

the bilingual family newsletter

MULTILINGUAL
MATTERS

news and views for intercultural people

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editorial

Being Different is Normal

Ever since we announced that the *BFN* would cease publication at the end of the year, we have had an influx of fantastic articles, letters and anecdotes about what bi- and multilingual living is all about, and how the *BFN* has contributed to our collective understanding of this strange condition we call 'multilingualism'.

Perhaps one of the most striking reflections to come out of all of this, is just how odd it is that multilingualism was ever considered odd. The world is, after all, a plurilingual place, and speakers of multiple languages far outnumber those with only one.

Nevertheless, misconceptions, prejudice and even hostility have not disappeared entirely. In fact, it's interesting to read Madalena Cruz-Ferreira's take on how we multilinguals ourselves contribute to a paradigm that considers us somehow different from the norm.

Meanwhile François Grosjean busts a few myths about multilingualism of his own, Suzanne Barron-Hauwert dives into the multicultural kitchen, and Iman Laversuch explores an often over-looked, yet extremely significant factor of multilingual family life - what do we call our kids?

Once again, it's the diversity of perspectives and interests represented in the submissions we receive that makes the *BFN* what it is. We bilinguals may, or may not, be 'normal'. But we sure have something to say.

Sami Grover

Maria, Rahel, Ivan, Bjorn: The Naming of Children in Bilingual and Bicultural Families

An Article in Honour of the Smallest Members of Our BFN Family

By Dr. I. M. Laversuch

Photographs by G.Nick

Over the millennia of human civilization, we have managed to come up with a name for just about everything and anything around us. The second we recognize something (or someone) as being important, we seem to have a primal drive to name it. (1)



For a social scientist, it is the seeming irresistibility of this drive which can provide important clues for tracking the changing interests of our society. Simply by monitoring the growth or decline of names, we can find indirect yet powerful evidence for the changing social significance of particular entities, concepts, and/or areas in our daily lives. Take for example, the world of computer technology and the internet. Just over the past few decades, the world has seen a dramatic rise in the number of names developed to label

our thriving virtual reality. At the same time, we have also been sad witness to the startlingly rapid demise in the number and variety of names we use (or even recognize) for our ailing natural environment. Fifty years ago, the name APPLE conjured up completely different images than it does today.

Be that as it may, it is a comfort to know that there are still some sacred spaces of nature which we continue to mark, generation after generation after generation. Chief among them is the birth of our children.

The names we give our children are of incredible social and historical importance. They not only constitute one of the first, primal linguistic rites of passage from simple adulthood to parenthood. They also announce our children's formal entrance as individual and significant members of the larger family, community, and society into which they were born. (2)

This is where it all gets fascinating to me as a social scientist interested in bicultural bilingual families. How have *BFN* families gone about the business of naming their children? What is some of the advice they can offer others facing this exciting yet oft daunting first task of parenthood.

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Speaking of Multilinguals...

Madalena Cruz-Ferreira



Multilinguals (or those of us who use more than one language in our everyday lives) appear to be very odd individuals. Judging, that is, by the way people keep talking about us, multilinguals ourselves included.

The purpose of this article is to present discussion of this issue in my latest book on multilingualism. The book draws on solid academic research on this topic, but is intended for a general public: anyone, families, educators, clinicians, monolingual as well as multilingual, who ever wondered about multilingualism and multilinguals. The book is titled *Multilinguals are...?* and was published by Battlebridge Publications (www.battlebridge.com/) in January 2010.

Let's review a sample of reasons why multilinguals have come to be treated as unusual people. To start off with, multilinguals have studies, research teams, networks, blogs, journals and books dedicated to them. This must mean that they are somehow worthy of special attention, because monolinguals, people who use a single language throughout life, do not. This state of affairs reflects the common perception that monolingualism is the normal condition of humankind, which in turn means that multilingualism is somehow not normal. Treating multilingualism as a kind of deviation from (monolingual) normality has in fact become standard practice among specialists and laymen alike. Researchers compare language data from multilinguals to language data from monolinguals, whose benchmark status is indisputably taken for granted, never the other way around; educators and clinicians worry about the effects of multilingualism, but never of monolingualism, on child

development, whether linguistic, cognitive, emotional or social; caregivers, even when multilingual, fret over whether the use of several languages in the home will impair, instead of foster, the multilingual competence that they wish their children to attain. Everyone assumes monolingualism to be the hallmark of linguistic excellence.

The fact is that much of what has been discussed, and goes on being discussed about multilingualism stems from traditions of thought which are monolingual. The consequences are that labels, even technical labels, which apply to monolingualism because they were devised to account for monolingual uses of language, are freely borrowed to talk about multilingualism too. Yet we all know that dealing with one issue through the use of instruments attuned to another can only yield strange results. We shouldn't therefore be surprised that the outcome of monolingual thinking about multilingual

Multilingualism is not about what several languages can do to people, it is about what people can do with several languages.

behaviour is multilingual oddness. The fact is also that multilinguals are not, cannot be, and cannot be made to be, monolinguals: multilinguals are found odd, not because they are indeed odd, but because odd claims keep being made about them. It is therefore no wonder either that multilingual behaviour finds itself described, prescribed, praised and berated in ways that are in fact paradoxical.

Multilinguals are, for example, required to show balanced command over their languages, where balanced is to be understood as synonymous with 'perfect', or else jeopardise their entitlement to the label multilingual itself. That is, they must behave like the sum of several monolinguals, whose behaviour is, as said, the model of linguistic competence. But multilinguals must also be dominant in one language, or else jeopardise their entitlement to linguistic wholeness. They

must both have full (or 'perfect') command over a single main language, the one said to enable them to engage in higher thought, and possess a single mother tongue, since speaking of mother tongues, in the plural, is virtually unheard of. That is, multilinguals must in fact be like monolinguals, who indeed have one all-purpose language, the mother tongue in which they think higher and other thoughts.

Nevertheless, multilinguals are not native speakers of any language. If they were, nobody would compare them to native speakers of each of their languages, which is a widespread way of assessing multilingual abilities, because comparing things to themselves does not make sense. But multilinguals are not non-native users of their languages either, because comparing them to non-native speakers is everyday practice too, which may well make us wonder what labels like 'native' and 'non-native' can possibly mean, when they are used in this way with the avowed purpose of shedding light on multilingualism.

Perhaps, we may then assume, this indeterminable nativeness of multilinguals is what explains the alleged ease with which they acquire new languages, since it is well known that the one native language of native speakers, and so their single mother tongue, is what prevents 'perfect' acquisition of one or more new languages. However, we would be wrong in this assumption, because ease in language acquisition turns out to be something that is claimed of young children only. The usual way out of this acquisitional conundrum is to posit that multilinguals of any age who acquire languages easily must belong to yet another special category: they are gifted. Much has been said about multilingual brilliance, sometimes in nearly mystical terms, although, strangely enough, much has also been said about multilingual foibles, sometimes in nearly ominous terms. Multilingualism thus appears to correlate with both over-ability and disability, as far as linguistic, cognitive and social skills are concerned. Given that, as we also know, taking a correlation for a cause is quite a common leap of logic, multilingualism has therefore been found to be the cause of both enhanced and diminished assorted intellectual abilities, for which the acquisition of new languages

and the use of a single language have been emphatically recommended, respectively.

Explaining the roots of these and other oddities in our purported knowledge about multilingualism was one of my purposes in writing this book. The point is that to persist in following traditional thought processes, those underpinning the ways in which multilinguals continue to be talked about, can only lead to paradoxical findings. My second purpose was to argue that multilinguals are about as odd as monolinguals, for the simple reason that we all use exactly as many languages as our everyday needs require us to. If multilinguals were indeed special in some way, then the majority of the world's population would be special, because the majority of the world's population is multilingual. This would then mean that being special is in fact the norm, a conclusion which again, to say the least, is rather strange. My third purpose was to alert readers to the role that paradoxes such as the ones briefly touched upon in this article can play to (mis)guide decisions about language uses in the home, educational policies, assessment practices and remedial therapy.

We still don't know what multilinguals are, as the question mark in the title of the book makes clear. If we want to find answers to this question, we need to shed the monolingual bias that has so far shaped our quest for knowledge about multilingualism and start looking at what multilinguals actually do. Multilingualism is not about what several languages can do to people, it is about what people can do with several languages. This means that only multilinguals can tell us what multilingualism is all about.

In The News

The Importance of Foreign Language Teaching and Learning

Learning a foreign language in school is compulsory in England only up to 14 years of age. After that students can drop language learning and concentrate on other subjects. Also many universities have closed down modern language departments so the downward spiral is born. There are fewer and fewer inspiring language teachers to encourage future students to learn languages and therefore more and more will drop language learning at the first possible opportunity.

Michael Hoffman, a leading translator and a poet, wrote an interesting article *"Our failure to speak foreign languages should shame us. It's not civilised"* published in The Observer on 15.08.2010:

"On the individual level, think of the loss of possibility, the preordained narrowness of a life encased in one language, as if you were only ever allowed one, as if it were your skin in which you were born. Or your cage. That's your lot. When the great Australian poet Les Murray said: "We are a language species", he did not mean English. We think and are and have our being in, and in and out of languages – and where's the joy and the richness, if you don't even have two to rub together? If you don't have another language, you are condemned to occupy the same positions, the same phrases, all your life. It is harder to outwit yourself, harder to doubt yourself, in just one language. It is harder to play"

Letters



A Personal Thank You / Merci

I have just heard that *the Bilingual Family Newsletter* is in its final year and I hasten to write to thank very warmly all those involved with BFN's 27 years history.

As one goes through the list of people who have written an article for the newsletter, a real Who's Who of bilingualism emerges. All of these authors, many of whom have pursued distinguished careers in the area of language, have cared about the social, psychological and educational aspects of bilingualism, and have wanted to describe, in accessible language, what they have learned or observed. In addition, many authors were themselves parents of bilingual children who accepted to share their experiences with other parents living with two or more languages in the home.

The BFN has played a pioneering role in getting bilingual family life to be accepted as normal. Today's many books on the subject, as well as numerous websites and blogs, owe a lot to this small publication that showed how normal, but also how precious, having several languages in a family can be.

On a more personal level, our own two boys (now men!) are about the same age as Tommi and Sami, and I enjoyed comparing how the Grover boys blossomed bilingually and biculturally in England while ours were growing up in the United States and then in Switzerland. We've never met the Grovers (we really should one day!) but thanks to what we learned in the BFN, we definitely shared many common experiences.

And so thank you / merci to Marjukka, Sami, Mike, Tommi, and all the others... you have done a superb job that you can certainly be proud of!

François (Grosjean)

Now Available

"This is a breath of fresh air in a field which desperately needs ventilation. It blows away the myths and fantasies about multilingualism, and puts in their place a perspective of sound common sense, grounded in the daily experience of living a life in which several languages form a natural part. For anyone who has ever been uncertain about multilingualism, worried about it, or misrepresented it, this lively and accessible overview is the perfect reality check."

Professor David Crystal

ISBN9781903292204, £9.95.
www.battlebridge.com

