

Myths about bilingualism

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A number of myths about bilingualism are discussed in François Grosjean's new book, *Bilingual: Life and Reality* (Harvard University Press, 2010). They are summarized here.

Bilingualism is a rare phenomenon. WRONG. It has been estimated that more than half the world's population is bilingual, that is lives with two or more languages. Bilingualism is found in all parts of the world, at all levels of society, in all age groups. Even in countries with many monolinguals, the percentage of bilinguals is high. For example, one can estimate that there are as many as 50 million bilinguals in the United States today.

Bilinguals acquire their two or more languages in childhood. WRONG. One can become bilingual in childhood, but also in adolescence and in adulthood. In fact, many adults become bilingual because they move from one country (or region) to another and have to acquire a second language. With time, they can become just as bilingual as children who acquire their languages in their early years (minus the native speaker accent). In general, people become bilingual because life requires the use of two or more languages. This can be due to immigration, education, intermarriage, contact with other linguistic groups within a country, and so on.

Bilinguals have equal and perfect knowledge of their languages. WRONG. This is a myth that has had a long life! In fact, bilinguals know their languages to the level that they need them. Some bilinguals are dominant in one language, others do not know how to read and write one of their languages, others have only passive knowledge of a language and, finally, a very small minority, have equal and perfect fluency in their languages. What is important to keep in mind is that bilinguals are very diverse, as are monolinguals.

Real bilinguals have no accent in their different languages. WRONG. Having an accent or not in a language does not make you more or less bilingual. It depends on when you acquired your languages. In fact, some extremely fluent and balanced bilinguals have an accent in the one, or the other, language; other, less fluent, bilinguals may have no accent at all.

Bilinguals are born translators. WRONG. Even though bilinguals can translate simple things from one language to another, they often have difficulties with more specialized domains. The reaction people have is almost always, "But I thought you were bilingual!". In fact, bilinguals use their languages in different situations, with different people, in different domains of life (this is called the complementarity principle). Unless they learned their languages formally (in school, for example), or have trained to be translators, they often do not have translations equivalents in the other language.

Mixing languages is a sign of laziness in bilinguals. WRONG. Mixing languages such as code-switching and borrowing is a very common behavior in bilinguals speaking to other bilinguals. It is a bit like having coffee with milk instead of just straight black. The two language repertoires are available in bilingual situations and can be used at will. Many expressions and words are better said in the one or the other language; mixing permits to use the right one without having recourse to translation which simply may not do justice to what one wants to express. This said, in other situations, bilinguals know that they cannot mix their languages (e.g. when speaking to monolinguals) and they then stick to just one language.

Bilinguals are also bicultural. WRONG. Even though many bilinguals are also bicultural (they interact with two cultures and they combine aspects of each), many others are monocultural (e.g. the inhabitants in the German speaking part of Switzerland who often acquire three or four languages during their youth). Thus one can be bilingual without being bicultural just as one can be monolingual and bicultural (e.g. the British who live in the USA).

Bilinguals have double or split personalities. WRONG. Bilinguals, like monolinguals, adapt their behavior to different situations and people. This often leads to a change of language in bilinguals (e.g. a Japanese-English bilingual speaking Japanese to her grandmother and English to her sister). This change of language has led to the idea that bilinguals are "different" when speaking the one, or the other, language. But like monolinguals, it is the situation or the person one is speaking to which induces slight changes in behavior, opinions, feelings, etc., not the fact that one is bilingual.

Bilinguals express their emotions in their first language. WRONG. Some bilinguals have grown up learning two languages simultaneously and hence have two first languages with which they will express their emotions. And for the majority of bilinguals who have acquired their languages successively—first one language and then, some years later, another—the pattern is not clear. Emotions and bilingualism produce a very complicated but also very personal reality that has no set rules. Some bilinguals prefer to use one language, some the other, and some use both of them to express their feelings and emotions.

Children

Bilingualism will delay language acquisition in children. WRONG. This is a myth that was popular back in the middle of the 20th Century. Since then much research has shown that bilingual children are not delayed in their language acquisition. This said, one should keep in mind that bilingual children, because they have to deal with two or more languages, are different in some ways from monolingual children, but definitely not on rate of language acquisition. As for bilingual children with language challenges (e.g. dyslexia), they are not proportionally more numerous than monolingual children with the same challenges.

The language spoken in the home will have a negative effect on the acquisition of the school language, when the latter is different. WRONG. In fact,

the home language can be used as a linguistic base for acquiring aspects of the other language. It also gives children a known language to communicate in (with parents, caretakers, and, perhaps, teachers) while acquiring the other.

If parents want their children to grow up bilingual, they should use the one person - one language approach. WRONG. There are many ways of making sure a child grows up bilingual: caretaker 1 speaks one language and caretaker 2 speaks the other; one language is used in the home and the other outside the home; the child acquires his/her second language at school, etc. The critical factor is NEED. The child must come to realize, most of the time unconsciously, that he/she needs two or more languages in everyday life. This is where the one person - one language approach often breaks down as the bilingual child quickly realizes that the weaker (often minority) language is not really needed (the caretakers or other family members often speak the other, stronger language, to one another, so why keep up the weaker language?). A better approach is that all family members use the weaker language at home, if at all possible, so as to increase the child's exposure to it and mark the language's "main" territory.

Children raised bilingual will always mix their languages. WRONG. If bilingual children interact in both bilingual and monolingual situations, then they learn to mix languages at certain times only. When they are with monolinguals (e.g. Grandma who doesn't speak any English), they quickly learn to speak just the one language (communication breaks down otherwise). It is important though that the situation be truly monolingual (and not a "pretend situation" in which a bilingual parent pretends not to know the other language); children will make an effort to speak only one language if they feel it is vital for communication. Thus, caretakers will want to create natural monolingual environments where children will need, and hence use, just one language.

For further reading:

1. François Grosjean's new book *Bilingual: Life and Reality* (Harvard University Press, 2010): <http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog/GROBIL.html?show=catalogcopy>
2. A short text, "What parents want to know about bilingualism", by François Grosjean: http://www.francoisgrosjean.ch/for_parents_en.html
3. An interview of François Grosjean on bilingualism: http://www.francoisgrosjean.ch/interview_en.html