" in Catalonia. There are Spanish nationals residing in Catalonia (I was one of them for a while). You can't

monolingual households, each with their separate agendas. When this happens, children may begin to feel (or be made to feel) that speaking the language of one of their parents will automatically be perceived as disloyalty to their other parent. It is important to note that children are incredibly sensitive to their surroundings. Accordingly, co-parents who are facing such a crisis are encouraged to go deep within themselves. Those who do may find that their children are picking up on unconscious, unresolved hurts or resentments of the parents which are unwittingly being translated into an aversion towards the language of the “ex”.

In her newly published book, *Bilingual Couples Talk*, Dr. Ingrid Piller discusses how ‘marital conflict may also be expressed through language choice’ (2002: 160). In the following citation, an English-speaking woman describes how her husband Hans-Peter coded his estrangement in monolingualism: ‘From time to time, Hans-Peter would phone to talk to the boys. He always addressed me in German. This had been a new development; it began about a year before, when Hans-Peter started to speak to me systematically in German and demanded that I answer in it.[...]. [It was] as if he had put a barrier between us.’ (Meyer 1999:87 qtd. in Piller, 2002: 160). Although the focus of Piller’s study are adult bilingual couples, it is easy to imagine what the effects of such strife would be on the children.

Equally obvious is the necessity of open communication to minimize such damage. Just as it was important to negotiate family language policy at the start of the relationship, often before the children were born, it is equally important to renegotiate new terms of communication once the children have arrived and the constellation of the co-parents’ relationship changes. If, however, the channels of communication are blocked, parents are strongly encouraged to consult a therapist well-trained in the special needs of the bilingual/bicultural family.

Communication is not only useful for families facing divorce. It can also be helpful to for intact bicultural/bilingual families where the parents’ cross-cultural union was not welcomed by the extended family. Under such circumstances, it is not unusual to find that relatives or even friends may be the ones who are communicating the hurtful message that monolingualism is a condition of affection. As one 30-year-old bilingual living in Great Britain confided, the worst discrimination she ever faced came from her family, both sides.

*Continued on page 4*

## Notes From the OPOL Family



### First Words

***This is the first of a new regular column from Suzanne Barron-Hauwert, relating the anecdotes, stories and experiences that come about in the day-to-day living of her intercultural family life. In this issue’s installment she shares the ‘joy’ of hearing her baby’s first words learnt, with some encouragement from his siblings...***

The baby is learning to talk and he has lots of help – big brother Marc and big sister, Nina. They both relish the idea of helping him along in the communication side which makes me rather suspicious. Do they want to convert his wailing screams to verbal demands or would they really like to talk to him properly? No, they’ve cooked up a plan to teach him to swear... This is how it goes:

“Mummy, how do babies learn to talk?” asks Marc sweetly.

“Well, they hear the word several times and make the connection and then they try to use the word.” I say.

“How many times?”

“Three or four times should get him going” I calculate.

The next day we are in the car, driving back from the school run and I hear Marc saying ‘*kaka, kaka, kaka, kaka*’. This drives me mad, it’s one of their favourite swearwords. It’s a French playground swearword, the equivalent of ‘poo-poo’ in English. It’s often used as a prime example of inter-sibling bilingual mixed language misuse such as ‘You are a *kaka*!’ I don’t even bother to stop them saying it anymore.

Back at the house Marc cosies up to Gabriel *kaka, kaka, kaka, kaka* he chants. Gabriel, delighted as ever that they are out of school and at his feet playing with him happily repeats ‘*kaka, kaka*’. They take

him for a little walk and show him the toilet and he makes the link. I get a surprise when I hear the baby saying *kaka, kaka* behind me.

“Who taught him this?” I shout

“We did!!!” Marc and Nina shout, smiling like two cats that got the cream.

“Hmm...”

So there it is: Gabriel has a word, and he knows what it is. He joyfully says it over and over again enjoying the sound and the effect.

The funny thing is that in Bahasa Malay, the local language of Malaysia, *kaka* means ‘elder sister’ and is often used to refer to the maid. So when our maid hears the children teaching Gabriel she is amused and tells them what it means. They laugh even more. “So” says Marc, bright as a button “If I talk to Nina in Malay I can say *kaka* and its OK?” “Yes” agrees Emi, unwittingly realises the tool she has given them.

Next school run I hear “*Kaka* Nina, *kaka* Nina’ in the back.

I ask them to stop swearing and Marc replies calmly:

“I am just talking Malay to Nina.”

“What is Malay about *kaka*?” I ask.

“It means Sister!” says Marc triumphantly, knowing more Malay than I do anyway. “Hmm...”

Gabriel understands that one word can mean many things; within a week he’s understood that *kaka* means: (1) something in his nappy that smells bad, (2) a naughty word that drives Mummy mad (especially when she’s driving the car) and (3) the word we use when we see the local Malaysian maids around our condo looking after children. Now he just has to learn the English equivalents. I leave that part of his language acquisition up to the kids....

**Suzanne and Jacques are an English/French couple with three more-or-less bilingual children (Marc, 7, Nina, 5 and Gabriel, 18 months). They have lived as a family in Budapest, Cairo, Zurich, France and England and now live in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Marc and Nina attend the Lycee Francais there. They try to stick to the OPOL approach.**

**Suzanne is the author of *Language Strategies for Bilingual Families: The One-Parent-One-Language Approach*, available from Multilingual Matters.**

**Pbk ISBN 1853597147  
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## Language of the Enemy

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When asked what her reaction was, she answered ‘great disappointment’. She finally learned to ignore their negativity and added that ‘families living with a bicultural union need to be [even] more open. I wish for my son that he will never go through what I have been through.’

The point of this article is not to depress but to motivate BFN readers. As we celebrate the rewards that come from multilingualism and multiculturalism, we must not neglect to speak openly about the special challenges that come with defying the artificial boundaries which divide people into “us” and “them”. After all, the ability to use more than one language can only overcome conflict if it is accompanied with a real desire to speak openly, listen attentively, and act responsibly.

### Suggested Reading:

Ashimori, S. Bilingualism and School Bullying in *Bullying in Japanese School: International Perspectives* 7 (1999): 22-25.

Alibhai-Brown, Y., *Mixed Feelings: The Complex Lives of Mixed-Race Britons*. London: The Women’s Press Ltd., 2001.

Meyer, C. *They are My Children, Too: A Mother’s Struggle for her Sons*. New York: Public Affairs, 1999.

Piller, I. *Bilingual Couples Talk: The Discursive Construction of Hybridity*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2002.

Seelye, H. N. and Wasilewski, J.H. *Between Cultures: Developing Self-Identity in a World of Diversity*. Lincolnwood, Illinois: NTC Publishing Group, 1996.



## Four-way Language Muddle

I am Spanish, married to a Cypriot Greek (Andreas). We live in the USA and we have twins, a boy and a girl, almost 7 months old. The common language between me and my husband is only English. My mother-tongue is Catalan. Andreas’ mother-tongue is Greek, since he is Cypriot. The nanny that takes care of our babies is from Mexico, so she only speaks Spanish.

I am worried about my babies’ languages learning: I talk to them in Catalan, Andreas talks to them in Greek, the nanny talks to them in Spanish. We live in Alabama so the language here is English (which is what I speak with Andreas). My twins are exposed to 4 languages simultaneously. How should we approach this language mix?

**Elisabet Seuba de Anayiotos,**  
Birmingham, USA

A multilingual household that consists of two or three home languages that are different from the community environment can be a challenge to manage, but not impossible. There are countless documented studies of trilingual language environments (see Barron-Hauwaert, 2003; Byram and Leman, 1990; Hammarberg, 2001 and Klein, 1995), and well-known cases of individuals brought up with four or even five languages as well (a la Berlitz). In the case above, given the Greek, Catalan, Spanish parent/nanny input and the English environment, several strategies can be used to achieve proficiency in the four languages.

However, before one strategy or another can be chosen, the family should think seriously about their *Family Language Goals*, as the different options emphasize different languages. The four main elements to bear in mind are *Person, Place and Time* as well as *quality language input* (who speaks what, when, and where). There is a direct correlation between proficiency in a language and the time spent in the language. The dominant language of a trilingual child, for example, may be the school language until he/she goes for a summer stay in his/her father’s home language country, at which time his relative level of proficiency shifts drastically.

In the case above, if the family adopts a one-person, one-language strategy this means that the mother speaks Catalan, the father speaks Greek, and the nanny speaks Spanish, leaving the English to the environment. Depending on the amount of time each of these people spend with the child, and to which social groups the child belongs (play groups, library story time groups, etc.), different languages will

benefit. One possible scenario is that the nanny spends more time with the child than anyone else and speaks exclusively in Spanish, without any chance for social interaction in English. In this case, Spanish will probably dominate (as the nanny is with the child even more hours than the mother), followed by Catalan (presuming the mother spends the second greatest amount of time with the child), Greek (presuming the father spends more time with the child than the child spends in the community) and English (community). However, this changes drastically if the child has many chances for social interactions in English, and could very well push English to the top of the pack if the child receives a great deal of age-appropriate language stimulation.

Finally, the quality as well as quantity of language input needs to be carefully monitored. Depending on how rich the vocabulary is and how crafted the age-appropriate exchanges are, a child can benefit enormously from even short periods of time in a target language.

### Tracey Tokuhama-Espinoso

Tracey is professor of Education at the Universidad San Francisco de Quito in Ecuador. Tracey is the author of *Raising Multilingual Children: Foreign Language Acquisition and Children* (Bergin & Garvey 2001), and *The Multilingual Mind: Issues discussed by, for and about people living with many languages* (Praeger 2003).

Tracey gives interactive workshops on foreign language development and learning potential to international school organizations, teachers, parents and multinational companies. She can be

Contact details removed

## HELP NEEDED

The UK Economic and Social Research Council has awarded the University of Manchester (Dr Ludovica Serratrice) and the University of Edinburgh (Prof. Antonella Sorace) funding for a two-year project investigating language acquisition in bilingual English-Italian and Spanish-Italian children. We are looking for 7-8-year-olds with the above language combinations to take part in the study. If you live in or near Edinburgh, Manchester, Milan or Turin, and are interested in knowing more, please contact:

Contact details removed

# BILINGUALISM, LANGUAGES AND IDENTITY: A Historical Perspective

Ray Smith

*Sarah-Jane is a French teenager, born in the town of Mulhouse, in Alsace. Her father, Ray, comes from Northern Ireland and settled in Alsace after marrying her mother, Christiane, who was also born in Mulhouse. Her mother's family has a strong regional identity and can trace their family tree in Alsace back to 1730. Her father wrote this article based on research undertaken by Sarah-Jane for a school project.*

Bilingualism came to Sarah-Jane at an early age: with a British father and a French mother she has been used to switching languages for as long as she can remember. As an infant she was often left in the care of her Alsatian grandparents who conversed together, and sometimes with her, in the local dialect and so she picked up some of their words and expressions too. Later, in high school, her teacher asked for volunteers to carry out a project on patriotism and identity, Sarah-Jane immediately raised her hand.

*...patriotism today is no longer relevant. Not only for me personally, but for some of my friends too, who feel more "European" than French.*

The young student saw this as an opportunity to find out more about the history of her family. She had often heard her grandfather talk about her great-great grandfather who had been forced to change his nationality five times during his lifetime; she had seen photographs handed around in the family of ancestors in uniform, both German and French; she had wondered how they had lived during these troubled times and for which country they had fought and died for; above all, she asked herself: what did they really consider themselves to be – French, German or Alsatian? Could they really feel French when most of them could not speak a word of the language?

She hoped that the research she would undertake for this project would help her find the answers to such questions and help her to better understand her own identity too.

After a four month effort, involving a close collaboration with her grandfather who had built up an impressive collection of family photographs, documents and anecdotes,

Sarah-Jane finally completed her project. The result is a well-documented account of an Alsatian family covering six generations, a family who like so many others paid a heavy price to both France and Germany as the region changed hands 4 times during 3 wars (1870-1871, 1914-1918 and 1939-1945), as sons left to do their patriotic duty and did not return. We first asked Sarah-Jane if her attitude to patriotism had changed as a result of completing this research:

SJ: No, I think it just confirmed to me that the notion of patriotism today is no longer relevant. Not only for me personally, since my parents have different nationalities anyway, but for some of my friends too, who feel more "European" than French.

*Q: And where does Alsace and bilingualism fit into this new European scheme of things?*

SJ: Alsace is important to me: even though my mother did not teach me the dialect, I still understand a lot, especially as I also speak German. Even if I do not speak the dialect well, I still identify with the Alsatian culture, the local traditions and values. The smells from my grandmother's kitchen, her colourful expressions and soft lullabies. You don't need to understand the words, it's how they are said and what they convey which count. This is all part of my childhood and I shall never forget it. However, I think that living and working in the Europe of the future will mean that we shall have to learn and speak more foreign languages than before and I fear that this may well be to the detriment of regional languages and dialects.

*Q: Why did your mother not speak in the Alsatian dialect with you as a child?*

SJ: My mother learnt French at primary school. It was forbidden to speak the dialect within the school and anyone caught doing so was sent to the corner of the classroom to stand in shame. I think she grew up feeling a little ashamed of speaking Alsatian except with her family. She feels French in the sense that she was given a French education but she regrets that it did not take account of the Alsatian identity, culture and history. So I guess that she did not transmit the dialect to me to save me from going through the same experience. Unfortunately in doing so she has also contributed to the decline of the dialect. Perhaps she also felt that I was already bilingual as we have always spoken French and English at home.

*Continued on page 6*

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## Bilingualism and Identity

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Q: *Does she still speak the dialect?*

SJ: She does, more so than in the past. That means not only with her father, uncles, aunts, etc., but also in our local village, at the market or small supermarket, especially with elderly people. They are pleasantly surprised when a “younger” person speaks the dialect with them. It creates an instant bond and also makes sure she gets the best cuts of meat from the butcher! She is no longer hiding her identity in this sense.

Q: *What are her views on the notion of her fatherland?*

SJ: She remembers copying in her book a sentence which began with “Our ancestors, the Gauls...” She learnt about French history but nothing about the history of Alsace. She also recollected having a terrible row with a priest who was saying what a noble sacrifice it was to die for your country. She replied that this was ridiculous as her ancestors did not choose what country they died for, it was just a coincidence whether they happened to be French or German at that time.

Q: *Does she feel more comfortable with her identity today?*

SJ: Yes, she feels above all that she is Alsatian, but open to both French and German cultures, and by extension, to all European cultures.

Q: *Your grandfather played a key role in your project. What are his feelings towards his country and his identity?*

SJ: He has always felt French. His grandfather, my great-great-grandfather, was a fervent admirer of Napoleon and his greatest pride was a wonderful book (in German!) with over 200 illustrations of his life and battles which he passed on to his grandson. He was also obliged to speak French within the school gates but reverted to Alsatian or German outside it. It was German on the radio, German at mass, German at the theatre. Which did not prevent him getting his school-leaving

“...her ancestors did not choose what country they died for, it was just a coincidence whether they happened to be French or German at that time.”

certificate in French at the age of 13, just before the start of the 2nd World War.

Q: *Did his attitude to France change during the occupation by the Nazi's?*

SJ: No, he told me that he always knew that the French would return. But like so many others, he had to hide his pro-French feelings. The Nazis changed everyone's name, and even the street names, into German and it was forbidden to speak French! He considers himself one of the lucky ones because he escaped being drafted into the German army due to a

medical disorder. Many of his friends were not so fortunate. Few returned.

Q: *Didn't his grandfather live through the same situation after Germany annexed Alsace-Lorraine in 1870?*

SJ He did and, according to my grandfather, he had mixed feelings on the subject, like many of his compatriots. There were certain German qualities that they appreciated and they benefited from the many social advances of the time. However, they missed no longer being part of the grandeur of France. In fact they wanted the best of both worlds. A little like the famous Alsatian song about Hans who is never satisfied because he doesn't want what he has and wants what he doesn't have.

Q: *And how does your father feel about all this, as an “outsider”?*

SJ: He understands the Alsatians well, being born in Northern Ireland. He sometimes feels more Irish than British and sometimes it's vice-versa, a little like the Alsatians with French and German. In his view, the Northern Irish have developed their own identity, which should not stop them from taking the best from both the Irish and British cultures.

Q: *Which brings us to our last question. How do you see the future of the Alsatian identity?*

SJ: I believe that Alsace needs to open itself more to Europe, both culturally and linguistically. This will not endanger the Alsatian identity, on the contrary, it can only enrich it. I sincerely hope that in the Europe of the future, regional identities and cultures will take their rightful place.

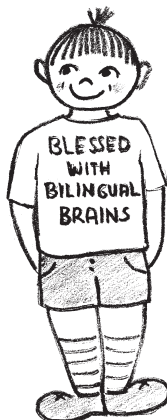
## BILINGUALISM IN THE NEWS – Bilingualism and the Brain

The benefits of bilingualism for the brain have been making headlines recently. In two separate reports featured on the BBC over the last few months, attention was drawn to new research on bilingualism's effects, not only brain function, but also, more unusually, on brain structure.

The first report, published in June, summarised research appearing in the *Journal of Psychology and Ageing*, which suggests that fluency in two languages may help to keep the brain sharper for longer. Researchers from York University, Canada, led by Dr Ellen Bialystok, carried out tests on 104 people between the ages of 30 and 88, assessing their cognitive skills. Vocabulary skills, non-verbal reasoning and reaction times were all tested to assess the effectiveness of volunteers' thinking skills. The results indicated that those who were fluent in two languages were less likely to suffer from the decline in cognitive abilities that comes with old age.

These results would appear to support other research that shows that keeping the

brain active can help to ward off dementia. However, the results should be treated with caution, as the volunteers had been through different education systems. The bilingual group of volunteers all came from India, fluent in Tamil and English, and the monolingual group was made up of English-speaking Canadians.



This report was followed by another report in October exploring new research, published in *Nature*, that apparently shows that a knowledge of two languages not only effects brain function, but also structure. A group of researchers led by Dr Andrea Mechelli have discovered that bilinguals have an increased density of grey matter in areas of the brain associated with language acquisition. Furthermore, the research showed that the difference was more pronounced in those with a higher level of proficiency, and in ‘early’ bilinguals i.e. those who learned a second language before the age of five. Whilst these differences could theoretically result from a genetic predisposition to increased density, their cause is more likely to be to be experiential than genetic as bilinguals probably gain their language skills as a result of their life experiences, rather than any genetic advantage.

Relevant websites:  
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# FAMILY LANGUAGE STRATEGIES ON THE MOVE: A Balancing Act

Meg Valenzuela

Before our children were born, my husband and I knew that we wanted to raise them trilingually. We discovered, however, that establishing a language strategy was only the beginning of our journey. As we have moved between countries, we have had to be creative as we adapted our language strategy to best fit our surroundings.

I am a native speaker of US English, and my husband was born in Argentina, but grew up in Germany, speaking both Spanish and German. When our first son, Lucas, was born in 1997 in Germany, we decided to raise him using the one-person-one-language (OPOL) strategy: I spoke only English with him, my husband only Spanish, and he learned German through friends. This created a good language balance and he initially felt comfortable with all three languages.

Shortly before Lucas' 3rd birthday, we made a move within Germany. We were surprised when Lucas suddenly took on a negative attitude towards the German language. He seemed to notice that everyone new in his life spoke German, and he would generally only speak German when we were with old friends.

Soon after this move, my husband took a job in Italy. We became concerned about how we would maintain Lucas' German. Although we hoped to meet German speakers in Italy, we knew that we had no chance of keeping up his trilingualism without a change in strategy.

We began slowly. My husband chose a few puppets that had been gifts from German friends and "defined" them to be German speakers. We did the same with games that we had bought in Germany, explaining that they could only be played in German. Lucas accepted these changes. In Italy we had satellite television, so Lucas watched primarily German programs. Gradually, his attitude towards German became positive again. After a few months, we took another step: "Saturday is German Day". With Lucas' agreement, we both spoke German with Lucas on Saturdays. Before long, Lucas proposed that Sunday should be a German Day too! We did, as we had hoped, find German friends in the area, so there was also external motivation to speak the language.

Meanwhile, the other two languages were kept up well too. We saw Spanish-speaking family regularly, Lucas attended an English-language pre-school, and we had a number of English-speaking friends as well. Lucas picked up some Italian

from Italian-speaking children at the pre-school, but our primary focus was on our first three languages.

In the summer of 2003, before Lucas started in the first grade at school, we moved back to Germany. Lucas had no trouble settling in and feeling a part of his class in the local school. What a wonderful feeling that was for us as we thought back to the concerns we had had previously. Our rules have changed again, of course, though they are not as strict as they were. We now limit speaking German to him only in certain situations, such as when non-English-speaking German friends are with us.

*After a few months, we took another step: "Saturday is German Day" [...] Before long, Lucas proposed that Sunday should be a German Day too!*

Being a multilingual family on the move has had its difficulties but it has also had its advantages. Being away from Germany meant that English and Spanish were able to develop without as much competition. Lucas has never objected to my husband or me conversing with him in English or Spanish, even in the presence of German friends. He is proud of his three languages.

With our younger son, Samuel, we have walked a different path. He was born in 2000, shortly before our move to Italy. Because of our good experience with the OPOL strategy, we chose to speak English and Spanish with him as we had with Lucas. We hoped that he would pick up enough German from our conversations with each other and Lucas that we could later change strategies with him. As a result, Samuel returned to Germany with a passive knowledge of German, but few experiences using it actively.

Although his response to our move was not as negative as Lucas' had been, Samuel made it clear that he didn't like it when we tried to speak to him in German. This concerned us as we had begun to consider a possible move to the US. We knew that in the case of such a move, Samuel was unlikely to develop as a German speaker unless we were a part of that development. Although Samuel watched German videos regularly, he was not open to the "tricks" of playing with German-speaking toys.

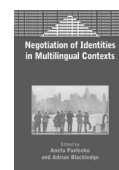
It was again my husband who came up with the "magical" idea. We had recently begun using the local German library, and Samuel was enthused by being able to bring home any books he chose. On our next visit I explained to him that if he wanted to take a book home, I would only read it with him in German. He tried to negotiate but, in the end, he accepted my use of German while looking at the library books with him. It took a few more trips to the library before the objections ceased. But that was clearly a turning point for us: Samuel will now allow me to read even our own German books to him and will sometimes respond in German himself.

If we are still in Germany in September, Samuel will begin Kindergarten, and certainly his development in the German language will accelerate. In the meantime, I can work on helping him to continue feeling more positive about the German language. If we do move away from Germany again, I am also now in a position to be able to be one of his German "teachers".

As a family who is "on the move", we have sometimes felt that keeping our children's three languages in balance is like a tightrope act. However, we have been rewarded in seeing our children take pleasure in the languages that are important to our identity as a family.

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Pbk ISBN 1-85359-646-9  
**£27.95/ US\$44.95/ CAN\$64.95**

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Vol.21, No.4, 2004

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**GLOSSARY**

**Indigenous Language:** A language relatively native to an area, contrasted with an in-migrant language.

**Individualised Instruction:** A curriculum which is carefully structured to allow for the different needs and pace of learning of different students, Individualized instruction tries to give learners more control over what is learned, the style of learning and the rate of progress.

**In-Migrants:** Encompasses immigrants, migrants, guest workers and refugees. The term is often used to avoid the negative connotations of the word ‘immigrant’ and to avoid the imprecis and loaded distinctions between migrant workers, guest workers, short stay, long stay and relatively permanent in-migrants,

**Input:** A distinction is often made in second language learning between input and intake. Input is what the learner hears, but which may not always be understood. In contrast, intake is that which is assimilated by the learner.

**Input Hypothesis:** Language in the second language classroom should contain elements that are slightly beyond the learner’s present level of understanding. Using contextual clues to understand, the learner will gradually increase in language competence.

