

Is Three a Crowd?

Interview with Madalena Cruz-Ferreira
By Alice Lapuerta



Madalena Cruz-Ferreira is a linguist specialized in child multilingualism and author of the recently published book *Three is a Crowd? Acquiring Portuguese in a Trilingual Environment*. In the following interview she talks about her book and shares with us her personal experiences in raising her three trilingual children.

Alice Lapuerta: Let us start with the most obvious (and possibly most frequently posed) question: what particular reason or motivation prompted you to write the book *Three is a Crowd?*

Madalena Cruz-Ferreira: The main reason was the vast discrepancy that I found between what I read in the literature about child language development and child multilingualism, and what I came to experience in my own family.

My husband, Peter, is Swedish and I am Portuguese, so our children started life with two languages. I was a trained linguist before I became a parent, although I started collecting language data from the children out of sheer curiosity at first, like many parents do. But very soon I realised that the children were doing things with their languages that were either disregarded or misinterpreted in the literature, particularly in literature about very early language. For example, their uses of intonation, the so-called melody of speech, before their utterances had any recognisable words in them, made it clear to me that they were, already then, dealing with two distinct languages. This made me question why 'words' are persistently hailed as *the* breakthrough into language, including monolingual language, and why researchers had not looked at uses of intonation to settle apparent dead-ends in child multilingualism, like whether

and when multilingual children 'differentiate' between their languages. The evidence was there: there's nothing to 'differentiate' among, because there are different languages from the children's very first attempts at communication, long before children start speaking in words.

More generally, I started wondering why purported research in child 'multilingualism' went on bothering with monolingualism instead, typically comparing things like the number of words or syntactic constructions used in the *same* language by multilingual and monolingual children, instead of paying serious attention to what multilingual children across the board are doing to learn language.

Alice: Your book is a study based on your children Karin, Sofia and Mikael's linguistic developments. You've collected data for over 10 years. Judging from the elaborate conversation transcripts that you present in your book - which give us really excellent insight into how a trilingual family communicates - you must have spent an incredible amount of time collecting, analyzing and transcribing conversations. How did you manage to do all this data-gathering?

Madalena: I was a stay-at-home mum when the children were small, so I could find time and opportunity to record and transcribe data -- despite the usual hassles of learning

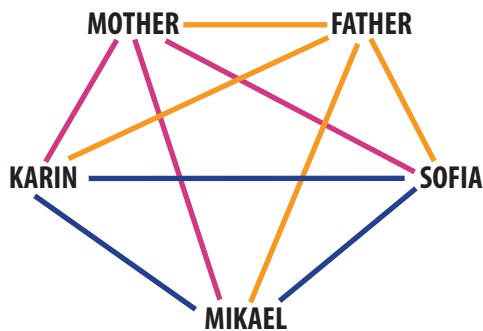
to be a parent too. Most of the data concerns the children's first few years, when a lot is happening all the time. As we say in my country, "they who run for pleasure don't tire," and I thoroughly enjoyed being able to mother and do research at the same time.

I certainly have my children and my husband to thank for their endless patience with my data collection-mania!

Alice: Could you please outline your family's linguistic situation (who speaks what to whom, when)?

Madalena: The current default 'who-speaks-what-to-whom' situation is probably easiest to see in diagram form:

ENGLISH: —————
 SWEDISH: —————
 PORTUGUESE: —————



I say "default" because the 'when' issue is a tricky one. I found that there are occasions when using Portuguese to the children and expecting it from them just doesn't work. One example is when their Swedish-speaking friends are visiting, when everyone uses Swedish to everyone else. The same goes for my husband, who also speaks Portuguese, and his language. English-only is not true either of the children's exchanges among themselves. They may resort to one of their other languages, for example to discuss something private in an all-English environment.

So I could say that "default" means the languages that we use when there are no specific reasons to use other languages.

Alice: You've lived in Sweden, Portugal, Austria, Hong-Kong and Singapore. How do you manage to keep up your three languages every time you relocated? Did you ever have to change your language method in your family? Did you add on new languages with every move?

Madalena: Our stays in Sweden and Portugal posed no problem. At the time, there were only two languages in the family, Swedish and Portuguese, and both groups of relatives and friends helped nurture the children in each of

their languages.

Things started getting interesting with our move to Austria. We thought we would stay there for an extended period of time (we didn't in the end), and therefore started planning for Karin and Sofia's schooling -- Mikael is the youngest, and schooling was not an issue for him then. The two girls attended kindergarten in German, which we then assumed would become the family's third language. That privilege went to English instead, for all three children and again for schooling reasons, with our move to Hong Kong and then to Singapore. Peter and I kept Swedish and Portuguese going as usual throughout this moving spree, and our family has always kept in close touch with our two countries. The children were quite laid-back about all this, simply taking it in their stride that if you live in another country, then you learn its language.

Alice: How did your children's linguistic developments differ? How are they doing now?

Their linguistic development did not differ much, both from one another and from the typical developmental paths that are well-known from research on child language, in both Swedish and Portuguese. They each had their preferences in tackling their own language learning, something else that is also well-established in the literature. For example, one child would spend more time and effort figuring out the word-endings that are grammatically central in Portuguese, another child would find it more useful to practice different speech melodies with the same utterance. They did this in lone play, repeating things to themselves (or to their toys), or they found ways to ask us about them, for example by using deliberately wrong words or constructions, to check our





reaction.

They are now 20, 18 and 16 years old, respectively, and their patterns of language use haven't changed. They still use Swedish with dad, Portuguese with mum, and English among themselves. Karin recently took a course in Mandarin at Fudan University in Shanghai and has become fluent in this language, the one they all took as a school subject. She is now learning German, because she wants to "recover her old language", as she puts it. Sofia wants to learn Japanese and Mikael goes on with his Mandarin in school (both girls are at university now), but none of the children is interested in pursuing languages as academic subjects.

I must add here that technology made their use of Portuguese take an unexpected turn. The children were never schooled in this language, unlike Swedish and English, so they never had structured teaching about its spelling. Nevertheless, when electronic communication became an everyday utility, I was endlessly pleased to find out that they wrote to me in Portuguese. With mostly phonetic spellings at first (perhaps there's another study here waiting to be done?), which have become more and more standard with regular practice.

Alice: Did any of your children ever resist a language or refuse to speak it?

Madalena: Not really. There was never downright resistance or refusal, although we had a few instances of hesitation, or adjustment. These arose when English was beginning to take shape as the children's peer language and, by extension, their own language. Neither the children nor we parents had any idea how the family's linguistic situation would come to look like, in time. We were all (still are!) living it and learning from it as it evolved, because the whole thing was new to all of us. Peter and I began noticing that the children used English with both of us when they came home from school, or when they otherwise wanted to report on what went on in school. We started by insisting that they use our languages as usual, until we realised that this resulted in silence instead. This is when we

all learned that, just like Swedish and Portuguese had specific territories (to discuss skiing or sunbathing, for example, which 'belonged' with Sweden and Portugal, respectively), so did English. This was the language in which school matters took place and therefore the language in which they should be reported. It also became clear to us that it takes time to switch gear into a different language from the one the children had just been immersed in. Sofia, aged 8, explained this to me one day (in Portuguese...): "My head is still full of English."

The children solved the matter nicely, by simply asking permission to speak English, or by acknowledging that they were unable to say what they wanted to say in Portuguese or Swedish. They could try, but they didn't want to, because the reports would lose their original 'flavour'. We took their point, as we also realised that forcing an unnatural translation exercise out of tired children at the end of their working day was not the best way to encourage their willingness to share the day's happenings. So they told their stories in English, and we responded in our own languages. The interesting thing was that later in the day, after the "head-still-full-of-English" effect had waned, they would happily comment on the same happenings in their other languages.

Alice: In your book, you express a concern that when we encounter problems such as speech delay, multilingual children are treated for their multilingualism instead for other behavioural or linguistic problems which may be the actual cause behind the problem. You've experienced a similar problem with your daughter Sofia. Would you mind elaborating on this issue?

Madalena: This is indeed a critical issue. What happened in our family was that Sofia, aged 6, had problems adapting to her new school, when we moved to Singapore. Mostly, she missed the friends she had made in Hong Kong, and the first 'real school' she had started there (Year 1) just a few months earlier. Without consulting us beforehand, Sofia's form teacher filed a referral to the school's psychologist, to whom we parents were eventually summoned. The teacher's 'diagnosis' was that Sofia's behaviour was being "destabilised" by the use of too many languages. He was adamant that Sofia must enrol in a Special Needs class, and that we should stop using any other language than English with her. Karin and Mikael did not escape scrutiny either. Their teachers had no comments on their performance, but Peter and I were nevertheless sternly warned that Sofia's misbehaviour was just the beginning. We should expect, sooner rather than later, similar behavioural disruption from our two other children unless we enforced English monolingualism at home.

A long bureaucratic process ensued, but the first point I wish to make concerns the sheer arbitrariness of this teacher's assessment of one child's problems, and the blind corroboration of his views by the remaining staff who had contact with Sofia. They were not expressing personal opinions (or perhaps they were, too), they were attempting to implement an officially sanctioned policy. It unsettled me very much to realise that multilingualism, something that had always been a natural and necessary part of our lives, should be singled out as the cause of a problem which had absolutely nothing to do with it. It made me wonder how many parents this teacher and others had managed to persuade that raising children multilingually is "detrimental", and how many again,

out of misinformation and the alarm that goes with it, had followed his advice (we didn't) about 'curing' the child by means of English monolingualism. I wanted to ask him, of course, what he would say to someone who advised him to use a foreign language with his own children, but I couldn't, because English was the only language he knew. The question wouldn't have made the slightest sense to him. And it unsettled me most to realise that Sofia's teacher meant well. He genuinely believed that "many languages" are at the root of behavioural disruption.

The second realisation that dawned on me then was that if school authorities are so easily brainwashed into blaming multilingualism for any perceived deviation from whatever behavioural patterns they take as norms, then multilingual children with genuine problems, linguistic or otherwise, will simply go undiagnosed. And this for as long as the suggested monolingual therapy, if heeded, is left to produce its expected 'effect'. Truly deficient uses of language have nothing to do with multilingualism. Language deficiencies affect monolingual and multilingual children alike, because the problem is *language*, not *languages*. These are two quite different things. Incidentally, I believe that much of the confusion about these issues stems from the ambiguity of the word 'language' in English, the language in which most of what we know about *language* and *languages* is reported, and often thought about.

I say in the book, and I repeat here, that we urgently need to gather hard data on the extent and depth of this noxious misguidance. I suspect it stands for the lion's share of the current boom in referrals of multilingual children to speech and/or psychiatric 'therapy', often offered, needless to say, by therapists who are either monolingual or have no knowledge of their clients' languages. We must be able to provide children who happen to be multilingual with a sensible, healthy, family and institutional environment in which to grow and thrive.

Alice: Mixing is usually regarded as something rather negative. We often read that we shouldn't mix as this will "confuse" the child; we should always be consistent and speak only one language at a time (preferably one parent one language). Otherwise the child will learn only with great difficulty to separate the different language systems. Yet as we try to juggle

three or more languages simultaneously, it is often inevitable to mix and switch languages, and to remain "consistent". What is your take on this?

Madalena: There is an interesting story to be told here. When the children were born (and even before that), my husband and I naturally used our own languages with them. I say naturally because this apparent choice was in fact no choice at all. Peter had been nurtured in Swedish as a child, and I in Portuguese, these are the languages that we see as 'ours', and so it was instinctively clear to us that these were the languages to use with 'our' children. Still today, if you ask me which language I speak to my children, I will unhesitatingly reply 'Portuguese'.

The facts are different, though, and I have my tape recorder to thank for this insight. Because I ended up recording myself in spontaneous interaction with my children, I caught myself out speaking three different languages to them on different occasions: Swedish when singing and talking about Swedish nursery rhymes or when helping out with Swedish school homework (all three children attended Swedish Supply school from age 6), English when discussing current school topics and homework, and Portuguese otherwise.

I came to realise that the kind of language consistency that makes sense in multilingual families is likely to be related to use, not to person. If the children learned their times tables or the names of the human bones in English, it makes little sense to use a different language to check this knowledge. Here too, what feels natural is what works. The other issue is, of course, that the one-parent-one-language policy was devised for and by monolingual parents. In Singapore, for example, where there are four official languages and virtually everyone is multilingual from birth, this policy makes little sense. Bilingual parents in, say, Malay and English, will use both their languages to their children, who will accordingly learn them. Naturally.

Alice: Semilingualism: what is it, and is this something that we should be concerned about?

Madalena: "Semilingualism," as far as I understand the use of this term, means 'poor linguistic proficiency'. Semilingualism therefore afflicts monolinguals and multilinguals alike, and we certainly should be concerned about it. Languages are tools





that must be kept in good working condition, if they are to fulfil their purposes.

What we need not worry about at all, however, is the popular use of this term to characterise the mixed speech which is naturally found among multilinguals. Mixes are viewed as a sign of 'half-proficiency', or perhaps even 'one-third proficiency, one-fourth proficiency' and so on, in each of a multilingual's languages, depending on how many they have. The reasoning goes that multilinguals mix because they have deficient command of each of their languages' vocabulary or grammar, or both. They therefore need to resort to more than one language to express themselves, and they do this by using bits and pieces of one language to fill the gaps in another language, which in turn proves that they have incomplete knowledge of each language. The reasoning is fully circular, in other words, besides revealing deep ignorance of what multilingual mixes are all about, an issue which has been duly addressed in the literature.

The assumption behind this kind of reasoning is that the only way to express oneself properly is through one single language at a time. This, in turn, in fact assumes that monolinguals are never, by definition, semilingual. Both assumptions have deep roots that grow back to Ancient Greek thought about language 'purity', and current versions of them mirror it wholesale. Back then, anyone whose speech was unintelligible to educated monolinguals was a 'barbarian'. Nowadays, they are 'semilingual'. By the same token, anyone wearing French perfume or eating curry in the USA or in Portugal must be a 'semicultural'.

Alice: Is the language acquisition process the same for monolingual and multilingual children?

Madalena: Yes. Monolinguals and multilinguals alike go through exactly the same acquisitional stages and use the same acquisitional strategies.

This is why I decided to do, in this book, something that I hadn't seen done before, which was to draw overall conclusions about language acquisition from the same children's multilingual and monolingual (Portuguese) productions. That is, I wanted to show that multilinguals tackle their learning of each of their languages in the same way that they tackle their learning of their multilingualism, not despite being multilingual, but precisely because of being multilingual.

Alice: You write that "Language acquisition is a back-and-forth process, which often surfaces in the shape of regressive or disrupted forms of speech. The reason for the production of a wrong word, or of a nonexistent form of a word, may lie in that the child is busy concentrating on sorting out something else, say the inflectional morphology of one language." (page 306) In other words, when a child produces a wrong word this is not because s/he is confused, but because s/he happens to be concentrating on another area of development right now. Could one then conclude that in children's overall development, it is entirely normal for them to go through phases in which they seem to regress?

Madalena: Yes. A kind of "U-shaped" curve is found in overall child development, including language development. It generally shows through worse productions at later ages, for example in cognitive tasks, which can raise some concern if you don't know what is going on.

In language acquisition, one reason that I presumed might explain regressive productions is that children appear to apply themselves very methodically to their learning tasks, one thing at a time. If you're currently curious about learning names for objects, you are not worrying to the same degree about learning past tenses, for example. We adults seem to do this too: when I first became acquainted with computers, I dedicated myself to learning all I could about word processors, then spreadsheet programmes, then email programmes, and so on, in turn. So while I was busy cracking spreadsheet secrets, my emailing skills were appalling.

One other reason is that we, children as well as adults, learn through generalisation. When children realise, say, that the plural of many nouns in English is formed by adding an -s at the end of the word, they assume that their observations apply wholesale and may then start talking about *foots* and *mouses*

(or even *feets* and *mices*) instead of *feet* and *mice* as before. Generalisation is also the reason why I attempted to export my hard-earned mobile phone expertise from my old phone to a new model, with very frustrating results.

So apparently regressive productions like these are perfectly normal, and are in fact good news: they show us that children are reasoning their way through newfound regularities, and they therefore mean that learning is taking place.

Alice: There seems to be the rather wide-held belief that the brain can handle only so many languages simultaneously, that it just gets “crowded” up there and that we can overwhelm our children with too many languages. To the question “Is three a crowd?” you write that the answer “is an emphatic negative,” and that three, four or more languages don’t crowd the brain any more than one language does. If I understood correctly, learning several languages is not a matter of “endeavour” but of “management.” Could you elaborate on this?

Madalena: The notion of ‘brain crowding’ stems from currently fashionable models of the human brain as computer-like CPUs. Computer hard-drives do need a reasonable amount of free space to run processing operations smoothly. But while it is true that models provide streamlined ways of looking at what they model, and help us control variables that are in reality out of our control, there is a very real risk of taking the model for what it represents. Modelling brains as computers is just as useful (or not) as modelling, say, the human eye by means of a photographic camera and conclude on the properties of human eyesight on the basis of observed camera function.

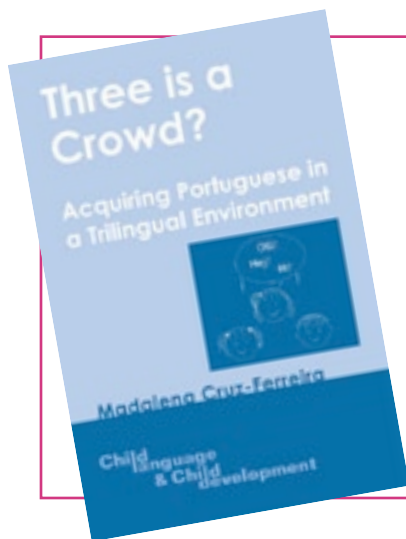
The human brain is inherently plastic, and renews itself by producing new nerve cells and connections among them throughout life. In other words, the human brain changes and adapts, depending on

how experience, linguistic or otherwise, pushes it. As far as we know, computer hardware does not renew itself according to input. Multilinguals have their brains adapted to serve communicative needs in different languages, taxi drivers have theirs adapted to navigate mental maps. And multilingual taxi drivers have differently-wired brains from their monolingual counterparts, or from multilingual cooks.

My children showed me that languages cannot ‘crowd’ the brain, because multilingualism does not involve an *addition* of languages. Language learning is about applying general acquisitional strategies to different languages, one or many, the same strategies that apply at any age to any object deemed worthy of investigation. Multilingualism is therefore a matter of resource “management”, as you say, not of filling in presumably idle brain space.

Alice: Thank you VERY much for your answers!

Madalena: You’re most welcome!



The book describes three siblings’ apportioning of linguistic and cultural space among three languages: Portuguese, Swedish and English. Parallel strategies accounting for monolingual and multilingual language management shape a truly illuminating picture of child linguistic competence. Written by a multilingual parent, educator and linguist, this book is for parents, educators and linguists in our predominantly, increasingly multilingual world.

Visit Multilingual Matters for more information and to order this book:

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