

MADALENA CRUZ-FERREIRA

Multilinguals are ...?

clever ?

semilingual ?

gifted ?

unbalanced ?

odd ?

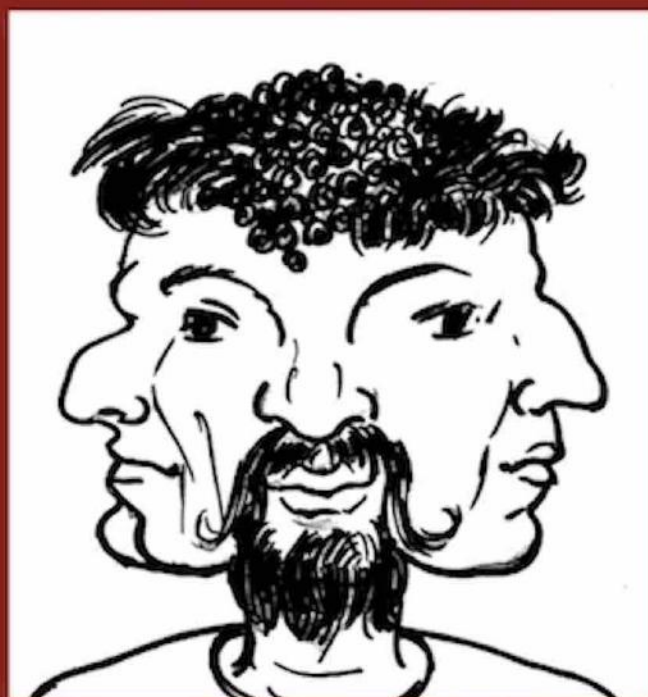
special ?

skilled ?

funny ?

split ?

... ?



MADALENA CRUZ-FERREIRA

Multilinguals are ...?



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*C'est par le malentendu universel
que tout le monde s'accorde.
Car si, par malheur, on se comprenait,
on ne pourrait jamais s'accorder.*¹

Charles Baudelaire
(*Mon Cœur Mis à Nu, Journal Intime*)

Multilinguals are ...?

Multilinguals are... what, indeed? This book is about how you could fill in the blank with almost any label and get away with it. Multilinguals have been called all sorts of names, which have cast more shadows than light on what they are, thereby portraying them as very, very odd creatures.

I am one of those creatures and also a parent of three trilingual children, in a family where the mother uses Portuguese, the father Swedish, and the children English among themselves. Ours is the first multilingual household among monolingual households from both sides of the family. We have lived in Singapore for over 15 years, a country with four official languages and where individual multilingualism is the norm. My everyday observations as a parent, educator and scholar made me realise the amount and scope of confusion that seeps through when people talk about multilingualism, in technical as well as lay settings, in official as well as informal ones, where baffling labels top it all.

Labels should be useful tools. They name things that are relevant to whoever found reason to name them, and so help us organise our thoughts about them. They usually fulfil their job of identifying things with reasonable accuracy: if I say *molecule*, or if I say *unaspirated allophone*, anyone who has used these words before will know what I mean. Everyone will also understand that these two labels, because they are distinct labels, refer to distinct things, both worth naming and both worth talking about. But what if I say *semilingual*, or *balanced bilingual*? Chances are that you won't have a clear idea (or any idea at all) what I'm

¹ 'It is by universal misunderstanding that people reach agreement. For if, by some misfortune, we understood each other, we could never agree.'

talking about. What's more, chances are also that I won't either. My perplexities, together with my refusal to agree that multilinguals are odd at all, are what prompted me to write this book.



Questions about multilinguals start with the word *multilingual* itself, which is about as difficult to define as the word *word*. I can propose one definition: multilinguals are people who use more than one language in their everyday lives. I make no distinction between bilinguals, trilinguals, quadrilinguals, pentalinguals, and so on – and I focus on spoken language, although what I'll have to say of course applies to sign language too. This definition may look like a straightforward enough way to start thinking about multilingualism, but the snag is that there are virtually as many definitions of it as there are people who discuss it, which means that no two people are actually talking about the same

thing when they talk about “multilingualism”. No wonder then that ambiguity and vagueness have become the rule in these discussions, all the more so that generalised interest in matters of multilingualism has boomed in the last few decades.

The book is written in a light-hearted style, guiding you through the keys to the origin and endurance of several of these descriptive oddities, starting with the master-key to them all. Retracing someone’s thought processes and arguments (our own included) is the best way to understand how people think. I draw on solid academic research to make my points, quoting that research in constructions like “It has been argued that...”, or “The findings showed...”, or “They were found to...”. Constructions of this kind are commonly used when you either don’t know or don’t want to say who dunnit, that is, who was it that argued, showed or found. My reason for doing this is neither: I do know who and I would certainly say so if this were a different kind of book. Supporting your claims and arguments with named references is standard etiquette in research pieces (which this book is) targeted at academia (which this book is not). But this doesn’t mean that I am saying whatever I fancy. I will be more than happy to provide sources to anyone who so wishes, and likewise to discuss whatever I say here. My e-mail contact can be found through my academic webpage.²

The purpose of the book is to raise awareness about what multilinguals really are, by helping dispel misconceptions about multilingualism. These often entail sanctioned but damaging advice to individuals and families, as well as to educators and policy-makers. Each chapter deals with paradoxes and/or myths about multilingualism that have been etched into the popular imagination as unquestionable truths. The book shows that paradoxes, myths and oddities arise because of the language that is used to talk about multilinguals, not because of multilingual behaviour itself. Child multilingualism, adult language learning, dominant vs. balanced languages, semilingualism, multilingualism vs. language impairment, gifted language learners, all find their niche and a dedicated discussion. Whether you are monolingual or multilingual (and if you read English), this book is for you.

One final note. My first thought was to call this book *Funny-lingualism*. My reasoning was that the various ways in which multilingualism has been described, prescribed, flattered and lambasted, taken together, have two things in common. They are paradoxical, they apply to fantasies and/or they simply make no sense, on the one hand, and they are all extremely funny, on the other. In the spirit of Occam’s Razor, I thought we might as well use only one label for them all. By these accounts, multilinguals are funny-linguals.

² <http://linguistlist.org/people/personal/get-personal-page2.cfm?PersonID=8708>

The publisher liked the final title of the book better and so do I. I've nevertheless kept the word *funny* in many places around the text. Partly as a sort of deference towards the runner-up title, but mostly because I couldn't honestly find another word which describes so well the ha-ha and peculiar nature of what I go on reading and hearing about multilingualism and multilinguals. The focus of the book is still the same, but I'd rather leave to readers the choice of alternative labels to the kinds of "multilingualism" discussed in it. By any other name, they will sound as funny.

Madalena Cruz-Ferreira
Singapore, October 2009

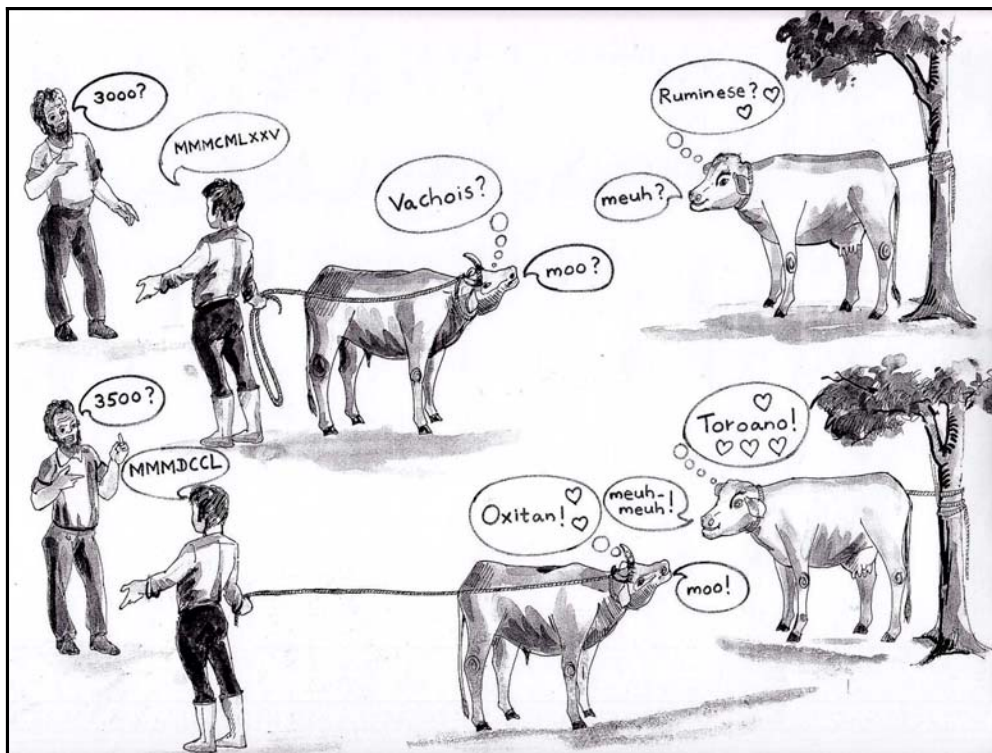
1

*Different languages are a menace
to a friendly world.*

Reader's letter in *Scientific American*

It's a multilingual world, but multilinguals are the odd ones out

Multilinguals are in the majority out there. There are more people in the world who use more than one language in their everyday lives than people who spend their whole lives using only one language. In addition, contrary to what may be the general understanding, global multilingualism is not a recent state of affairs. It has always been there, ever since people started moving around to barter with other people or to batter them into submission, which are the prime activities associated with human civilisation.



When you move around, you take your language(s) with you, and when you get somewhere new you either adopt the local language or you impose your own, sometimes both. Finding new languages and finding ways of dealing with them has thus been a core part of human history.

Despite their statistical credentials and their historical endurance, multilinguals have come to be treated as a special kind of individuals. This has been particularly so in the last few decades, when research about multilingualism took flight and, with it, the media and the general public's curiosity about it. Saying that a group or its members are special can mean opposite things, special-bad and special-good. Multilinguals are mostly treated like linguistic chimeras, arousing mixed feelings which range from deficiency through incredulity to awe. On the special-bad side, multilingualism is a deviation with suspected pathological implications for the overall development of multilingual children and the overall welfare of multilingual adults. The linguistic development of multilingual children is for example discussed alongside clinical conditions such as deafness, blindness, autism, prematurity, specific language impairment and Down's syndrome, or socioeconomic conditions such as extreme poverty, under headings titled "varieties" of development, or development in "exceptional" circumstances. No wonder that conclusions extracted from accounts such as these lead parents and educators to take multilingualism as a "condition" to be feared or, at best, to be addressed by specialists.



On the special-good side, we find almost mystical comments to the effect that multilingualism is an "exotic" and "intriguing" phenomenon, nay, just short of a "miracle". Acquiring more than one language as a child is an "amazing feat", and switching among different languages with apparent ease is both a "remarkable ability" and a "mystery". It is, in short, "astonishing" that there are multilingual people at all. Multi-

linguals should be very wary of taking these kinds of comments as flattering because the problem here is of course that what is awe-inspiring cannot be normal.

We may then ask what is it that is “normal”. In other words, what is it that multilingualism deviates from after all? The answer is very interesting because, it too, has very, very old roots: the use of a single language is taken as the default linguistic state of humankind. This tradition of equating *monolingualism* with “normality” dates back many, many centuries. Perhaps this is why it is still so devoutly respected, even today. It goes back all the way to the venerable Ancient Greeks, who were known to label as “barbarians” anyone whose speech was unintelligible to educated monolinguals – that is, to the Ancient Greeks themselves. Nowadays it is not nice to call people barbarians, but rather unflattering labels like “semilingual” or “deficient” user of language are nevertheless in widespread use to designate modern-day people whose speech is likewise unintelligible to educated monolinguals – that is, to several influential Ancient Venerables-to-be within language studies.

It is indeed so that the first scholars who decided to look at multilingualism were monolinguals, or subscribed to monolingual theories about language, or both. The tradition of thought that they initiated goes unchallenged, as does the related persuasion that lifelong use of a single language is a guarantee of excellence in linguistic competence. This is so partly because many people who deal with multilingualism continue to be monolinguals, partly out of academic respect for monolingual views about language or perhaps out of sheer inertia, a bit like you go on using the same detergent that you saw used at your grandmother’s because it never occurred to you that what you see your elders do can be questioned. Accepted theories take a long time to change, even when they are in dire need of a thorough spring-cleaning, as is clearly the case here. These theories and the statements that issue from them in turn percolate through to the general public, whose word-of-mouth beliefs are, as we know, even more difficult to dislodge.

The assumption that monolingualism is the norm of language use is often not stated in so many words, but it has led to the fact that virtually all that we know about multilingualism comes filtered through monolingual lenses. Language produced by multilinguals is compared to language produced by monolinguals, without ever explaining why the comparison is made or how valid it can possibly be. The goal is said to be to find out about multilingualism, but turns out to be something else: to find out how multilingualism differs from monolingualism. Much like once upon a time (or maybe not so once upon a time) women were compared to men, or children to adults, or for that matter varieties of language to “standard” uses of language. Comparisons of this kind show, predictably, that women, children and language varieties are

funny men, funny adults and funny language uses, respectively. What we might then ask is why nobody came up with the equally funny idea of making the same comparisons the other way around. Going by sheer numbers of multilinguals vs. monolinguals, such comparisons could at least claim some statistical relevance.

We can try. The first sign that monolingualism is taken as the norm shows in the questions that people ask about multilinguals and multilingualism. This includes both research questions and everyday questions. Research questions are questions that academics ask themselves, in order to be able to answer them in more or less long dissertations and books, or more or less short journal articles, book chapters and conference presentations. Everyday questions are questions that Jack and Jill ask themselves and each other, in order to understand what's going on. Everyday questions also include questions that multilinguals ask themselves. For example, a favourite question is "Am I multilingual?". Like other questions that question the questioner (Am I a human being? Am I mad?), this is not a rhetorical question. It is a question that demands a clear answer, so that people are not illegitimately labelled something that they in fact cannot claim to be. Like if you say that you are a systems engineer, you must be prepared to show proof of your entitlement to the title. Moreover, this question is usually asked with overtones of anxiety, as is often the case when people attempt to label themselves. Other overtones may be present when the question is asked not about "I" but about you, he/she/it, we or they. This question implies that the normal way of being is monolingual. Nobody asks "Am I monolingual?" of themselves or others, with or without overtones.

I like to turn questions like these the other way around, from a multilingual perspective, which is a very normal perspective to a multilingual like me. Let's look at a sample of favourite questions asked about multilinguals:

- Can multilingualism affect language development?
- Can multilingual development affect the development of each of a child's languages?
- Is multilingualism an advantage or a disadvantage?
- What are the reasons to nurture multilingualism?
- How do people become multilingual?

None of these questions is ever asked about monolinguals or monolingualism. We can try, to see how such questions really make no sense at all:

- Can monolingualism affect language development?
- Can monolingual development affect the development of a child's single language?
- Is monolingualism an advantage or a disadvantage?
- What are the reasons to nurture monolingualism?
- How do people become monolingual?

We may then ask ourselves why is it that everyone keeps asking questions like these. We may also ask what kind of answers these questions have had, and therefore what kind of enlightenment about multilingualism they are supposed to muster. Clearly, taking *monolingualism* as a norm will necessarily find that *multilingualism* is a disruption of it. The same is true if we decided to take multilingualism as the norm, to find that monolingualism does not conform to that norm, or if we compared oranges to apples to find that an orange is a funny kind of apple. The point is that in order to make fair comparisons we need to compare like with like.



What we need to realise is that monolinguals and multilinguals cannot be compared in any useful way, as little as the behaviour of an only child can be usefully compared to the behaviour of a child who has siblings. The individuals in each of these groups are different from the individuals in the other group. If we want to know what is it that characterises each group as a group, that is, what is it that multilinguals are all about, we need to observe what they actually do. I think it is

about time that all the energy spent on comparing multilinguals to monolinguals start to be invested in surveying and norming multilinguals.

This is precisely what has *not* happened, with the result that we simply do not know what multilingualism is. Comparative findings about multilingualism have also focussed on the languages that multilinguals use. Particular language pairs, triplets, quadruplets, and so on, of particular multilinguals are examined, to conclude that multilingualism is too “complex” because of the countless number of languages and language combinations involved, to the power of several. So far as I can tell, no less mind-boggling monolingual complexity and variability has ever deterred investigation into monolingual uses of language, which are the ones covered in virtually all research about language. Vocabulary sizes are further compared across the languages of a multilingual, accents and uses of grammar are dissected, apparently expecting to find the key to multilingualism in the languages themselves. This way of looking at multilingualism takes it as a property of languages, which is clearly nonsensical. Languages cannot be multilingual, people can. The same view shows in applications, multimedia packages, online databases and even schools that claim to be “multilingual”: this means that different languages are involved, not necessarily that multilingual people are. So what we need to do is to find out what people do with different languages, not what different languages do to people.

Given this misty state of affairs, it is perhaps small wonder that an impressive number of paradoxical claims have been made about multilinguals and multilingualism. Vague labels like “balanced multilingual” or “semilingual”, used carelessly, don’t help either: since they are seldom defined, they are interpreted according to individual expectations and become statements of value rather than statements of fact. Not to mention the amount of emotional damage done to people labelled as *unbalanced* or *semi*-anything.

I discuss a sample of these issues in the coming chapters, in the hope, if not of shedding some light, at least of dispelling some of the murk.

2

*Eu não escrevo em português.
Escrevo eu mesmo.³*

Fernando Pessoa
(*O Livro do Desassossego*)

Multilinguals must have balanced languages, but one of them must be dominant



The issue of how many languages a person actually “has”, and so the issue of how entitled that person is to the label “multilingual”, takes many forms. I will deal with two related ones, in this and the next chapter. First, the contradictory claim that multilinguals must have both languages that are balanced and one dominant language. Then, the claim that you may call yourself multilingual all you want, the truth is that you must also be a well-behaved monolingual anyway, because you must have one main language in your repertoire.

Let’s start with *balanced*. This is an extremely appealing label, because it involves weight-watching. To check whether you’re a balanced multilingual, you measure the degree of bulk of each of your languages by sampling them item by item. For example, you can count how many words you have in each, or whether you can use the present

³ ‘I don’t write Portuguese. I write myself’.

perfect continuous and solve riddles in each of them. When you've done that, you calculate the differential weight of each of your languages. If there is no difference, you are a balanced multilingual; if you find any difference, you are unbalanced.

This is undoubtedly a neat way of getting neat data and neat labels for your findings, but funnily enough we run into trouble immediately. Not least because neat data are one thing and what goes on in real-life situations is quite another. *Balanced* means 'equally weighted', which therefore means equally good – or equally bad. Few people would agree that I am a balanced multilingual in Polish and Swahili if I can say "Good morning!" fluently in both languages and if this constitutes my entire repertoire in these languages, or if I consistently misuse grammatical gender in all my languages. We must then conclude that *balanced* is a word with positive connotations, because nobody wants to be called *unbalanced* about anything. Which in turn means that *balanced* cannot mean 'balanced' here, because 'of equal weight' is a statement about observed quantities, and hence neither positive nor negative. Here, the word in fact means 'with perfect command of all languages in all four skills, listening, speaking, reading and writing'.

Wow!, you may think. Wow indeed: can anyone really be balanced in this way? We can replace "perfect" with other positive-sounding words like *good*, *full*, *proper*, *fluent*, *competent* and even *native* (more on natives later in the book), the issue remains the same: is it really the case that people can understand and express exactly the same things in different languages? This is where things get really, really funny, for all sorts of reasons. Let me enumerate a few.

First of all, the assumed standard of "perfection" is, as always, monolingual. That is, multilinguals are expected to behave linguistically like several monolinguals tucked away inside one same body and mind, which is not so much funny as downright spooky.



They are not multilinguals, they are instead meant to be what I call multi-monolinguals. By the same reasoning, if one bilingual equals (or

should equal) two monolinguals, and so on and so forth for the number of languages that a multilingual uses, then this must mean that, say, a monolingual Tunisian and a monolingual Inuit are in fact just a single bilingual, and so on and so forth, because “equals” is a two-way correlation. The sheer thought of being accounted for as a fragment of a multilingual must be, I’m sure, no less disturbing to the monolinguals in question.

Second, what do words like *perfect*, *full* and so on really mean? Even when you talk about monolinguals, that is. Who measures perfection, or full command of a language? With what instruments? Third, how do we measure the counterweight to, say, different French past tense forms in Mandarin, which has no past tense forms? Languages don’t map themselves neatly onto each other. If they did, learning a new language would be a simple matter of translating words, grammatical constructions and pragmatic uses back and forth – assuming, of course, that language teaching programmes do not do exactly this, see Chapter 5. Fourth, knowing as we all know that different languages are obviously different means that *languages* are unbalanced, not their speakers. You can’t blame the users for the quiriness of the tools they’re using. Lastly, it is exceedingly funny to invent a technical label to describe the fruits of your fantasy: if you believe that there are “balanced multilinguals” in the real world according to the *Wow* criterion, you might as well expect to find unicorns in your backyard.

Nevertheless, the quest for unicorns among multilinguals goes on, so earnestly that the failure to identify them is often a source of concern. If a multilingual child or adult can use, say, more words in one language than in another, or prefers to talk about, say, a particular TV show in one language rather than another, the tendency is for outsiders to become suspicious about this person’s multilingualism itself. The conviction that multilingual unicorns do exist is also what explains one widespread practice in speech-language therapy: that assessing a multilingual child in one language is enough to form a representative picture of that child’s linguistic ability. Although the reasons behind this practice have nothing to do with the clinicians’ professional competence (see Chapter 9), the assumption is that multilinguals, children included, must have equivalent languages which therefore are also developing in equivalent ways, and hence that testing one language is the same as testing all languages.

Let’s make one thing very clear: multilinguals in the *Wow* sense do not exist. Not even professional multilinguals, like translators and simultaneous interpreters, can lay claim to *Wow*-ness. They specialise in different areas within their languages and not necessarily in all their languages either. Real-world multilingualism is naturally unbalanced, the reason being that languages are there to be used, not to be made

equivalent. If you ask monolinguals why they are monolingual, they will answer that it's because they need only one language to get on with their lives. So you can easily guess the answer to why people are multilingual: they need several languages to be able to live and function properly among their fellow human beings.

Multilinguals use one or another of their languages depending on the things that they find it useful to use one or another for. They also talk about different things in different languages, either because they experienced them in that language or because that language turns out to express better whatever it is they want to express. Little multilinguals talk to their toys in the language of the person who gave them those toys, for example, and differential uses of this kind are an additional reason why the developing languages of multilingual children do not keep up with each other. You can "translate" Brazilian *bossa-nova* into Hungarian, but the original flavour of the whole thing will be left behind, though the words and the grammar may reproduce one another more or less accurately across languages. Not to mention jokes and all sorts of language play, of course. Languages are not just alternative ways of talking about the same things, they are an intimate part of the cultures associated with them. This being so, the languages of a multilingual cannot but be unbalanced. Nobody would be multilingual if different languages could all be used in exactly the same way. A single all-purpose language would be enough. The word *unbalanced* thus turns out to be a very positive term after all: it means 'differential'.

Now, if you believe that multilinguals are, or should be, equivalent-linguals in the sense described above, it would seem rather odd to also believe that one of their "equivalent" languages is, or should be, not equivalent to their other languages after all. Nevertheless, in parallel to views about multiple equivalent languages, and apparently undisturbed by them, we find the view that multilinguals must have one dominant language. When applied to multilinguals, the word *dominant* doesn't describe a personality trait (as in "My neighbour speaks four languages and bullies anyone who says she's semilingual"), but a rank order among languages (as in "My neighbour speaks three languages and has no idea which one is his best language").

The dominant language of a multilingual is a sort of Mother Of All Their Languages (not to be confused with "mother tongue", which comes in a later chapter). This is often said to be the default language in which you spontaneously swear, or dream, or even the language in which you do your maths. But I'm sure I'm not alone in having heard all the multilinguals I know, including myself, utter fluent profanity in all their languages, depending on what catches their ire or their big toe and depending, of course, on the language they are using or thinking in when the offending incident takes place.

Likewise for those multilinguals with whom I have intimate enough contact to hear them dreaming: my family mumble and grumble in all their languages in their deepest sleep. The maths argument doesn't work either. Maths is something that you don't learn unless you're specifically taught, and whoever teaches you must speak to you in some specific language(s), which thereby will become your maths language(s).



A “dominant” language is sometimes described, probably for want of better words, as your “strongest” or “best” language, your “first” language, the one you are/were “most exposed to” as a child, the one you “use most” or “use best”, the language you feel “most comfortable” using, or the language that you “spontaneously” use, the one that “comes first” to you. The other, “non-dominant” languages are defined by the respective converses of these terms. But pinpointing what these terms exactly mean is not easy, because they are all quite vague. As a child, you may have been mostly exposed to a language that you don’t use (or use less, or use worse) as an adult. If you are raised in a multilingual family, you may have more than one language as your “first”. You may have to use most a language in which you feel less comfortable than another. And so on. So these terms seem to refer to properties that change over time, as well as with place and conversation partner. This makes good sense, because people don’t just talk out of the blue, and they must therefore change the way they use language according to situation. We speak differently to peers or parents, at work or at home, and we speak differently as children and adults. Monolinguals and multilinguals alike do this, the difference being not only that multilinguals do it in different languages, but also use different languages to do it. On the other hand, we constantly monitor what we hear around us, together with the prevailing mood of our exchanges, so that we can adapt our uses of language appropriately, which makes it difficult to define what may count as “spontaneous” uses of language. For example, multilinguals are also known to respond to their conversation partners in the language in which they are addressed.

We must then conclude that instead of an absolute, Mother-Of kind of language dominance, what goes on in actual multilingual exchanges is that different languages take turns to dominate.



This is really interesting, because dominance rotation of this kind in fact tells us nothing about language dominance itself and all about plain, everyday, humdrum multilingualism instead. Take me and my family as example: since today is Tuesday and I'll be teaching in English the whole morning, I'll be dominant in English by lunchtime. When the kids get home from school, *they* will be dominant in English because that's their school language, but I will have shifted dominance to Portuguese in order to talk to them, which will cause the usual cross-dominance multilingual glitches at snack-time. In the evening, when daddy comes home, everyone will be dominant in Swedish and Portuguese, to recount the day's happenings to everyone else at the dinner table. And so on. This is what multilingualism is about, alternating language preference according to all the factors that make language choices appropriate. It's just like you wear different clothes on different occasions for similar reasons of appropriateness, with no questions raised about dominant outfits.

The point is that although it may be true that there is language dominance among multilinguals, a dominant language need not be a single language or the *same* language. Multilinguals know this. But the idea that just one single language is what defines a human being is so ingrained that you find it under all sorts of guises, including different names for that language. The next chapter takes up the argument that multilinguals are of necessity endowed with a "main" language.

3

*We're philosophers.
We think, therefore we am.*

Terry Pratchett
(*Small Gods*)

Multilinguals must develop one main language, but that won't let them develop other languages

When we are told that multilinguals must have one dominant language, the term “must” is used in both its senses. One, that there is one language which is the Mother Of All Their Languages, as we saw in the previous chapter; and the other, that if such a language is not there, one needs to be nurtured as such. The argument that this “main” language must either exist or be created is that, without it, multilingual children’s cognitive abilities won’t be able to develop fully, including abilities associated with higher thought. Caregivers should therefore make sure that, notwithstanding the worthy pursuit of multilingual goals among the household, they keep an eye on the full development of just one language among their offspring. I don’t think I need to repeat here which analogy this “full single language” draws its inspiration from.

This favoured language will then be the one which developing children are expected to prefer in order to express themselves, or otherwise interact in for the purposes of absorbing knowledge. Higher thought, so the argument goes, needs a language to express itself.

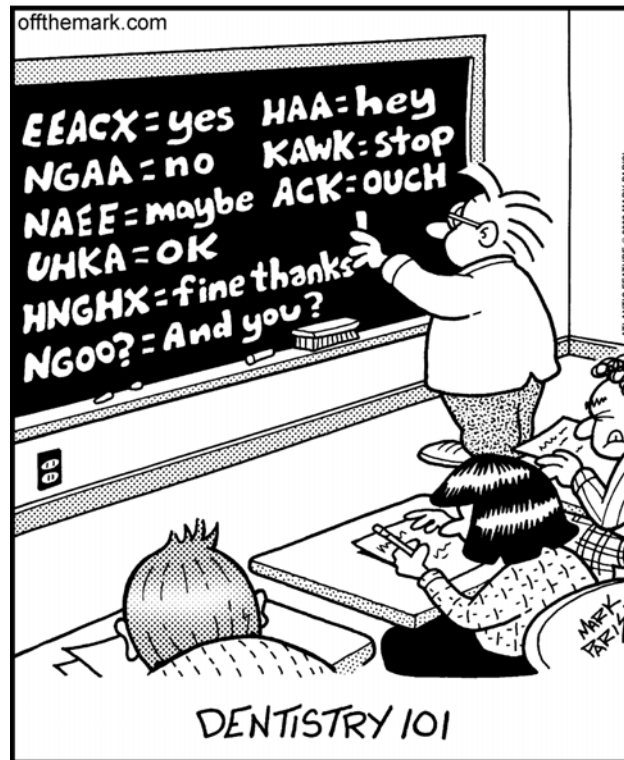


Explosion

It follows that if this language fails to develop for this purpose, so will overall cognitive development. By higher thought I presume is meant not just the (school) ability to reason out things like the reliability of historical sources or metaphysical goodies like the essence of being and the being as essence, but also the broader abilities to manipulate abstraction, analysis and argumentation. It is in this sense that people talk about the need for children to “be given” one main language (yes, we “give” it to them; the children just “receive” it, apparently), or the need for one language to be “well in place” before another one can be learned. Besides subscription to the intriguing view that having several languages “in place” may cause risk of developmental impairment (see Chapter 8), saying that you can only develop cognitively in one language is saying that your intellectual ability to learn and therefore to know must become, at bottom (or at top, in this case), monolingual: I think, therefore I must be monolingual.

There’s no argument that you need well-developed vocabulary and syntax in order to be able to manipulate higher thought. It is also clear that you can’t learn geography or chemistry in Tagalog if you don’t know Tagalog. What I fail to understand is why you have to do this in only one language. What do you then use your other languages for? To play tiddlywinks? Sudoku might be too challenging for a lower-thought language. And what about things like socialisation and emotional development, given that children need to bloom and grow in ways other than cognitively, should they have dedicated languages too? Cognition and higher thought do depend on language, but “language” doesn’t mean ‘a single language’. There is a persistent confusion out there between these two very different concepts, and I’m actually persuaded that the confusion is due to English having only one word, “language”, for both. A clarification of the two concepts is in order here. *Language* refers to the ability to use tongues, as popularised in expressions like “language faculty” or “language capacity”, which is shared by all human beings, whereas the terms *a language* and *languages* refer to the particular tongues (sign languages included) that human beings happen to have at their disposal for reasons of birthplace, parentage, and other incidentals that have nothing to do with language itself. The confusion between these concepts isn’t helped by the fact that English is also the language in which most discussions about language and other “higher thought” matters are reported, and often worked out too. In Portuguese and French, for example, there are different words for each concept, *linguagem* vs. *língua* and *langage* vs. *langue*, respectively, so the issue is crystal-clear there. Makes one wonder whether discussions of language matters might not have benefitted from “giving” the discussants Portuguese or French as their “main” language instead.

Anyway, saying that (higher) thought must be nurtured through one particular language is saying that you cannot think outside of that linguistic box.



But knowing, as we know, that worldwide thinking is done in all possible languages must of course mean that any language is, or can be made to be, higher-thought. You can study rocket science in any language, so long as that language does what current and past so-called languages of science have done, which is to provide themselves with the necessary vocabulary and syntax to address rocket and other science by freely inventing and/or pinching words and constructions from other (non-science) languages. And you can then discuss rocket science through the vocabulary and syntax of any other language, if you so wish, because knowledge is something that transfers across languages. Let me hasten to add that I don't think that sophisticated thought necessarily has to do with rocket-like knowledge or with knowledge garnered in school. Higher thought is something that develops through nurturing, like all cognition: learning to cook, in the cosiness of home, involves higher thinking as much as learning to do maths.

Let's now introduce a main character in this story, little Pedro, and let's assume that he is now big Pedro, who has had one main language put in place for him. One of the school subjects he will have to take is a language subject, sometimes called a foreign or a second language

subject. If Pedro's school follows the traditional methods of teaching languages (see Chapter 5), his main language will end up being the main hindrance to his language learning, in several related ways. Pedro will learn about the new language in his main language. Pedro's main language will do its expected job of allowing him to absorb the rules of grammar and the higher-thought complex linguistic terminology through which language subjects continue to be taught. This means that he will develop the habit of thinking about his new language by means of his main language. But this won't help him with *using* the new language, which is what languages are supposed to be there for. Having one language well in place is in fact also claimed to prevent proper (or complete, full, perfect, competent, all familiar labels by now) learning of a new language, by standing in the way of it. The same applies of course to the one language of monolinguals facing their first taste of multilingualism through a language subject in school, whose only language is by definition assumed to be "well in place". Pedro's main language will likewise interfere with the grammar and the pronunciation of his new language, surfacing through it as the intellectual filter that it is claimed to be.

Assuming that his progress in his new language is similar to the progress of school language learners reported by countless foreign language teachers and researchers throughout the years, Pedro will think first in his main language and then translate what he wants to say into his new language. That is, he will actually be speaking his main language with words of his new one, thereby producing consistent mixes which will eventually turn into his standard way of using the new language. He will also speak his new language with a strong main language accent. In short, our multilingual Pedro will become a typical foreign language learner like his monolingual peers. Chapters 5 and 12 have a few more comments on the ease, or not, of adding languages to a multilingual repertoire.

I'm not saying that Pedro's language classroom woes might have been alleviated if he hadn't been brought up with a main intellectual language. The other languages of multilinguals who are learning school languages are consistently disregarded anyway. Language learners are, by definition, emerging multilinguals – those who are not fully-fledged multilinguals already, that is – although they are taught monolingual varieties of a new language, thus exposing them to uses of language that are twice "foreign" to them.

Instead of engaging the learners' multilingual competence in the language learning process itself, language programmes invariably insist on the paradox of encouraging (school) multilingualism while ignoring (home) multilingualism: each "secondary" language should be nicely tucked away in neat little airtight compartments and left to nap there in

peace while another language is being learned, as I discuss further in Chapter 8.

What I am pointing out is the additional paradox in arguing that, in multilingual child nurturing, one “proper” language must be there, and that, in later multilingual nurturing, languages can’t be learned in any “proper” way because one language is there.



Now if you indeed think that claiming or enforcing a main language in this way is paradoxical, what should we call the scenario where someone who must have a main language in fact has neither a mother tongue nor a native language? This is what we discover next.

4

*There is nothing to suggest that mothering
cannot be shared by several people.*

H Rudolf Schaffer

Multilinguals have no mother tongue, because they are not native speakers of any language

Have you noticed that multilinguals are never said to be “native speakers” of their languages? The only instances where you see the word *native* collocated with the word *multilingual* are when multilinguals are deemed to have shown, or failed to show, “native-like”, “near-native”, “near native-like”, and so on, uses of language. The word *native*, short and sweet, is simply not used to account for multilingual uses of language.

The reasoning behind this strange state of affairs must be that multilinguals and native speakers are assumed to be different kinds of human beings. This is confirmed by the large amount of research which sets out to investigate, black on white, the uses that “multilinguals” make of their languages as compared to “native speakers” of the same languages. This sounds very funny to me, because *native* means ‘born into’. You can’t for example say “I became a native speaker of Tamil at the age of 34”, or “She stopped being a native speaker of Tok Pisin when she moved to Iceland”. You are, or you are not, a native speaker and you remain so, because you were born so. It follows that a native speaker must be someone born into some kind of surrounding language. Surely multilinguals are also born into communities that do use language? The mystery is solved when we realise that the label *native* in “native speaker” has nothing to do with your birth rights or those of your languages: it actually means ‘monolingual’. All the native speakers to which multilinguals have been compared throughout decades are monolingual.

This realisation helps clarify why people accept without blinking to label someone born into more than one language as “native-like” and “near-native” (or not) whereas these labels never, ever, apply to someone born into only one language. We can try, for the sake of sheer fun:

- Original: Carmen, you are a Spanish native speaker with native-like language abilities in Spanish.
- Gloss: ‘Carmen, you are a Spanish monolingual with monolingual-like language abilities in Spanish.’
- Original: Ali, you are a Bahasa Melayu monolingual with near-native language abilities in Bahasa Melayu.
- Gloss: ‘Ali, you are a Bahasa Melayu native speaker, with near-monolingual language abilities in Bahasa Melayu.’

Confusing? Apparently not, because you can say things like “Mei Chuen, you are a Mandarin-English bilingual, with near-native-like language abilities in Mandarin and English”, and get away with it.

OK, so multilinguals are not native speakers of their languages. Unfair enough. Let’s move on to try to follow the reasoning that has it so. This must then mean that multilinguals are non-native speakers, because the textbook world of language users out there is neatly divided into watertight, either/or, native vs. non-native categories (see Chapter 5). By the logic of (supposedly) technical terms, if “native speaker” = monolingual, then “non-native speaker” = multilingual. The real world of language users out there naturally divides into users of one language vs. users of more than one. But no. Even more intriguing in this native mess is that multilinguals are also compared to non-natives. We find things like “Björn, who was born and raised in a Swedish-Urdu-Japanese trilingual home, attained below average non-native proficiency in all three languages at age 16”. Whereby we must conclude that multilinguals can’t be non-natives either, because you don’t compare things to themselves.

But the story doesn’t end here. A similar creative use of terms applies to the label *mother tongue*. If you are multilingual, you may have been asked baffling questions like “Right, so you speak three languages, but what is your mother tongue?” You may have blinked a little and hesitated to respond, because you honestly don’t know how to answer, although you do feel urged to respond because you think that this is a relevant question: doesn’t everyone have a mother tongue? Or the whole thing may even have ended up with you being told that mother tongue is just not for you, because you actually have more than one, and there is only one mother tongue per individual like there is only one mother per individual (although definitions are nowadays being challenged here too).

Being summarily tongue-orphaned in this way is very funny, for two reasons. First, because it treats languages like some commodity that must be coupon-rationed, as if there were a shortage of languages around the world – there are about 7,000, at the latest (rough) count.

And second, because no one ever asks the one question that matters, which is “Who says that people can have only one mother tongue?”, just like no one ever asks “Who says that people can have only one native language?”



Asking multilinguals about their one mother tongue is like asking “How do you get along with your sister?” of someone who has no sisters, or “When did you stop smoking?” of someone who never smoked. Questions like these are not just looking for an answer, they are presupposing something else that the question doesn’t question because, for the questioner, this something else is unquestionable: that you have one mother tongue, a sister and once went around carrying a pack of cigarettes. So whatever you reply, you are actually confirming two different pieces of information: the one contained in your answer and the one implied in the questioner’s presupposition. In other words, questions like these show lack of awareness of other people’s realities or, worse, blank assumption of other people’s realities. It’s no wonder that they are commonly used in police interrogatories, precisely to catch out things that the suspect doesn’t want to acknowledge.

We can now try to define *mother tongue* as opposed to *native language*, to see whether some light can be shed on what these terms really mean. The distinction between them is far from clear even in research about monolingualism. We might say that your mother tongue is what your parent(s) speak(s) to you. In monolingual settings, it then becomes clear that *mother tongue* is the same as *native language*: what you hear around since you were born is the language(s) you are born into. This makes one wonder why we need two technical terms for the same thing. And this also makes us realise that, by this definition of who-speaks-what-to-you-from-birth, multilinguals may have several mother tongues if their mother happens to use more than one language to them, or they may have a mother tongue and a father tongue, like they may have a sibling tongue and a grandparent tongue, which now means that all of these must be your native languages too, but in fact aren't.

Remember me talking about chimeras and unicorns? This is what I mean. Unicorns look like horses, though not really. Multilinguals also look like other users of language, natives and non-natives who have mother tongues, though not really. But wait. The lack of mother tongue and of nativeness may not be such a serious shortcoming after all. It may well be the secret, who knows?, behind the legendary ease with which multilinguals learn more, and more, and more languages.



Learning languages is something that native speakers and people who have mother tongues are conspicuously inept at – and can in any case entertain no hope of remedying because, as we saw, there's no way they can be deprived of their higher-thought-well-in-place-native-mother language. Let's then check multilinguals' skills at becoming more, and more, and more multilingual.

5

*If I don't need to speak French,
why do I need to learn French?*

Multilingual 9-year-old,
questioning her school curriculum

Multilinguals can learn new languages easily, but only in childhood

We have so far reviewed a number of labels commonly used to talk about multilinguals, like “dominant”, “balanced”, “(non-)native”, all of which leave much to be desired as far as their precise meanings are concerned. As if in acknowledgement that labels expressed in words can be very baffling, discussions of multilingualism also abound with numerical identification of languages. We then talk about L1, L2, L3, ..., L_n to refer to the order of appearance of different languages in the life of an individual. Representing languages in this way has a further advantage, which is that no assumptions are made about what multilinguals should or should not do with their languages, or about the relative worth of these languages: instead of pulling rank among languages, we serialise them.

Numbering languages in this way first became popular to account for typical school-learning situations. Typically monolingual learners were said to speak an L1, which is their first (and only) language. When they learned a second language, this new language became their L2. If they learned other languages later on, one at a time, each of them was then consecutively labelled accordingly. So far so good, but things started getting really funny with the generalisation of these labels to other kinds of multilingualism besides the well-behaved “After-You” one that they were meant for.

Take simultaneous multilinguals, those who start life with several languages, or who later acquire several languages at the same time. A simultaneous bilingual will have two L1s (pronounced ‘El Ones’), both labelled “1” because they both come first, which is what the numbers are meant to describe. So that makes *two* languages. Since calling the next language an “El Two” might be perplexing for this reason, this person then acquires an “El Three” instead. In case no other languages follow, these multilinguals will then have two L1s and one L3, with the number

"2" nowhere in sight among their "Ls". In addition, "L3" doesn't now mean 'the language acquired in third place', but the one acquired in second place, which is after L1, and which therefore is different from an L3 acquired after an L2 which in turn follows an L1.

Mind-boggling, I agree. This is a very funny twist to the usually unambiguous nature of numbers. Each of these numerical labels in fact turns out to add to the confusion, by referring to at least two different things, the chronological order of acquisition of one particular language, on the one hand, and the number of languages of a multilingual at any one point in time, on the other. In addition, despite awareness that people can speak and learn more than two languages, the monolingual bias of language teaching still shows in that learning any new language, regardless of how many you already know, is still called "*Second Language*" learning, with dedicated acronym "SL" and all.

Let's now discuss a number of related mind-boggling things, like what people say and do about language learning itself. For starters, there seems to be no doubt that the more languages you know, the easier it is for you to learn new ones. This is a rather blank statement: successful language learning depends on the number of languages that you already have, period. The reasoning behind it is that knowing at least two languages gives you awareness about how different languages work, a side effect of multilingualism that you can put to good use in learning yet other languages. Speakers of only one language, the reasoning continues, lack the ability to distance themselves from their language in this way. Making your own language "alien" to you, through the process of learning another, may be part of the reason why, the reasoning concludes, learning a new language the first time is so difficult.

Funnily enough, there is another equally blank statement which is at least as popular: children learn new languages easily, adults don't. This one says that successful language learning depends on your age, also period. The malleability of a young mind, the eagerness of childhood to soak up everything and anything, and all that cute tiny tot cheeriness, this reasoning has it, makes children the ideal learners across the board, and so the ideal learners of languages too. Learning is effortless because young children are unaware that they are learning, particularly languages: the children contemplated in this statement are the ones acquiring their first language(s).

Now the two statements cannot be both true, period. They're not saying the same thing, so there might well be more to blank statements about the learning of new languages than meets the popular eye. Is it the number of your languages or is it your age that does the trick? Is this all there is to it, number of languages or number of years? It is important to unravel these things, because language learning is big business,

handling enormously-sized resources to keep outrunning and outsmarting the competition in the quest for the magic key to boosting language absorption. We immediately find, for example, that none of the two statements takes into consideration the question of *how* we learn languages.

Research in fact shows that things are not quite as black-and-white as our statements will have them. Children and adults obviously engage with new languages and with overall learning in different ways, not because of age, but because of the cognitive gear that goes with different ages. Young children are known to have more instinctive strategies play on their side, benefitting from learning by doing. Adults may approach their learning more through reason, drawing benefit from explicit teaching *about* the language, which is not the same thing as teaching the language. Teaching about a language involves talking about its grammar rules (things like “This is the third conditional. It works like this and here’s an example. Now do exercise 146f. on your handout”) or giving tips about pragmatic uses (how to be polite, for example), whereas teaching the language involves using it in meaningful interaction. Knowing how verbs can be tensed, say, and knowing how to make acceptable use of tense in a new language is not the same thing.



The Many-Languages-does-it argument disregards significant differences of this kind between learner mindset, intellectual baggage and

learning strategies. The Age-does-it argument actually digs its own grave by comparing apples with pears: *child* and *first* language acquisition, on the one side, with *adult* and *further* language learning, on the other. In addition, it assumes that acquiring a first language (one or many) is a breeze. Anyone who has had close daily contact with young children along their first years of life knows that language doesn't come easy to them. There is effort, and quite a lot at that. Learning eventually takes place not because it is inevitable, being so "easy", but because there is motivation to learn. The argument also rests on the fallacy that children are fast and good compared to adults, whereas adults are slow and bad compared to children. It's like saying that fish has more omega-3 than meat because meat has less omega-3 than fish. There's no gain to draw from this kind of statements (except wanting to win an argument at all costs) when, in order to be able to single out the learner's age as the decisive ingredient in learning, you're also saying that learning languages at home, surrounded by people who talk to you in them every day the whole day, is the same as learning them from a school seat on a per-hour basis, in front of a teacher who most probably talks to you in one language to teach you another. The fancy name for what to do to avoid this kind of nonsense is "control of variables": in order to decide that something (a variable) correlates with something else, or may even be the cause of it, you need to make anything else that may also vary the same. This is why you can fairly compare, for example, boys and girls of the same age, social group, educational and family background, and so on, to decide whether sex correlates with their choice of favourite toys.

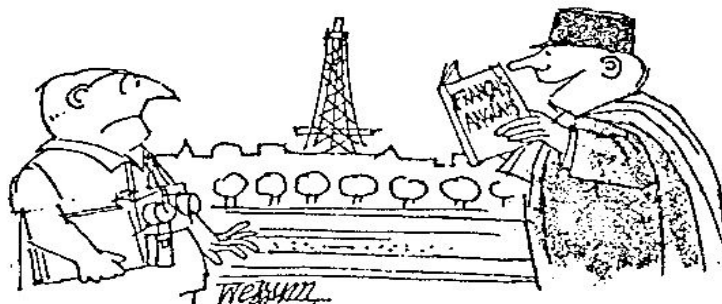
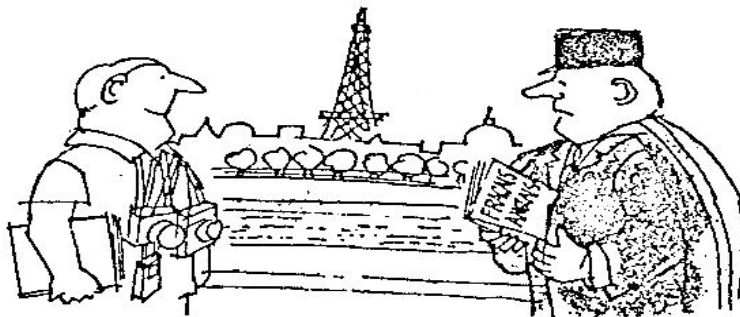
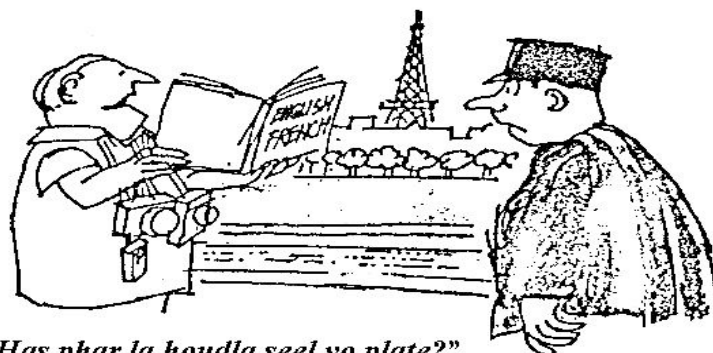
Maybe the two statements are both false, then. We could try controlling a few variables and check out, say, multilinguals of different ages learning a new language in school. For both child and older learners, the usual scenario is that the first thing you're asked to do in your first SL lesson is to take out from your bag your brand-new language textbook, exercise book and a pencil. Only then are you ready to start learning a language. The teacher reads from the book and/or writes things on the board that you copy onto your exercise book, and asks you questions, whether to repeat other things or to control that you understood these things, all in a different language from the language that is being taught. Homework is then a list of words with their respective translations into the language of teaching, to memorise for next time (in the early stages of the language course) or a list of grammar rules, all in the language of teaching, to do likewise with (in later stages).

These are standard second language teaching methods, found all the way from primary to university schooling levels. This is how I learned English, my first "S" L (actually my third language) at around age 10 and, interestingly, also how my children learned theirs (actually their fourth language) at the same age, which was French taught in English, all of

thirty-plus years down the road. Definitely *down* the road, yes. Their first homework, also to memorise for next time, was a sheet containing number goodies like these, presumably meant to bring their French accent up to par from day one:

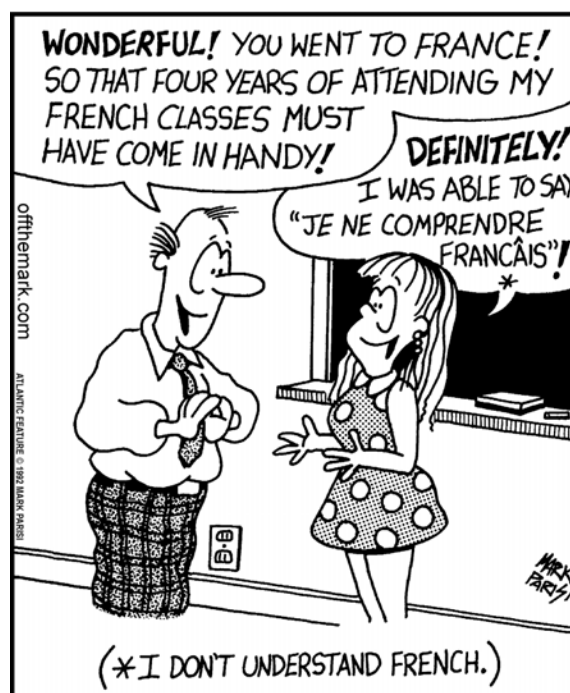
- 1: *ern*
- 3: *terwa*
- 8: *wheat*
- 32: *tront tay der*

We should then perhaps not be surprised that SL performance continues to be dismal across the age board, not least accent performance.



"Gihup hwow you shoul do da?"

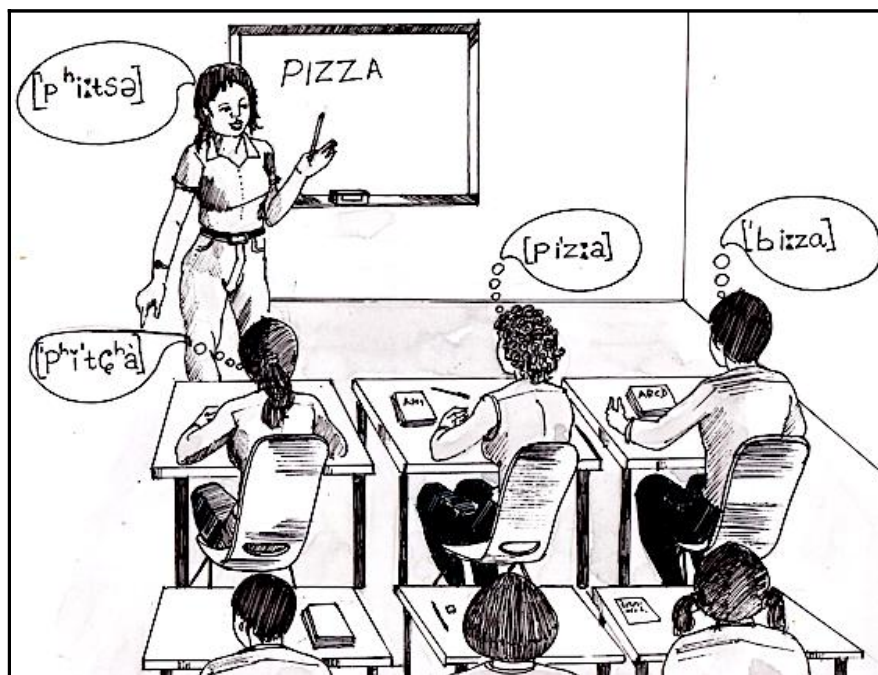
Languages are taught in the spirit of someone who would choose to teach beginner swimmers by providing them with fins, arm rings and a textbook in flotation physics to memorise for next time. My children can recite the *passé composé* rule (in English) but cannot use the *passé composé* (or anything else in French) to save their lives.



All of us additionally learned to say intriguing things in our new languages like “The cat is under the table” or “My sister’s bookcase is taller than mine”, with no cat or bookcases in sight and no idea why stating the whereabouts of an irrelevant cat should matter to anyone in sight.

What should surprise us is that the learners keep getting the blame. It’s a losing game, really. Take the examples above. We were all multilinguals: our “main language” must have interfered, then (see Chapter 3). We were all children: we must have been well past the best-before date anyway, then. At the time I was learning languages in school, I didn’t know that important people were finding out that I shouldn’t really bother learning languages or maybe anything else: my brain had retired from active service (see Chapter 8). My teachers had no clue either that they might just be wasting their and everyone else’s time. But there could be other reasons for our mediocre learner performance. Perhaps we didn’t study hard enough (whatever “study” might mean here, given the circumstances). Or perhaps we were just not gifted for languages (see Chapter 12). Whichever way we look at it, language

learners are the clue to the non-learning, by being too obtuse, too lazy, too old or too monolingual in their main language. It doesn't help either that the results of language learning of this kind are routinely compared to "native" uses (see the previous chapter) in order to assess performance, not least accent performance.



Native speakers of a language do not obviously learn it this way. So we're assessing a language taught through classroom drills which, on the one hand, give pronunciation issues a miss because they are mostly printed and, on the other, mostly target vocabulary lists and rules of grammar, against a language learned through ordinary use. Does "control of variables" ring a bell?

This state of affairs may well explain the accepted wisdom that learning languages is hopelessly hard, and the aversion to learning them that goes with it. Learning languages *this way* is hard, no doubt about that. There is hope, though. New findings are telling us all sorts of exciting things, like your proficiency in a new language shows far better in informal settings than in response to classroom routines. For example, when you are chatting in it about things that are relevant to you, around a nice meal. It has also been known for a while that fluency in the new language improves after a couple of drinks. Findings like these reflect the equally accepted wisdom that we're at our best when we're relaxing and indulging a bit. Relaxed and uninhibited is exactly what children are about their language learning, so other studies show that perhaps implementing language teaching methods that match what children

appear to do with their language learning might not be as far-fetched as it sounds. Antique methods can only claim prestige precisely because they are time-honoured, not because they work. Or, perhaps more to the point, because they generate test papers that are straightforward to mark. But if we're targeting language *use*, why not draw on foolproof strategies that children can teach us to profit from? Language play to get at the grammar, singsong to get at the melody, choral repetition to get at those tongue-twisting new sounds without making a fool of yourself standing up all alone and tongue-tied in front of the whole classroom? Why not indeed? We were all children once, after all.

There is hope on the brain-death front too, perhaps from a rather unexpected quarter. We've all heard that your first (or whatever) language shows through a new language. You speak with its accent and you use its grammar. What may come as a surprise is that the converse is also true: you may start using your old languages with features of the new one(s). Now this must mean that your brain is actively at work, because interference of this kind is proof of manipulation of new material. There are new language bits which are being worked together with language bits that are already there, and working things together in this way means that *learning* is taking place. We must then conclude that what are familiarly called "language mixes", which is just another name for "interference", are a very good sign indeed. Are they? Apparently not, as we find out next.

6

*To use two languages familiarly and without
contaminating one by the other, is very difficult;
and to use more than two is hardly to be hoped.*

Samuel Johnson

Multilingual competence means erasing signs of multilingualism from the speech of multilinguals

One striking feature in the speech of multilinguals is the occurrence of mixes. When you mix, you use more than one language in the same utterance or conversation. Mixes are therefore a typical feature of multilingual speech, because mixed language can only be used by people who, well, have more than one language to mix.

Mixes, which also go under names like *codeswitches*, *codemixes*, *blends*, are striking in two chief ways. First, because they literally stand out, to monolingual ears. The people who puzzle over them appear to be unacquainted with what I call the “expat-speech” used by anyone, including fully articulate monolinguals, who has lived for any length of time in a country where a foreign language is spoken. An Englishman who has visited Portugal is likely to use the Portuguese word *bacalhau* when describing local staple food for other English speakers, and may define it as ‘dried salted codfish’, which is also a translation of the word but does not mean the same. Likewise, Westerners in Singapore will order *laksa* in a restaurant, not “noodles in spicy coconut milk”, and discuss the amount of money to include in each *hong bao*, not “red envelope”, to be given over Chinese New Year. My view on these observations is that it is in fact impossible *not* to mix in a multilingual environment, whether that environment consists of a family language and a different country language, or of two parents who speak two different languages. Nevertheless, the negative overtones of the word *mixed* itself, against its opposite “pure”, reinforce the common view of mixes as linguistic stigma.

It is the stigmatisation associated with mixed things that explains the second reason why mixes are striking: they arouse disquiet, again to monolingual ears. They are seen as evidence of deficient command of

the languages so mixed, a dreaded sign of semilingualism (of which more in the next chapter). The reasoning seems to be that if one language encroaches, as it were, upon another, there must be gaps in one language that need to be filled by bits and pieces of another. In order to rise to the status of fluent speakers, multilinguals must demonstrate the ability to remove from their speech all traces of their multilingualism, precisely those that surface in the form of mixes. In other words, the linguistic resourcefulness of multilinguals, which naturally draws on different languages, ought to be stifled, because mixes are there, but ought not to be. It is a bit unsettling, to say the least, to be required to show competence by means of denying competence in the resources you've got. It's like asking pianists to ignore all their knowledge about music when playing the guitar, or else risk being judged as lesser musicians.



It doesn't matter that mixes have been shown to actually reveal deep knowledge of the languages involved in them, be it of their sound systems, grammatical structures or vocabularies. We can only mix things that are differentiated, which means that language mixes provide no evidence of confusion or of deficient linguistic competence. It doesn't

matter either that multilinguals mix when they know that their listeners understand their mixed speech. That is, they mix in multilingual contexts, among other mixers. In monolingual settings, multilinguals know that mixes result in communicative glitches. They accordingly heed the needs of their conversation partners, in the same way that everyone heeds the limited resources of children when interacting with them. In contrast to the loud alarm bells that go off about language mixes themselves, these equally typical features of multilingual language use tend to get swept under the carpet instead. All that matters is that multilinguals erase the mixes, the obvious sign of their multilingualism, from their speech, in order to be judged competent users of language. All that matters, in other words, is that that they behave monolingually. The reason is that competent, that is, monolingual users of language do not mix. But don't they?

It may at first sight appear as paradoxical to expect mixed language from monolinguals as to demand only unmixed language from multilinguals. So let me ask the question in another way: why don't we say that monolingual English speakers who use words like *spaghetti*, *habeas corpus* or *typhoon* are mixing? We may also want to think a while about how words like these came to be counted as "English" words. They began their linguistic lives in a new language as mixes. We pinch words and expressions like these as and when the need arises, and it's up to us users to decide whether to keep them in "our" language or discard them. All words were new, once upon a time. The facts are that when mixes end up becoming part of a language by overall consensus, they are given the more reassuring label *borrowings*, a word that, unlike "mixes", no longer suggests impurity or confusion. Although disguised as borrowings, "English" words like *pizza*, *coleslaw*, *genre*, *robot*, *lingua franca*, *orangutan* or *smorgasbord* remain mixes, regardless of aliases. These are words that belong to other languages, that only multilinguals could have started to use in a different language and that eventually became the linguistic patrimony of even self-proclaimed purists. In print, any residual foreignness of these words is sometimes indicated by visual conventions like italics or quotation marks. In monolingual speech, their integration into an utterance goes as unmarked as any other mixes from multilinguals. It might in fact be more adequate to call multilingual mixes "borrowings" instead, because to borrow means to use for a while and then return. Unlike monolingual mixes (or culinary mixes, for that matter), multilingual mixes are often one-off and don't necessarily become a permanent part of the mixed product.

Children and youths, both monolingual and multilingual, contribute the lion's share of new words and expressions to the world's languages, and these are what keeps a language alive and usable. So we may also want to reflect a little about whether a language is there for the purpose

of keeping itself “pure”, whatever that may mean, especially in cosmopolitan surroundings. Or conversely, about whether mixes really are the same as “debasement” and really are all that irksome after all. We mix and borrow because different languages offer more, and often more precise ways of expressing ourselves.



Language mixes arise because we find, in words or expressions from one language, a feeling or an appropriateness to what we want to say which is lacking in another language. The reason is that different languages have different personalities, just like people. You can celebrate Thanksgiving in French, or sing Edith Piaf's songs in English, but the genuine feeling of the celebration and the songs is no longer there, because it lacks its proper linguistic expression. The biggest headache among translators is the need to match the right feeling, not necessarily the right dictionary suggestion, to the text that they have to render in a different

language. Multilinguals in action simply ignore such *finesses*. They borrow and mix the right word which comes with the right *nuance* of meaning at the right time instead.

This is why I like to think of mixes as an instance of what I call the “Buffet Effect”. Faced with lavish gastronomic choices laid out before my eager appetite, who will blame me for wanting to sample the salad intended for the fish with a meat course? Even expert gastronomes might nod benevolently, and perhaps follow suit, just to make sure that their seasoned taste buds aren’t missing out on some scrumptiously mixed novelty. Why not indeed? You don’t know unless you’ve tried. So if I choose to draw on the whole array of my linguistic assets and switch to language X in an utterance in language Y so as to express, as eagerly, something unique, I’m not showing lack of proficiency in language X, or language Y, or both. I’m making it clear that I know that a single language isn’t enough to say what I mean. In all human endeavours, we praise those among us who make the most of their resources and use those resources creatively. We line them up for promotion at work or we pat-pat them proudly on the head at home. The same must hold for multilingual language use. To the charge that people who need to mix languages in order to express themselves have something missing, we could counter the charge that people who need to express themselves in just a single language don’t know what they’re missing.

Mixes are a multilingual norm of language use, because they are an obvious consequence of being multilingual: you can’t help being aware of all the resources which are available to you, including language resources. It has in fact been shown that all the languages of a multilingual are switched on, as it were, at all times, one more, another less, depending on the language of the current interaction, though all of them remain on standby, ready to leap into action at any time (see Chapter 8). Multilinguals do mix, but they certainly do not mix all the time and every single time they open their mouths. We must then conclude that mixes do not define multilingual speech. The reason that mixes are inevitably targeted in discussions of multilingualism is that general curiosity about multilingualism tends to focus on what makes multilinguals different from monolinguals. Monolingual speech from multilinguals, of which there are plentiful examples, is uninteresting. It goes as unnoticed as mixes/borrowings in the speech of monolinguals. So if monolinguals do mix after all, why is it that only multilinguals are accused of semilingualism? And what does semilingualism really mean?

7

*They have been at a great feast of languages,
and stol'n the scraps.*

William Shakespeare
(*Love's Labour's Lost*)

Multilinguals don't have many languages, they have many half-languages

We saw in the previous chapter that if you mix different languages in your speech, your overall command of the languages so mixed is likely to be taken as deficient. You are giving evidence of incomplete, or imperfect mastery of your languages, or both (often both). Whether the evidence is of a single deficiency or of multi-deficiencies, and whatever the type or scope of your shortcomings, they are commonly subsumed under a cover word, *semilingualism*. You are accordingly labelled a semilingual.



The reasoning that associates mixing with semilingualism goes roughly like this: you mix because you have incomplete knowledge of each of your languages. If you knew those languages through and through you wouldn't need to import into them words and expressions that do not belong to them in order to say what you mean. This reasoning is, to put it charitably, thoroughly circular: you mix because you are semilingual, therefore you are semilingual because you mix. The reasoning is also

judgemental, because it assumes a “good practice” benchmark which is left unstated. Namely, either you toe the single language line and produce unmistakably monolingual speech, or you can kiss goodbye any aspirations of being counted among proper users of language. We may safely guess that whoever concocted a reasoning along these lines was decidedly, and probably fiercely, monolingual.

The same reasoning also raises many questions, all quite puzzling. What does “complete knowledge” of a language mean? In particular, how do you measure this kind of thing? Or, if you are inclined to more broadly philosophical musings, can a language ever be said to be complete at all? For example, was English less complete before words of it like *fluorophosphate* or *blog* were invented? If I do use *blog* and know what it means, but not *fluorophosphate*, do I then have imperfect knowledge of English? Or, in case I don’t use *if*-clauses because I don’t know how to use them, but I do know that they exist and are important to express *if*-meanings, and so I use a paraphrase instead, is my knowledge of English deficient? Questions like these are very entertaining, because you can spend your whole life looking for answers to them. They are also entirely pointless, because languages are not containers to be filled or unfilled to capacity. They are tools that get moulded to serve our needs as and when we use them. Languages are user-friendly, in other words, not straitjackets to stuff people in, and they are living things, not museum pieces to be admired and kept as is. This is why talking about complete (or incomplete) languages is so funny, and this is why talking about complete knowledge of something that cannot itself be complete (or incomplete) is even funnier.

Let’s take a closer look at the label *semilingualism* itself. As we know, *semi* means ‘half’. But a semilingual is not someone who knows half a language, or one-half of each language – for one thing, the maths would be funny too: being semilingual in, say, four languages would be something really worth striving for, in that your cumulative language abilities would add up to 200%. If you look up *semilingualism*, you will find that it does exist, and that it is something that we should all be concerned about. The word defines a pathological deficiency in expressing oneself through *language*, not through particular *languages* (see Chapter 3 for a clarification of the ambiguity of the English terms *language* vs. *languages*). Since semilingualism affects language, and language ability is independent of the number and type of languages that you speak, semilingualism affects monolinguals and multilinguals alike. Which in turn means that semilingualism has nothing to do with the number of languages that you speak.

The word *pathological* is the clue here: we all produce lapses, slips and bad grammar when we speak whichever language, we all hesitate, mumble and fumble for words or the right turn of phrase without

triggering automatic suspicion of language deficiency for that. Now if, on the other hand, you look up *semilingualism* in connection with multilingualism, you will find definitions of a semilingual as someone who has deficiencies in their *languages*, compared to monolingual uses of the same languages. Comparing particular languages across different users in this way is clearly a funny extension of what *semilingualism* means, for two reasons. First, because of the arbitrary endorsement of monolingual uses as a gauge for multilingual ones. We've been grinding this axe since page one. And second, because of the mistaken assumption that monolinguals cannot be semilinguals. They obviously can, because semilingualism can affect the language ability of any human being. It is this mistaken assumption that leads people to believe that the solution to suspected problems in multilingual children's language development is to turn them into monolinguals. Chapter 9 deals with pathological language matters in more detail.

From half languages (or assorted bits of languages, which amounts to pretty much the same thing) to fragmented identities and split personalities is a small step to take, since we know that identities and personalities hinge on languages to a significant extent. Multilinguals not only call the same things by different names in different languages but, more to the point, also talk about the same things in different ways, in different languages. To some people, this suggests an image of "dispersion" associated with confused minds. It is true that not even proper names are spared: just like London is also Londres and Londra, Ai Lin can also be Eileen and Ramamoorthy can be Stephen, depending on where they are or which language they are interacting in at the time. You can be Michael in English, Mikael in Swedish, Miguel in Portuguese and Mai Ke in Mandarin.



Now if having more than one name to go by is a sign of disordered identity, we could amuse ourselves counting the number of pieces into

which Mr Robert Jones' identity must be split, a monolingual who fluently identifies with and responds to, in alphabetical order: Bob, bro, dad, daddy, darling, dude!, Jones, lieutenant, Mr Jones, old chap, Robert, sir, son, sweetheart, uncle Bob.

Multilinguals can be found to have half languages in yet another way. This time, the mixers themselves are not at fault, their caregivers are. If you are raised in a mixed family where your parents speak different languages to you, let's say one each, chances are that your languages will be found to be lacking even if you don't mix them at all. Suppose your (very politically correct) family consists of a stay-at-home daddy and an executive mother who travels the world for a living. Daddy's language will naturally develop into your everyday language, and mum's into whatever she finds the time to share with you when she gets to be home with the family. It is likely that there will be only partial overlap between the two languages. This means that both of your linguistic containers are not only not full, their contents are not equivalent by a long shot.

The reason is that you had "less exposure" to each language (do I need specify "less than who"?). The contents of the providing container have not been fully poured on into the receiving container, the argument goes, because this only happens when you are exposed to a single language from everyone around you. Multilinguals' exposure to different languages can in fact be measured numerically: if you were raised bilingually, for example, you had $\frac{1}{2}$ exposure to each of your languages. The fractional maths gets quite complicated in case of exposure to more than two languages, or in case several people expose you to the same language out of several languages in a household, or in case you get both a lot of exposure and very little exposure to the same language from two different people, and so on. It doesn't matter: what matters is not so much the actual numerical fraction reporting the exposure, but that the exposure is a fraction. You are found to be semilingual not because you mix your languages, but because your parents failed to mix theirs to give you a properly "balanced" input.

The overall exposure to *language*, not particular *languages*, in families such as the one in this example is of course the same as in any other household where two parents are around, but this is apparently not what counts. We all know that the quality of the input must be of relevance too, but what counts is that caregivers in multilingual contexts give their children quantitatively "deficient exposure" to their languages.

There's perhaps no need to detail another quantity, an important one, which is the amount of anxiety whipped up among caregivers who are told about things like containers and three-fourth-inputs and who, naturally, have no way of remedying their "deficient" upbringing of

their children. Perhaps they should be told instead that the container theory will never find a multilingual who satisfies its demands. This might avoid several quite unfortunate developments among (even well-educated) families who read, hear and believe that they are being fractional parents in this way, not least their growing persuasion that their children's multilingualism is a pathological issue, best handled by complete strangers (see Chapter 9). The next chapter explains how the container theory can further apply to find other oddities in multilingual behaviour.

8

*Two languages in one head?
No one can live at that speed.*

Eddie Izzard
(*Dress to Kill*)

Becoming multilingual is both a drain and a strain on your brain

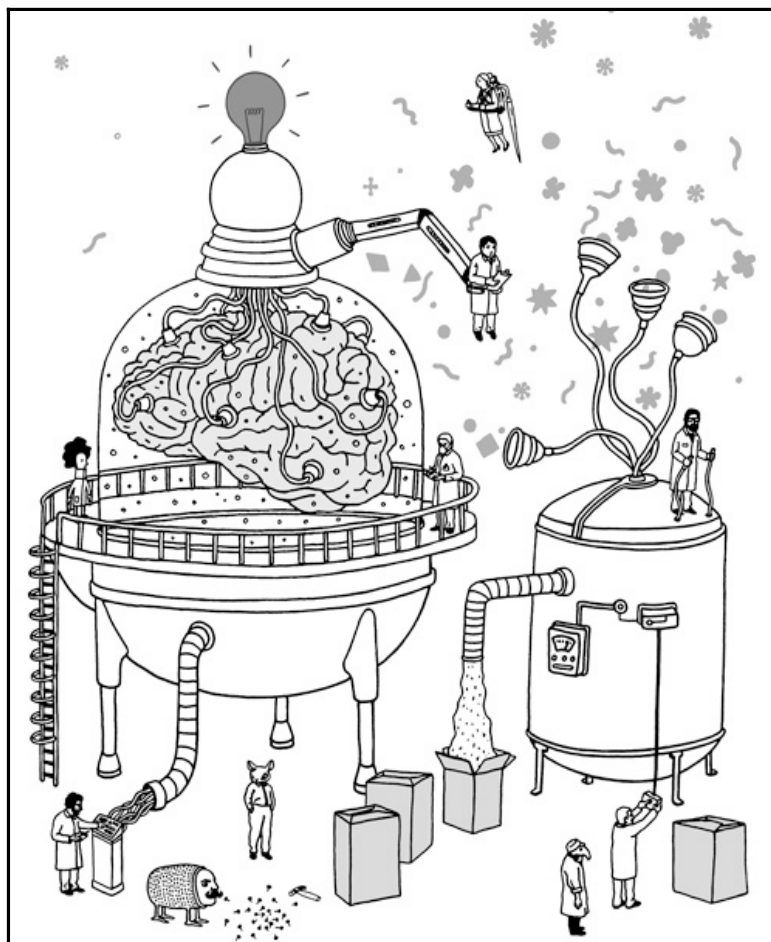
The popular view that the human brain has limited storage space is the cortical variant of the container theory that we saw applied to languages in the previous chapter. The main difference is that filling a language to the brim is a good thing, as we noted then, whereas heaping content inside the brain can cause it to overflow and result in severe mental indigestion. Brainy limitations are claimed for both time and space (this has nothing to do with relativity theory: the claims are absolute). We dealt briefly with the time bit in Chapter 5, and we'll return to it here, but we turn first to the matter of the brain's cubic capacity.

I should start by making it clear that nobody knows how the brain works, for the simple enough reason that we have to use our brain to study the brain, even when we're studying someone else's brain, because we use the brain to study anything else. To get an understanding of this and other matters that also stump us, say, the structure of the cosmos, our quest for knowledge proceeds through models. A model is a representation of something else, showing the components that we suspect play an important role in the real thing, and often their suspected interconnections and interactions. For example, drawing a square with a triangle on top can be a model of a house with its roof. But it can also be a model of an envelope, so if we're talking about houses, we use the model one way, and if we're talking about envelopes, we use it another way. Models are then convenient ways of visualising things, or talking about them, to help us make sense of them. They are not the things themselves. We don't know, for example, whether black holes exist and, if they do, what they are like. We don't even know whether they're black or any other colour, or for that matter whether they're

holes at all. Their name is just meant to model something that we can't see, but whose gobbling-like effects we do observe. Models are thus drastic simplifications of things, but since we know that they are models and not things, there is no problem in using them.

Or is there? The risk is that we get so enthusiastic about our models that we forget that they are models and end up taking them for the real thing. We already talk freely about holes that "are" there and that "are" black, and about "falling" into them, because holes are things we can fall into in the real world. The same has happened to models of the human brain. Current models represent it as one of the offshoots of human creative brain power itself, namely, computers. Using computers as brain models is fitting because models change with the times and this is the IT (Information Technology) age. The human eye was once modeled on the telescope, before photographic cameras were invented. This is all fine. The problems begin when we start drawing conclusions about human eyesight and/or brain properties on the basis of observed camera and/or computer function. This is exactly where we are now: the brain "is" a computer CPU (Central Processing Unit) and therefore works like one. To anyone who, like me, is persuaded that computers are essentially stupid machines that do nothing but what their (human) programmers taught them to do, this is extremely mortifying.

If you assume that the brain works like a hard disk, its contents get stored in more or less neat compartments. There must therefore be physical brain space dedicated to language too. You then assume, with the mainstream, that the "normal" language compartment fills to capacity with just one single language (perhaps because that language, in order to be properly called a language, must also be filled to capacity, as we saw in the previous chapter). And if you further assume, to complete the analogy, that the disk/brain needs some free space to be able to go about its housekeeping tasks properly, we have the ideal conditions that explain the havoc that multilingualism is said to wreak in "normal" brains. Symptoms of "Warning: disk full!" crop up through, say, a child's refusal to use one language, adults' difficulties with learning new languages or language mixes from speakers of any age. Whichever the case may be, the error message is ascribed to glitches in language warehousing, where the little grey cells struggle about and waste precious brain energy to defend the territorial rights of their one brain-one language.



The Law of Impenetrability of Matter, also known as the Law of Commuter Squirting at Rush Hour, is at work here, explaining why two material things (or languages) cannot occupy the same physical space (or brain compartment). If you attempt to force one more language in, the rightful language already installed there will be either deformed through squashing or spitted out.

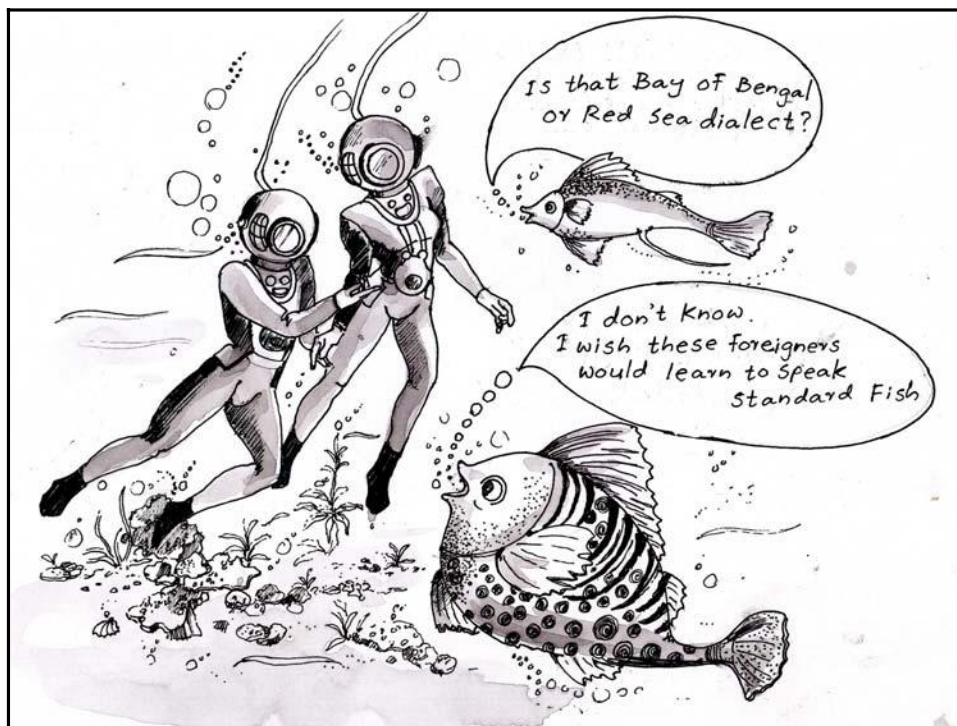
This is why we get the bleak multilingual scenarios that are familiar to us all, where learning a new language “threatens” the first one (only one “first” language, yes) or “removes competence” in it, or “crowds” the brain by taking up “illegitimate” space that was there peacefully allocated not only to that language (ditto) but to other contents of the brain, which also get shoved around and bruised with the intrusion. Multilingualism therefore “hampers” overall development, because it causes reduced ability, in languages themselves as well as in other intellectual domains. Now if someone told us that learning to dance the salsa, the tango, the waltz, the paso doble and the cancan could risk brain impairment, or that a pianist should refrain from learning to play

the saxophone, or else risk losing the ability to play the piano, or to do maths, or both, we would laugh in their faces. It makes one wonder why we take seriously the same nonsense when it applies to languages and language learning. If multilingualism were a cause of impairment of any kind, then the majority of humankind would be affected. As far as we know, there are no more impaired individuals among multilinguals than among monolinguals.

For language learning (and often spilling over to other learning too), the computer analogy further means that there is a period of time when the unit/brain is being programmed, and that when the programme is complete there's nothing else that can be added to it. The thing will go on churning out whatever it was programmed to churn out. Subscribers to this programming view all agree that the programming session closes for good, although no one seems to agree on when. Somewhat like The-End-is-Nigh prophecies, in other words. Mature brains thus have fixed processing power, which means that there is no learning worthy of the name after a certain age. The most benevolent guesses about maturity have it that young teenagers are elderly people, brain-wise. This carries a truly fascinating appeal to learning languages: no matter how you or your teachers go about it, you won't make it because there is no way you can make it. Makes you wonder why language teaching corporations don't seem to be risking bankruptcy any time soon and, more importantly, what kind of motivation this generates among prospective learners. Besides, like on a computer, the human hard disk only goes one way: towards wear, tear and decay. We learn less and we learn worse as grey matter shrinks and withers. To someone who, like me, goes on learning most of what is worthy of that name "after a certain age", this is downright insulting.

CPU analogies have been around for as long as computers, so they became a sort of thinking habit for the generations born under the IT zodiac. Luckily, the 2000s have been rich in insights about the brain, that date CPU models of it for what they are: last century's. First, we now know that the human brain is naturally plastic: it renews itself throughout life, by producing both new nerve cells and new connections between them. Computer hardware can't do this. This matches our commonsense knowledge that the human brain evolved to change, depending on how linguistic and other stimulation pushes it. As far as we know, containers don't do this either. If learning deteriorated or stopped after a while, how come everyone, oldies included, goes on buying the latest mobile phones and other intricate gadgetry? They must know that they can use them, and that means *learning* to use them. We learn things because we want to or because we need them. So teaching an old dog new tricks doesn't after all depend on the age of the dog and its brain, but on the usefulness of the trick.

Whatever the number of languages we speak, increased mental activity, whatever we dedicate it to, at any age, has the same effect on the brain that a good workout has on the body: it invigorates. The brain is of course there to cope with what we require of it throughout our lives, to learn and adapt, and it does its job just fine. At this point, the classical question usually crops up. OK, but there must be some limit somewhere: how many languages can a brain cope with, anyway? This question doesn't express curiosity about competitive world records, for which answers are easily available, or about people who learn languages for fun or for money, including museum guides who say hello and a few niceties to visitors in 23 (or was it 32?) languages. Some people collect cats too. The question means the maximum number of languages found in natural multilingual contexts, to which the answer is: as many as needed. It's not the quantity of brain space that is in question (if at all), or the quantity of languages, it's how the brain *qualitatively* adapts to the stimulation that is there to make it work.



The second major insight about the brain has to do with languages themselves. Languages cannot take up brain space from anything, because they do not have allotted slots in the brain: they communicate with each other. Proof? Multilinguals often don't know in which of their languages they heard, read, watched, learned, spoke or thought about something. The reason is that experiences are encoded within individual people, not within individual languages (see Chapter 3 for

another funny myth about this). Proof of this too? Multilinguals know quite well in which language they are writing. When you write, you have a specified reader in mind, so that in order to make sense to that reader you need to activate awareness of the language that you have in common, whereas when recalling other language-related events you take only yourself into account.

Activate is a key word here. Research has shown that all the languages of a multilingual are always on, as it were, even when multilinguals are interacting with monolinguals. That is, it is not possible to turn off one or another of the languages at will. What multilinguals can do, and do do, is to put one or another of their languages in gear, depending on need. The natural multilingual mode of being is to be called to use different languages to different people at any time, often alternating among them within one same conversation, as can be the case for example for children raised in mixed families (see Chapter 10). Alternate language activation means that access to each language works in a cline-like manner: you have greater access to the language you're using right now. It doesn't work in an all-or-none manner, where you would have no access to the language(s) you're not using right now. This in turn explains normal multilingual behaviour, like for example language mixing (see Chapter 6), and also why multilinguals can never, ever, "act as" monolinguals (see all chapters in this book for the ingrained belief that they not only can, but ought to). Unfortunately, multilinguals' natural inability to step into monolingual shoes has been taken as proof of overall language disorder. Let's see how, in the next chapter.

9

*Always listen to experts.
They'll tell you what can't be done and why.
Then do it.*

Robert Heinlein

**Growing up multilingual is no problem,
provided you seek clinical assistance**



I'm sure I am not alone in having heard, or read, that multilingualism may impair language development. I've also heard that multilingualism is the cause of speech features like stuttering or lisping. These claims are as common as they are nonsensical: we might as well say that playing different musical instruments may impair your musical development, or be the cause of cramps in your fingers.

Let's start by clarifying these two words, *language* and *speech*. *Speech* is a physical ability, involving sophisticated coordination of breathing and of many different muscles in order to articulate sounds. Stuttering, or lisping or imitating accents to perfection are speech issues. *Language* is an intellectual and social ability, involving use of systems of conventional vocabulary, grammatical and pragmatic devices through which we represent the world around us and communicate with other human beings. Using subordinate clauses, misplacing plural endings of

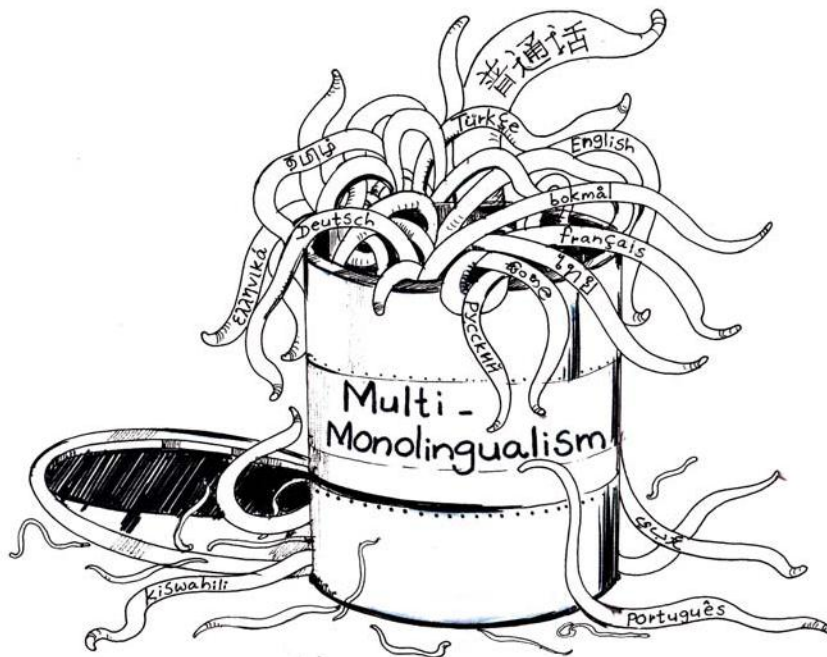
words or creating poetry are language issues. If speech and language are different things, independent of one another, speech problems or speech delays cannot be caused by language, nor vice versa. In the case of multilinguals, speech problems cannot therefore be caused by the number of languages that they speak (see Chapter 3 for clarification of another important difference, that between *language* and *languages*). You can find the same features of speech in children using one or more languages. One of my children lisped his way through his three languages up to age 6, when this very heavy feature of his speech disappeared on its own virtually overnight. You can also find the same features of language in children with fluent speech in one or several languages. Small children can spend their days chatting away in impeccable speech in all their languages, but no child will understand or use passive constructions and metaphors in any language at age 2.

So where does this idea come from, that multilingualism causes all sorts of speech-language ailments? In order to decide whether something is amiss, you need first to make an assessment. And in order to assess, you need to compare. You can't decide that something needs attention if you don't know that certain other things, by comparison, don't need attention. Things that don't need attention are what we call *norms*. Take mixes, for example, our usual suspects in broad-spectrum linguistic disruption, which expectedly are also said to be a sign of disfluency (the inability to speak fluently). We've seen that language mixing is a norm in multilingual settings. It is a feature of language, so it has nothing to do with speech. And if mixing isn't a feature of speech, it can't have anything to do with fluency, which is a feature of speech.

Language assessment tools used by speech-language clinicians rely on norms which apply to particular languages because these tools were devised for particular languages. The norms are therefore monolingual norms. Clinicians investigate whether there are problems in someone's language ability (they assess speech-*language*) through the only means that they have to get at language, which is to check the particular languages of their clients ("client" is a standard term for those seeking counsel about speech-language). In order to get a reliable assessment, clinicians should ideally be able to test all of their clients' languages. However, clinical assessment tests exist for only a very few languages, many of them translated and/or adapted from tests originally designed in English for *monolingual speakers of English* – people who are, moreover, speakers of particular varieties of this language. So the issue is not only that the tests reflect monolingual norms, it is also that there are many languages for which no tests are available at all. How, for example, do you assess a child's proficiency in inflecting the different past tense forms of each verb in Portuguese with norms that hold for English, whose past tense forms are the same for each verb?

Many speech-language clinicians, faced with multilingual clients, have therefore no way of adequately testing all of their clients' languages. It is not the case either that clinicians will be multilingual themselves, because knowledge of different languages (and often, of multilingualism itself) is not part of their training. They may then test one language, for which assessment tools happen to exist. But as we saw in Chapter 2, being multilingual means that different languages are used differently. So multilinguals are caught between multilingualism and a hard place, because they have to be tested in languages for which tests are available (this may be a problem for monolingual children too, of course) and they are unlikely to match the score which the tests were devised to assess, because the tests target monolingual uses of a language: there are no tests devised for multilinguals. A multilingual child may lack words for, say, bedtime happenings in one language, because it is daddy, not mummy, who's in charge of bedtime, and mum and dad speak different languages. If the child is tested in mum's language only, the results will show a "gap" in vocabulary, a lack of words which are otherwise plain, everyday, known to all children, and so a suspected "disorder" in language development. By the same token, you will judge a Scottish accent as deviant if the only assessment instruments that you know about are normed for a Texan accent.

Now multiply this by the number of multilinguals referred to clinics and by the number of different languages that they speak, and you get a steady correlation of language "deficits" of all sorts, on the one side, with multilingual speakers of different language combinations, on the other.



From there to taking the correlation as causality is a very small step indeed. We do this all the time, rightly or wrongly: if every time you eat chocolate you get a pimply nose, there's a correlation between chocolate and pimples, but there's also a strong likelihood that the chocolate causes the pimples. If my word processor crashes whenever I forget to back up my documents, there's also a correlation, but the causality here may be rather more obscure. In the case of our multilinguals, since vocabulary or grammatical deficits cannot cause multilingualism, and since the culprits can't be particular languages because they're all different, then it must be multilingualism itself which causes the deficits.

This is why multilingual children continue to be diagnosed as "delayed": their production and understanding of one of their languages doesn't match the norms for that language among their monolingual peers, so it must be a deviation from those norms. Finding a difference in linguistic behaviour is equated with finding an anomaly. Other multilinguals are referred by schoolteachers to speech-language clinics on suspicion of learning difficulties, which are a general cognitive issue. The issue may instead be that the child is for some reason struggling with the language of schooling, in which case what he needs is a language tutor, not a language clinician. Whichever the case may be, the conclusion is invariably the same: multilinguals need therapy because they are multilingual. This belief is not, unfortunately, without serious consequences. Multilingual children who may indeed have speech-language problems often end up being diagnosed with multilingualism itself, for which the standard "medication" is the peculiar recommendation to use only one language with them. The use of a single language has absolutely nothing to do with linguistic impairment or linguistic recovery. If it did, there would be no monolinguals with speech-language problems.

How can we then tell apart multilingual competence from language impairment? This is a very, very good question, which means that we don't know the answer to it. Multilingualism may not be an ailment that needs attention, but it is something that needs urgent recognition as a *norm*, so that multilingual assessment can be engaged in, in the two senses of this phrase: assessment of multilinguals and assessment which is multilingual. Until we have multilingual norms to guide us in assessment, we may find comfort in what we do know about multilingual development: first, that monolingual and multilingual children alike reach the same developmental milestones at the same time; and second, that multilingual children lucky enough to have had normed tools devised for all of their languages, thus allowing assessment of their overall language abilities, fall within the norms as much as their monolingual peers. We do therefore know that

multilingualism cannot cause speech-language delay, because it doesn't even *correlate* with delay.

And speaking of developmental milestones, I am persuaded that a lot of anxiety and related clinical referrals is not just due to caregivers' (and sometimes educators', and medical doctors') deficient knowledge about multilingualism. It is also due to ignorance about child language development itself and/or about child overall development. When you don't know what's going on, it's easy to take typical child development for disorder and then blame disorder on multilingualism. For example, your multilingual child may start stuttering around the age when she is also starting to put together words to form utterances that finally are becoming more or less intelligible to you. If she additionally uses the grammar of one of her languages with the words of another, invents words of her own, at times appears lost in singsong gibberish for hours on end, throws colossal tantrums, and calls Sam "Tam", then she's a perfectly normal child.

It is of course wise to seek counsel if there is objective reason to do so. In order to decide whether specialist intervention is necessary, parents can do preliminary check-ups themselves. I may be old-fashioned, but I still think that no one knows a child better than a parent. Parents can compare their child to itself, just like we do to check bodily growth or the symptoms of an impending bout of flu. The child is somehow not behaving in ways that we know are "normal" for *that* child. We can check whether there is regression or stagnation *in all languages*, for example, which could be a sign that something does indeed need attention. Does the child use fewer words today than a few months ago, or has the child settled for the use of the same words and the same type of sentences for several months now? Exercising common sense is probably a good idea too: those cases that come to our knowledge as problematic may not in fact be problematic, given the assessment methods that are so far available to us, or may not be representative of all children who are developing in multilingual contexts. Nobody reports a child, whether monolingual or multilingual, who's behaving normally or above average. A child takes many years to develop linguistic competence, whatever the number of languages involved. And multilingual children all over the world *where multilingualism is the norm* develop just fine – probably because nobody worries about their multilingualism. Let's now look at the many wondrous ways that families come up with to agonise over their children's multilingual upbringing.

10

*There are some very odd children in my school.
Their mum and dad speak the same language.*

OPOL kindergartener, reporting her
impressions from the first school day

In order to raise multilingual children, you must speak to them in only one language

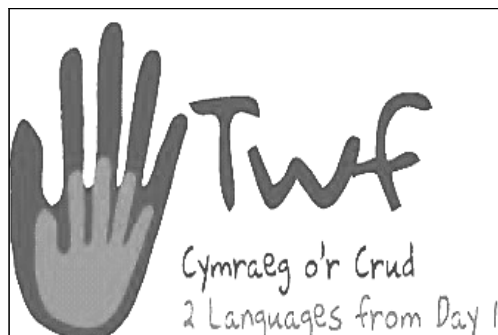
The fuss about multilingualism starts in the family, because that's where people normally start too. It translates into worried questions about how best to raise a child multilingually, namely, which language(s) should caregivers use with the child. I've never heard mixed families fret about how to teach their children to use fork and knife or chopsticks, or debate whether to appear before their children dressed in jeans or a sari, but the issue of what to expose them to as far as languages are concerned appears to keep everyone mystified.

We may start by asking ourselves why no monolingual family worries about the best way of raising their child monolingually. The issue doesn't arise in monolingual families because their use of language will, expectedly, be natural: the parents will speak to their child the (one) language that comes naturally to them, and the child will naturally learn it. In contrast, families who decide to raise their children multilingually are bound to start at once seeking information and advice about what exactly should be done to achieve this purpose successfully. We may go on wondering why is it that multilingual families should worry about this at all. In other words, what is it that makes multilingual families hesitate to resort to what must come naturally to them too, as far as uses of language are concerned? Let's review a couple of very common worries expressed by caregivers of multilinguals-to-be.

There are questions about how: how can my children become multilingual? The answer is that people become multilingual in exactly the same way and for exactly the same reasons that people become monolingual: because they need several languages, or only one language, respectively, to go about their everyday communicative needs. Put another way, it is as natural to grow up multilingual as it is to grow up monolingual. Children learn the language(s) around them in the same way that they learn the social behaviours and cultural traditions to

which they are exposed, which is through experiencing them in meaningful practice.

There are also questions about when: when should my children learn a new language? This of course presupposes that at least one “old” language is already in place and further presupposes that age is a (perhaps *the*) relevant factor in learning a new language (see Chapters 5 and 8). These questions express the worry that there may be a time when it is either too early or too late to learn languages. The answer is that a new language should be introduced when the need to use that language arises. Some children learn several languages from day one, as it were, for example in mixed families where different languages are used simultaneously.



For these children, all of their languages (or none of them) are “new”. Their multilingualism shows that learning different languages does not necessarily mean learning them one after the other, and that there is therefore no need to wait until one language is in place, as some people believe must be the case, to start introducing a new one. We might as well go on attempting to decide when exactly is a language ever “in place” until the child reaches retirement age, given that language learning is a lifelong process.

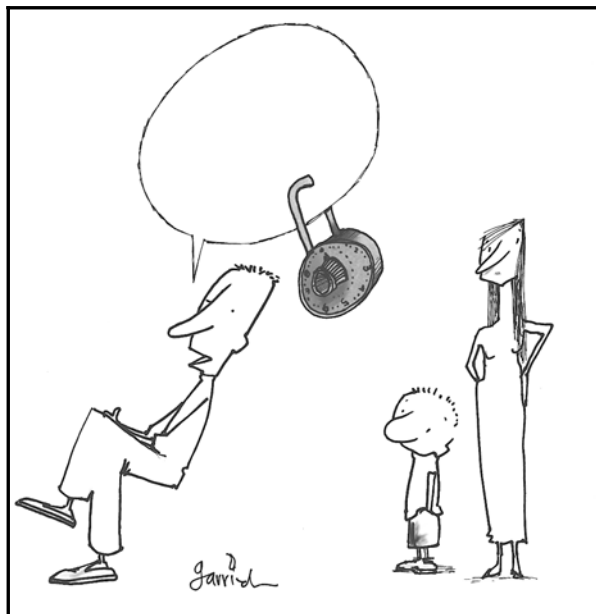
Other mixed families choose to start off with a single language, and introduce other languages successively later on. Yet other families find it best to switch language according to place or time, for example, one language at home, another outside, or one language on weekdays, another on weekends. Any of these strategies will work fine. The child’s age is of minor concern, not because children are little sponges, as the saying goes, who will soak up anything any time (they’re not and they won’t), but because what really matters in any learning is motivation. Just like you learn to behave socially around adults and other children in order to thrive among them, you learn to behave linguistically around them, whether they use one or more languages, for the same purposes and because you understand what’s going on. There is no “golden rule”, no single “foolproof” strategy to raise multilingual children successfully:

each family decides what suits their needs best, because every family is unique and so is every child. What matters is first, that the child feels the need to use different languages on an everyday basis and, second, that the child is consistently exposed to natural uses of language.

Exposure is a key word, because you can't of course learn a language (or anything else) for which you get no input. *Consistently* is another, because children learn best (languages or anything else) through finding patterns, that is, regularities in their surroundings. But *natural* is the master-key word, which answers questions about the *who* in this quest for hassle-free multilingual family management: who should speak what to whom? Monolingual parents in monolingual families obviously use their language with their children. If each caregiver in a multilingual family is monolingual in different languages, we have a textbook example of what is called the one person-one language family policy (OPOL), where "one language" is understood to mean two things: always the same language and only that one language is used *to* the child – and is in turn expected from the child. But what if caregivers, one or more, are multilingual, including from birth? Or, for that matter, if they speak different varieties of the same language? Often, there is in fact no conscious "decision" about language use, in that one language or another will spontaneously emerge as the right one in actual practice. But it is also true that multilingual caregivers often wonder whether they *should* choose only one language to use with the child and, if so, which. I think that the inflation of questions out there about the use of only one language among multilingual parents is due to the increasing high profile of the OPOL in the past few decades, so it is perhaps in order to take a little excursion to see what exactly the OPOL is all about.

Most of what we know about language policies in multilingual homes deals with families where the caregivers are monolinguals. The OPOL scenario Monolingual-Caregivers-Raising-Multilingual-Children thus acquired the status of observed "norm". But it is of course a norm for, well, Monolingual-Caregivers-Raising-Multilingual-Children. The "OL" in OPOL means what it says: one language per person, on the caregivers' side. This norm cannot therefore account for multilingual caregivers. First, because multilingual caregivers are not part of the studies on which this norm is based; and second, because multilinguals are not monolinguals. The OPOL doesn't "help" children learn languages, as a popular belief has it. "OPOL" is just the name for what monolingual parents in mixed families were found to do with their children. Nevertheless, because multilingual caregivers most probably haven't been informed that the OPOL is a *monolingual*-caregiver norm and because, as we're finding out, monolingual-based norms tend to be generalised as is to multilingual settings, the OPOL has gone from observed (monolingual) norm to prescribed (across the board) norm: no

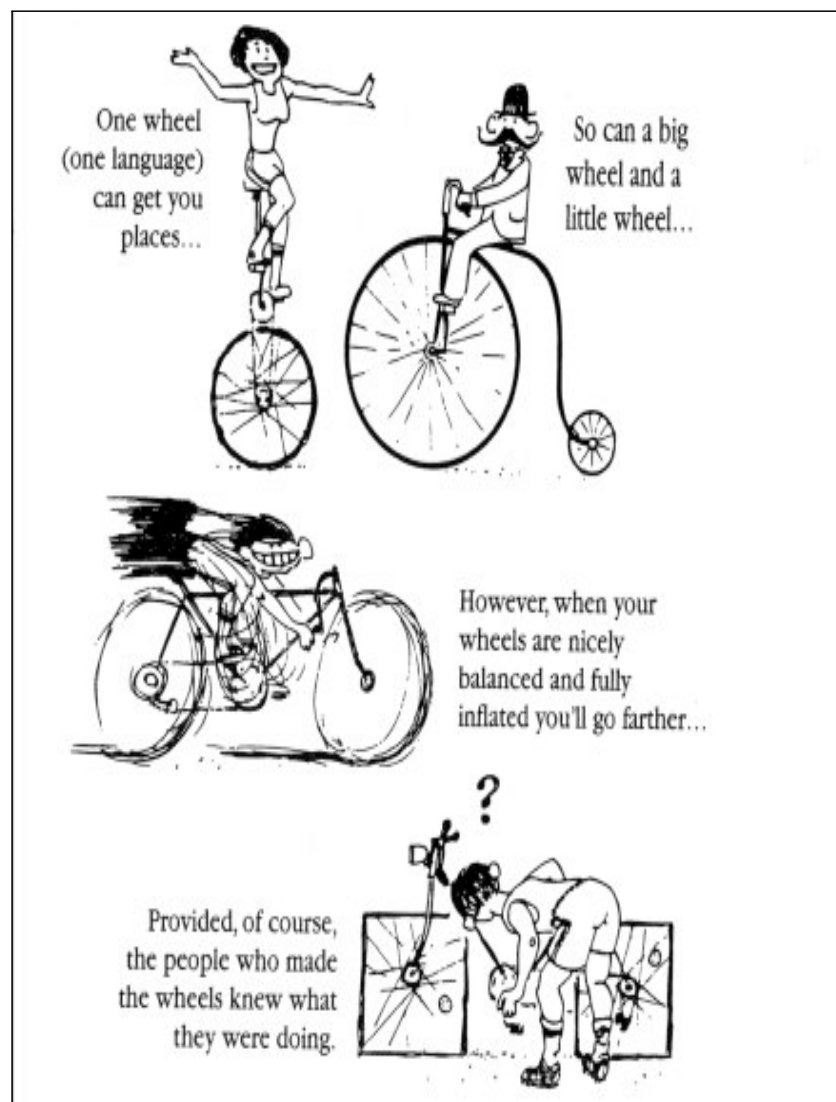
matter your linguistic background, you have to use only one language with your child.



The OPOL does work. There are many reports of successful child multilingualism achieved through this policy, so this is not an issue. The issue is whether OPOL caregivers are really OPOL caregivers, regardless of whether they say they are. What we find is that they are not. Even self-rated strict OPOL parents cross the one language line, some of them more often than not. Ask me? I'm definitely one of them. Like me, many "OPOL" caregivers use several languages to their children, despite fibbing about doing so, probably out of fear of being considered uncaring, inconsistent, jeopardising, deficient (that word again, yes) caregivers. Although I will tell you, if you ask me, that the language I use with my children is Portuguese, I've caught myself using all of my family's three languages with them. I can also tell you the first time this happened, which was during homework revision of times tables. I instinctively used Portuguese in my questions, the reason being that this is the language in which I learned and know my own times tables, and I became unsettled at what I thought was an abnormally long reaction time before the response came, also in Portuguese. Were my children that bad with numbers, or that slack with their own maths revision skills? They weren't, of course, they were just being good children by speaking my language to me. They were also translating the numbers in my questions into English, in order to compute the sums in English as they had learned to do in school, and then re-translating the final result into Portuguese, to tell me the answer. I asked them, out of curiosity,

and they confirmed that this was in fact the answering procedure that they were using. Homework is set in a particular language and must therefore be understood in that language, so I quickly realised that the *natural* thing to do was to talk about it using that language. The same goes for celebrations and other happenings encapsulated in a language for cultural reasons.

Only very recently have people begun to realise that parents can be multilingual too, as if this were a big novelty. The alternative policy which we may call OPSL (one person-several languages), if we really need to call it by name, also works fine. Evidence comes from all the multilingual parents around the world who never heard of family language policies and who have raised their children multilingually by simply being what they are: multilinguals.



Language use is a habit, and children are learning that too. Besides, why not nurture multilingualism by giving the budding multilingual child a perfect role model – yourself? That is, an adult who feels at home in several languages, which is precisely what the child is expected to become in time. Strict OPOL enforcement in fact exposes children to monolingual adult models, while paradoxically purporting to nurture multilingualism. So why not use French to your child, if you woke up in a French mood today? Or Greek tomorrow evening, if you're serving tatziki sauce at dinner? I think many multilingual parents will know, like I do, that one of your languages sounds more appropriate to discuss, say, school matters, whereas a different language definitely matches a good romp before bedtime better. Or that the language that gushes out of you to react to your child's scraped knee and bloody nose at the playground is not the same that you find yourself using when giving instructions about tooth-brushing.

What won't work is forcing yourself to speak in an artificial way to your own children – just imagine if monolingual caregivers felt somehow forced to use an OPOL policy. I continue to be dumbfounded by the sophisticated ways that otherwise sensible caregivers find to torture themselves linguistically, often with no awareness that their children will sense their tension and in all likelihood become linguistically tense too. One parent writes that she wakes up every morning with no idea about which language to speak to her little one. Another tells me that he wants his children to learn one of his languages, but finds himself tired and taxed by having to use only that language all day. A third asks me how their household and their timetable should be organised, including where to find nannies, helpers and/or tutors to hire, and how many hours a day each should talk to their children so that the children can acquire each of their parents' two languages in the "proper" one person-one language way. Yet another misinterprets the "OL" in OPOL to mean 'the same language all the time' and argues that his wife should communicate with him in her language and he should communicate with her in his, or else their child will never become bilingual in those languages. These parents were honestly persuaded that hearing two different languages from the same person is more confusing than hearing two different languages in the same dialogue. Yes, the multilingual paranoia at times takes frightening turns. Some parents forget on the whole that their children need parenting from them, in whatever language(s), not language lessons. Others wonder whether the multilingual development of their own children shouldn't best be managed by speech pathologists, as we saw in the previous chapter.

There is a methodology, but it has nothing to do with strict timetables, let alone with forcing people into being constantly on the

lookout for which language to use, stopwatch in hand. Nobody can stand this kind of mental pressure at length – even professional interpreters work in shifts. The methodology is that you use with your child whatever comes naturally to you. Multilingual parents may choose to speak all their languages or only a few of them to their children, often depending on which language(s) they feel are indeed *theirs*. Children in turn learn languages not because these are taught as an end in themselves, but because they are used to nurture and to form social bonds, to chat, comfort, giggle, cajole, tell off, play, sing nursery rhymes, help solve serious and less serious matters through the terrible twos and threes and the even more terrible teens.

Children attune themselves to whatever language uses they find around them and learn to respond to them. They have no idea that languages are things that adults worry about, and so have no idea either whether mums and dads “should” speak one language each, or different languages, or more than one language, or both the same language, or which language goes with what. They won’t be confused by anything except adults’ own confusions. They may even create their own language policies when they realise, which they do very early in their lives, that parental speech is dated, unfashionable, uncool speech, which is therefore of no interest to them – whatever the language. They will naturally start adopting their peers’ speech habits, including choice of language and, here too, there is no reason to deny them the language choices that come naturally to them. You may even find yourself wondering, like I do, what language(s) your multilingual children will one day use with their own children, because parent-child language(s) are part of a very intimate bond. This is why I puzzle over why some caregivers might want to choose home languages not according to family needs but according to marketing goals. The next chapter explains what I mean by this.

11

*Nothing that is worth learning
can be taught.*

Oscar Wilde

Multilingualism should be encouraged, but only in languages that matter

Multilingualism has recently become a fad. People currently sport XXXL-sized handbags, express concern about the environment, sip bottled water throughout the day, and raise multilingual children. It is of course good news that multilingualism is becoming a household word, so that the bogeyman aura that still clings to it in places may cease to intimidate people.



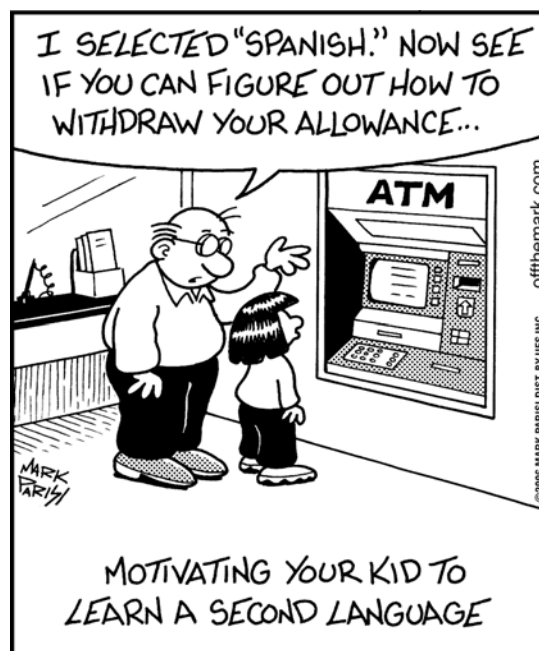
But the flip side is that it risks becoming the latest cure-all instead, with attested beneficial effects on anxiety, personality, professional success and mental tone and, by extension, probably body tone too. The new-found aura of multilingualism has also resulted in budding literacy about it among caregivers, regardless of whether they're multilinguals themselves. But here too, there is a snag: it is not always clear that parents wish to expose their children to language X or language Y, or to multilingualism at all, because that matters to the children or because that matters to themselves.

One case where language matters clearly matter to the children involves the extended family – grandparents, cousins, in-laws. These are (extended) caregivers that matter because they're around. They also speak languages, which may not be the same as the core family's ones. Particularly in close-knit families, caregivers may wish to keep those languages in good working condition, so the child can enjoy grandpa's or auntie's company with no need for an interpreter. Those languages may also allow the child to keep in touch with friends who speak them, whether in the family's original country or elsewhere. Grandpa and auntie themselves can take care of passing on their languages to the child, with no interference from mum or dad. This kind of multilingualism usually works itself out smoothly, not least because the extended relatives already have experience of multilingual contexts. In contrast, monolingual relatives who do speak one of the core family's languages, but who encounter multilingualism for the first time there, sometimes end up adding to parental woes about home language policies. You realise that raising a multilingual child also means educating your monolingual relatives when you get questions like "Do you really mean to force the poor thing to speak two languages?" or "Shouldn't you have this gobbledygook of his checked out?", asked with unmistakable signs of distress and preferably in the presence of the gobbledygook-speakers themselves.

Any perceived deviations in the children's ways of expressing themselves are immediately attributed to their multilingualism. The child speaks "only" the "other" language-thingy-whatever-you-call-it. Words that "all other children know" are missing; whereas words that they do use sound funny. If monolingual children babble away in Strange-Speak, they're being cute and creative. If multilingual children do exactly the same, their linguistic abilities are being threatened by your bizarre parental choices. Well-meaning relatives will scrutinise your child's behavioural output too, and invariably find it as wanting, because it doesn't (it can't, in fact) match familiar behaviour associated with *their* language. Multilinguals will naturally act differently, when they don each of their linguistic hats, and it may not always be easy for less prepared relatives to avoid the feeling that their own flesh and blood are aliens in disguise instead. If there are two monolingual sides to the family, each one will in addition persuade themselves that your child can only speak the other language "properly", on the trademark assumption that people can only speak one language "properly". In other words, not only are you, the parent, failing to raise a decent, solid little monolingual but, worse, the "other side" is winning. In cases like this, you have two alternatives: engage your relatives in the language nurturing itself, to keep them usefully busy, or buy them a copy of this book for their next birthday.

You get similar flak, by the way, from friends and acquaintances (and schoolteachers, and medical doctors, and even strangers). People who don't know your language will find ways to make clear to you their disapproval of your rudeness when they hear you talking to your child in that language. They always somehow appear to suspect that you must be talking about them, instead of to your child, saying boring things like "take your finger out of your nose" (that's rude!), "look at the birdie there", or "are you hungry?", that they surely also say to their children, in their language. Your role as a parent is obviously not to help your child develop the languages that matter to other people.

Let's now look through a sample of situations where languages may matter in alternative ways. The previous chapter described what is sometimes called the "natural" way of raising children multilingually. This doesn't mean that there aren't any other ways of doing this, or that other ways are unnatural. It simply means that the caregivers make largely instinctive choices about which languages to use in the family, on the assumption that those languages will naturally matter to both them and their children. Sometimes, however, caregivers may want to make rather more conscious goal-oriented choices about home language policies.



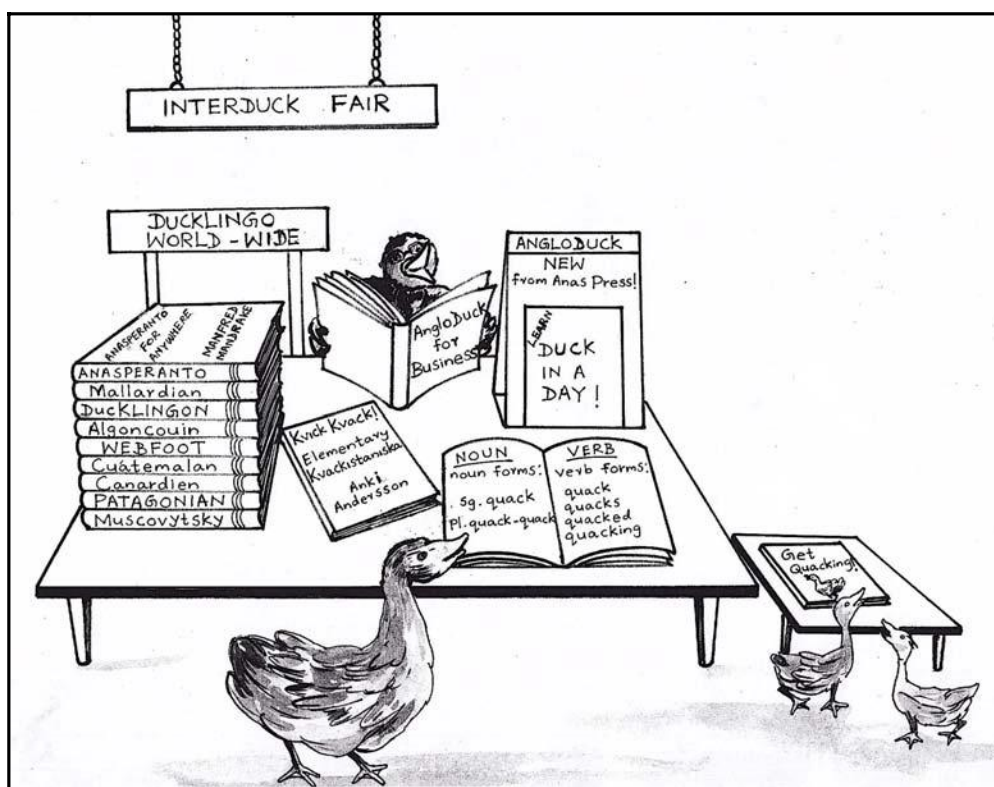
A parent in a mixed family may for example wish to support the language of the other parent, in cases where this language is for some reason deemed to be at risk of loss of interest from the children. Or, in association with a move to a new country, parents may choose to help their children learn the language(s) used in the new community and the

new school (which may or may not be different). In these and similar cases, many parents so choose to speak a non-native language to their children. I've now used another bogeyman word here, "non-native", which is known to cause ripples of discomfort when collocated with "to their children". How dare a non-native, the incredulous (indignant, scowling, glaring, tut-tut) question goes, arrogate the right to nurture children in a language that is not his/hers/its? The answer is: with no problem at all. The rule of thumb of successful language nurturing is that language which is directed to a child sound genuine. Small children have no idea that people use "non-native languages", or even a particular "language" with them. And to assuage trepidation about ownership of languages, see Chapter 4.

Where the situation involves languages which are alien to the family, things can get a bit more complicated. Two opposite scenarios spring to mind. First, where the language(s) of the caregivers appear as undesirable, for reasons of prestige. This is typical in situations of immigration, where "prestige" associates with the mainstream language used in the host country. Caregivers may feel urged to push their own language(s) to the background, in the belief that this will foster their children's blooming in the new one, or the children themselves may take charge of the extinction of the home language in the home by simply refusing to use it. All gradations of language allocation, embracement and shunning can be found here, depending on all sorts of social, educational and political circumstances. These circumstances have nothing to do with multilingualism itself and all to do with established judgements of value about particular languages, but they do end up affecting decisions about home language policies. A second scenario arises where caregivers worry about a language that may not have direct relevance for their everyday situation, but is a language of prestige in the wider world, regardless of whether theirs is too. One example is the growing wish to have children learn English in otherwise monolingual communities, because English is a language that everybody must know to generally partake of the current global cake.



In cases like these, caregivers may want to give their children a helping hand, not for the purposes of nurturing multilingualism itself, but for the sake of one or more specific languages. One snag is that our predictions about relevant languages and our children's own interest in the language that interests us may of course fall short. Another is that setting in motion a language that you chose for its own sake may lead to contrived multilingualism. The reason is that people tend to think that children will learn anything any old way. One popular idea is that learning a language must proceed through structured instruction.



This is the kind of language instruction that you get in school (see Chapter 5), which is also chiefly meant to pass tests and exams, and which therefore may not be an ideal method of introducing a new language in the home. Enrolling yourself in a language course just for the purpose of using that language to your child (yes, this does happen, and not seldom either) is probably not a good idea either. I'm not saying that structured teaching of languages at home is wrong, I'm saying that there is a huge difference between doing that and *using* a language at home. Parking the children in front of the TV for purposes of language tutoring will have mixed effects too. It is true that languages that children happen to overhear – say, the parents' own common language, or the one in the family's favourite TV show – will in some way “stick”.

But it is also true that if children's only exposure to a language is through TV-like things, they will produce TV-like language in that language. The point I'm making is that the way to learn languages, for children and adults alike, is through meaningful interaction in them, which means *human* interaction: the best language lessons are the ones that don't target the languages themselves at all.

The hype about multilingualism is making it emerge as a sort of badge, something that you wear instead of something that you are. Learning particular languages because they "matter" is fine, but the mattering bit must make sense to the children too. Multilingualism risks becoming a marketable commodity according to adult interests instead. Someone publishes a study saying that a group of 10 multilingually-raised adults who participated in an experiment showed better retention of related words in each of their languages than their monolingual peers. The next day, the media report that multilingualism enhances memory, and the next day you have fully-packaged offers online, complete with exclusive promotion discounts, which guarantee memory boost through learning of languages. And the next day parents are falling for this offer, until the next must-have course-gadget in turn takes hold of their gullible wallets. The eagerness to create multilingualism of this kind may well be a reflection of the myth that people who speak many languages must be geniuses. We can try to work this out in a little more detail.

12

*Into the face of the young man who sat
on the terrace of the Hotel Magnifique at Cannes
there had crept a look of furtive shame,
the shifty hangdog look which announces
that an Englishman is about to talk French.*

P G Wodehouse
(*The Luck of the Bodkins*)

Multilinguals are multilinguals because they are gifted for languages

I am not sure that the title of this chapter means what I want to say. I have certainly heard, time and again, that you are multilingual because you are gifted for languages, but I have also heard, and as often, that you are gifted for languages because you are multilingual. A typical chicken and egg problem, in other words. I think the idea that I mean to talk about is the one described in the chapter title, so I'll try, although I must confess that I have serious difficulties understanding this whole issue.

We saw in Chapter 5 that the ideal language learner is said to be either a multilingual or a child. This must mean that multilingual children ace it all on the language learning front, a claim whose validity Chapter 5 also addressed. Let's suppose that the claim is true and let's further suppose that you are an elderly monolingual who manages to learn a new language successfully. Since you're neither multilingual nor young, and since there's nothing people resist with greater pig-headedness than changing their ingrained opinions, you will be classified in a new category of learners: you're gifted.



There are examples of learners like this, more than many people perhaps know about or would like to advertise, who, expectedly, are classified as “exceptional” language learners. In this case, and for once, “exceptional” is not a politically correct word used to play down multilingual achievements – although these learners are an “exception” only because someone came up with the funny “rule” that children and/or multilinguals are *the* language learners par excellence.

Now, I am very wary of making assertions about language giftedness, for three reasons. One, because I have no idea how to measure or assess it. If I speak three languages and you speak two, am I more gifted than you and, if so, how much more? What if our friend speaks four, does that make her double as gifted as you? But maybe the issue is not deciding on values along a cline in giftedness, maybe the issue is more all-or-none, like this: anyone who knows more than one language is gifted. If so, all multilinguals, and no monolinguals, are gifted for languages. And if all multilinguals are gifted for languages by this criterion, how do we account for the multilingual big Pedros out there, from our Chapter 3, who fail miserably at learning a new language? (You can have a look in Chapter 5 for some clues.)

It could be that “gifted for languages” doesn’t apply to quantities only, as in one vs. many. Say I speak Portuguese, Spanish and French, which are sister languages (all descended from a common mother, Latin), and say you speak Russian, Mandarin and Japanese, which have no known common ancestor. The latter are generally considered to be “difficult” languages, by Western standards, so which of us two is (more) gifted (or not), by Western standards? “Difficult” is yet another difficult word. What can “difficult language” mean, if all children anywhere around the world learn any language to which they are exposed, at the same rate and in the same way? It could be that “difficult” is a relative concept after all, in the sense that things are difficult (or not) *for* someone. French in itself is no more (or less) difficult than Japanese, although it can be easy to learn for speakers of Latin languages and difficult for speakers of Japanese.

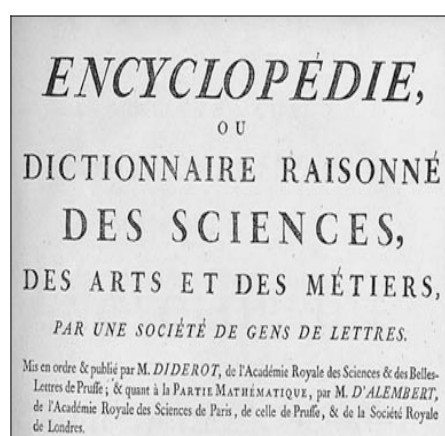
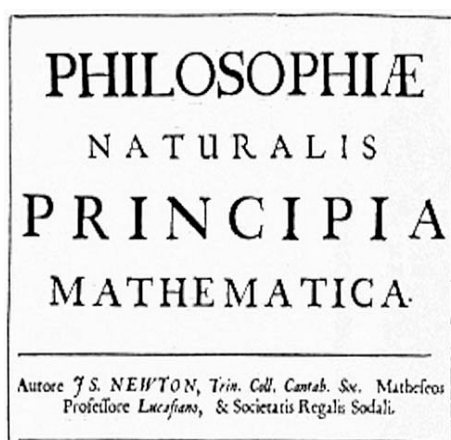
My second reason for not liking to talk about gifts is that I find it difficult to understand what talent is and where it may come from. There may be a genetic component, in the sense that baby fish will obviously swim. But the thing is that, just like with “difficult” above, talent is also a relative concept. You can’t just be talented. There aren’t any overall geniuses that I know of. You are (or not) talented *at* something, which means that a particular something must in some way reveal itself to you, so that you can discover your talent at it and eventually nurture it.

We can give a hackneyed example: Mozart. We wouldn’t want to deny his talent, but he did spend his childhood short of chained to a

piano by a talented parent intent on churning musical talent out of his offspring 24/7. So was Mozart born talented? Or try this way: can we say that someone who never had a chance to learn to play the piano is not talented at it? How do we know, if the person never had a chance to show whether yes or no? And would Mozart have grown to become what we know him to be if he had been allowed to chase butterflies and play with mud in his backyard as a child, instead of practising scales and brushing up on his counterpoint? Would his talent show, if inborn? (And is it showing that this whole story about talent is extremely confusing to me?)

Languages are different from pianos, admittedly, because everybody must learn at least one. The thing is that there are multilinguals who are good at languages and multilinguals who are not. I wouldn't want either to deny monolinguals a talent for language, and so for languages, if given the chance to become multilingual. There are also monolinguals who are linguists, that is, users of one language who have an interest in languages and chose that interest as their profession (aren't they gifted for languages, then?), and there are multilinguals who couldn't care less about languages for their own sake. So I think part of my difficulty with this topic is the lumping together of multilinguals in one (talented) category and monolinguals in another (untalented) one.

The final reason why I shy away from talent matters is the grim tendency to use verdicts of giftedness to set up and/or defend elites, of whatever kind. The reasoning that multilinguals are gifted for languages correlates a quantity (number of languages) with a quality (talent, special intellectual powers, intelligence). The association of knowing many languages with a special intellectual status has its roots in traditional views of what a "cultured individual" is. Historically, Western cultured individuals have had to learn first Latin, then French, and now English, in order to be able to communicate with an intellectual elite worldwide.



It follows that if you were a part of that elite, you had to speak at least one language that was not your own. By inverted logic, you can retrieve the chapter title that I ended up not using, to conclude that you are an “intellectual”, and therefore specially intelligent, because you speak more than one language. It is this reasoning which prompts people to learn languages, or use their learning, as a status symbol. It is chic and sophisticated to pretend to struggle for words in your language, for example, then sprinkle your utterances with words of a prestige language, and then ask “You know what I mean?” of your conversation partners. It is even more sophisticated to do this when you’re dead sure that your partners have no idea what you mean because they don’t understand the prestige language, or the bits of it that you chose to use. Parents can also attempt to remedy unwelcome associations of monolingualism with lack of talent by trapping their children in this ugly game (see also the previous chapter), not for the sake of the children, but as evidence that if little fish swim, they must have got this ability from somewhere.

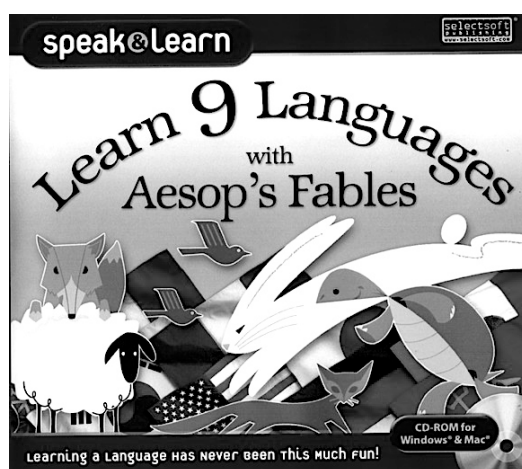


There is of course no correlation between the number of languages one speaks and the magnitude of one’s intelligence. All degrees of intelligence (and stupidity) are found among monolinguals and multilinguals alike. But if you decide that some people are gifted, for languages or anything else, and some not, then you’ll feel justified in not

bothering about the “some not”: oh well, we tried, they’re just not gifted, too bad, born that way, alas!, not much we can do about it, etc. etc. The idea here is that talent is a feature that you can’t help, whether you’ve got it or not. Those of us who are born untalented cannot therefore be expected to learn, languages or anything else. We’re not even worth the effort of at least trying – and we have of course a good excuse for not bothering at all. All of this despite our knowledge that the baby fish will swim, yes, but that swimming practice is what makes perfect. It makes one wonder about the extent to which this expected non-performance from language learners prevents their language learning.

I think that my discomfort hinges on the use of multilingualism for purposes that have nothing to do with multilingualism itself. My point is, again, threefold. First, that the correlation of multilingualism with talent (or skill, gift, aptitude) confuses talent with need. It says that you are multilingual not because you’re a perfectly ordinary person who follows suit on your language environment, just like everybody else does, but because you’re gifted. This makes no sense at all: being or becoming multilingual is a matter of survival, not the result of some “natural ability to pick up languages”. Multilinguals are no more gifted for *their* languages than monolinguals are. Besides, saying that multilinguals are gifted means that *all* multilinguals are gifted, which again makes no sense. If most human beings are “gifted”, then it is *normal* to be gifted. I’m sure this is not what the people who claim giftedness of multilinguals want to say.

Second, correlating multilingualism with talent forgets that being multilingual is not something you’re born with, it’s something that your environment dictates for you. Since you cannot be born multilingual, your talent for languages must be acquired as you *become* multilingual. It follows that if talent for languages can be sourced in multilingualism, then we’ve found the Eldorado: we just enrol in language courses and then we all *become* gifted for languages.



This may again not be what people mean when they talk about language gifts.

Third, and perhaps more importantly, labelling multilinguals, but not monolinguals, as “gifted” keeps the flame of multilingual oddness burning. Accumulating languages paradoxically results either in disability, as we saw in Chapter 9, or in over-ability. Multilinguals are, yet again, special, who somehow have different abilities from other mortals. They are, after all, not normal. This, I’m sure, is what the equation of multilingualism with talent is meant to put across. Highlighting the “special” nature of multilingualism has in fact been a constant, in discussions of it. But “special” is a double-edged word. Is it special-good or special-bad to be multilingual? The next chapter finds out about this.

13

*It is, of course, an advantage for a child
to be familiar with two languages
but without doubt the advantage may be,
and generally is, purchased too dear.*

Otto Jespersen

Multilingualism is a boon, but also a bane, or vice versa

There seems to be no agreement on whether multilingualism carries benefits or drawbacks, compared to monolingualism. If you look at it one way, multilingualism enhances brain power, makes you clever(er) and generally (more) verbally and socially gifted. Strong(er) problem-solving and cognitive skills, for example, are attributed to the continued practice of switching among languages, regardless of the amount of input you receive in each one. If you look at it another way, multilingualism eats up brain power, causes miscellaneous developmental glitches and makes you linguistically and culturally unintelligible to fellow human beings. Weak(er) language skills in each language are also attributed to switching among languages, because switching entails that none of your languages can be made to develop completely. (If you look at it both ways, by the way, you have to marvel at the Catch-22 which manages to call multilinguals abnormal in two radically opposite senses.)

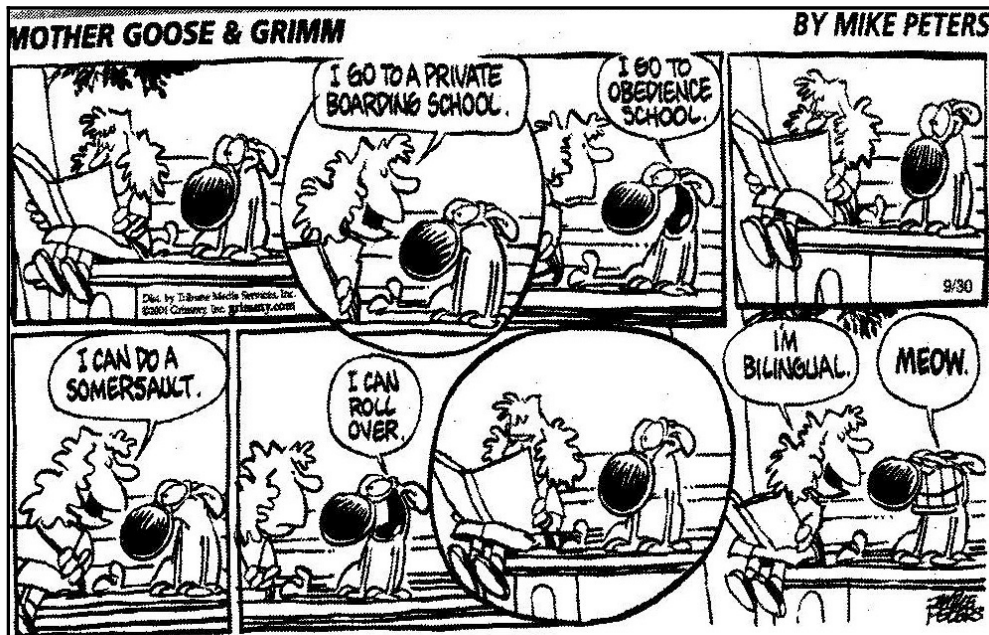
A bit of history might help us understand the reasons for this paradox. The first studies about multilingualism, which came to light in the early 1900's, invariably concluded for the bane side: the use of several languages was found to correlate with assorted ailments (except tooth decay, I think), ranging anything from personality disorders, through inability to cope with maths, to overall delays. Multilingualism was thus duly interpreted to cause these ailments (see Chapter 9 for the causality bit in this reasoning), which meant that it should be avoided at all costs. Children were therefore punished with sound spankings for speaking their home and/or community languages in school, all in the name of fostering sound adult cognition abilities: one "good" language was needed for this purpose, as we saw in Chapter 3, and the children's own language clearly was "no good".

Then, in the 1960's, a fresh batch of researchers found that their pioneering colleagues had in fact messed up somewhat beyond what might be acceptable in scientific research worthy of the name. It was true that they had compared multilinguals to monolinguals, and sometimes even multilingual children to monolingual adults, but that was of course standard procedure, so no problem there. But they had also compared monolinguals from favoured socio-economic groups with multilinguals from less favoured ones, so that there was no way to decide whether the ailments correlated with (and so were due to) multilingualism, which was one difference between the groups of participants in the investigation, or with socio-economic status, which was another. In other words, they had failed to control their variables decently (see Chapter 5 for this bit).

These fresh studies then proceeded to compare multilinguals to monolinguals, as usual, but this time controlling the naughty variables. They found, oh surprise!, not only that all was well in Multilingual-Land, but that all was in fact exceedingly well. Multilinguals were not just good, they beat the monolinguals at any task, any time, any way, whether the games they were asked to play with the researchers involved abstract reasoning, language abilities, or social empathy. Multilinguals were faster at understanding the point of games like "Can you call a spoon a fork?", for example, which stumped the monolinguals, because multilinguals know (and monolinguals don't) that the same object can have different names in different languages, and so were able to extend that knowledge to a game involving pretend play in a single language. They also had more vocabulary than monolinguals, counting the total of items in all of their languages, and they were instinctively more willing to give the right clues to an "impaired" conversation partner (a blindfolded researcher) in a game involving visual skills, because they are used to solving disruptions caused by their own use of several languages with people who may not know the same languages.

Each of the opposite sides in these two groundbreaking sets of findings about multilingualism naturally enjoyed a significant cohort of specialist and lay followers, at each time: we all know how safe and comfy it feels to swim with the current. It was as obvious, and acceptable, to discover multilingual affliction in earlier times as it was to trumpet multilingual brilliance later.

So where is the current heading now, in this Monolingual (still Home) vs. Multilingual (still Visitors) knock-out championship?



In order to work this out, we need to make another little excursion, also related to history, but this time to do with pendulums. There is a useful analogy to be made between currents of thought and pendular motion. You go all the way one way, to then let go and move all the way the opposite way. You then repeat the swing but adjust its width, because you've been there and done that at each extreme and so learnt your lesson that extremes are, well, extremely one-sided. The decreasing width of the pendular range tends towards an equilibrium, a "balanced" state, to use a much-maligned word, where extreme pros and cons are held in check to allow cold-headed reasoning about things. We currently find pendular swings on consuming animal fats or black tea, as we did, in earlier times, on the benefits of leeching or ingesting mercury. History shows that extreme pendular swings, whether in ideologies, fashion or you name it, tend to occur at roughly regular intervals. It takes about 30-40 years, or 2-3 generations, for old things to lose the immediate status of "outdated" and (re)gain the more appealing status of "novelty": wearing miniskirts, bell-bottoms, and platform shoes are examples.

In other words, pendular motions reflect fads. Multilingualism is currently enjoying fad status (see Chapter 11), which is derived from the Multilinguals Rock! set of findings, and which is naturally lagging behind the still not so well publicised next swing of the pendulum. This next swing is already in motion and is, as naturally, narrower than the preceding one. Already we can make out signs of discomfort about wholesale endorsement of the benefits of multilingualism. Today's stance seems to be that "multilingualism is a good thing, but", complete with cautious acknowledgement that, say, multilinguals do appear to be

more creative than monolinguals, although we still need to find out how (and sometimes whether) creativeness does relate to the use of several languages. Other “buts” include yet unstudied “effects” associated with “input” or “cognitive development” in different languages. None of these big words, which in themselves have neutral meanings, is defined or explained, with the result that it is difficult to say whether the current final message about multilingualism is in fact appealing – or off-putting. Hedges begin to crop up even when dealing with apparently uncontroversial multilingual advantages, like the ability to gather knowledge from sources in different languages, or the linguistic and cultural competitive edge in the global workforce.

Trilingual



...and I'm very fluent in English, txtmsgng, and body language

Is it also a good thing, we should now ask ourselves, to create multilinguals in communities which are monolingual right now, for the sake of possible international employment later on? Multilingualism is of course a boon in multilingual contexts, right now or later on, but it is also a bane in monolingual ones, whether these contexts are naturally monolingual or whether there's a choice to enforce monolingualism in them for some reason or other.

So, the plot thickens? Not really. Like the pendulum, we've also been here before, and done this, and we're riding the next swing. It is no longer politically correct to vilify multilingualism across the board, because we don't want to suffer the fate of the followers of the early naysayers, but it may not be advisable either to glorify it unquestionably, because we can predict the fate of the later aye-sayers: the multi-

lingualism-is-a-boon fad will pass like its predecessor did before it. So is it good news, this opinion plateau that we seem to be reaching? I honestly can't tell. I don't know whether this pendulum will ever swing wildly again and, if it does, for what reasons and where to. Besides, opinions – whether of the plateau or the bumpy kind – are very different things from facts, and the facts that we have about multilingualism are, to say the least and to use another loaded word, fractional. They draw on findings extracted from different sets of multilinguals (children, adults, born into multilingual contexts, immigrated to a foreign country), which means that there cannot be a one-size-fits-all answer to whether multilingualism is good or bad. It all depends on conditions on the ground, as it were, individual, social and political ones which have nothing to do with languages or their users.

The main issue of course remains, that opinions about multilingualism are not amenable to fad analysis, because the facts are that multilingualism is not a fad. You don't sport it today to discard it tomorrow, you have it as an intrinsic part of what you are. Facts are also that we need facts, so that we understand, with our *minds*, what multilingualism is all about. To conclude this book, I next explain why we need to do this.

*We first raise a dust,
and then complain we cannot see.*

George Berkeley

What are we talking about, really??

Let's recap what we've learned about multilinguals. They are gifted semilinguals who are dominant in no mother tongue, whose brain brims with fractional languages learned through deficient multilingual input designed for lower thought. Their L1 must be well in place but is not a native language, because they have several L1s to match each of their split identities, although none of their languages is non-native-like. In short, they are clinically impaired workforce assets who, despite mixing their main language and an L4, which is a second language, are nevertheless able to learn any number of unbalanced languages any time, provided they do it in infancy.

They, yes. The funny-lingual ones to whom labels like these apply in someone's funny imagination. Not us, the real-life ones.



I'm reminded of the tale of the elephant and the blind men, to whom the elephant might as well be a rope hanging from a pillar next to a wall with a fan on top. The elephant was a novelty to the blind men, but they nevertheless ended up realising that it was an elephant and not a peculiar assortment of the bits and pieces which the blind men happened

to be familiar with. Multilinguals are only a novelty in the eyes of whoever insists on treating them as “special”. I think it’s high time we came to terms with the realisation that multilinguals are about as special as monolinguals. For this, we need to make it clear to ourselves that there are norms which identify multilingual behaviour. We need to make it clear that multilingualism must be studied on its own terms. No funny comparisons, no judgements of value, no random groping about. No nonsense.

Labels like “special” apply to things that we don’t really understand. The question in the book title remains, then. We have no idea what multilinguals are. I’ll go on looking for answers to that question. I hope you will too.

Introducing *Yuti*

All profits from the sale of this book, including the royalties normally paid to the author, will go to *Yuti* (meaning 'unity'), a fully trilingual children's magazine (Sinhala, Tamil, English). 50,000 copies of each issue of this imaginative, educational, and colourful magazine are distributed to Sri Lankan children in the age range 8 - 14 free of charge three times a year. *Yuti* is written and illustrated by professionals and is printed in full colour to high technical standards. It is intended that every copy should be shared among several friends.

Yuti is completely independent. It has no political, religious, or ethnic affiliations. Its overriding aim is to promote a sense of solidarity and shared common values among children of all cultural backgrounds.

Yuti has received financial support in the past from several international and local organisations concerned with the welfare and educational development of Sri Lanka's multilingual children. More sponsorship and private donations are needed to secure the magazine's future. For more information, visit www.yuti.org.

The cover of issue number 4 of *Yuti* below, and one page of a cartoon from issue number 5 overleaf, are reproduced in black and white but are printed in full colour in the magazine.



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Multilinguals are people who use several languages in their everyday life. Attitudes towards them are very diverse: some consider them gifted or unusually intelligent, while others fear that they are not fully competent in any one language. This can lead to conflicting advice about multilingualism at home, in school, and elsewhere, particularly nowadays when awareness about multilinguals is growing wherever several languages are used, from London and Amsterdam to New York and California.

This is the first book which discusses, in lay terms, the reasons behind the beliefs and myths traditionally associated with multilinguals. It is written for the general public and is relevant for families, teachers, and everyone else who ever wondered about multilingualism. The style is light, often witty, but is founded on a thorough knowledge of all the solid academic research on this subject.

"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,
author of *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*

"Madalena Cruz-Ferreira has crafted a down-to-earth, fun, accessible, and highly informed treatise on multilingualism. The book addresses a wide range of misconceptions about multilingualism in a humorous and entertaining way, and should be required reading for teachers, professionals, and the rest of us who work closely with groups and individuals who use multiple languages!"

Professor Jeff MacSwan,
Applied Linguistics, Arizona State University

Madalena Cruz-Ferreira is a free-lance linguist with a keen interest in multilingualism. She was born in Portugal, acquired French in Africa at age 3, married a Swede a little later, raised three trilingual children (mostly) in Singapore and works (mostly) in English.



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