



Language Mismatches

ANSWERED BY MADALENA CRUZ-FERREIRA

Question: The last couple of months I've been translating English stories to Indonesian on the spot while reading to my preschooler. What I've been doing is to follow the letters with my index finger while reading in English and to point at the pictures when retelling in Indonesian, so I think I make a pretty clear contrast between the two languages. Plus I finish a full sentence or paragraph before retelling to make sure there is no language mixing in a sentence. From the way my son reacts, he seems able to distinguish well between me reading and retelling. But I've just heard that translating stories while reading to a child can give him trouble when he starts reading himself, as he will be unable to know what the words really represent. Is that the case? If yes, will it be safe if I read the story in English one day and retell it in Indonesian another time?

Answer: I see no problem in reading the story in English, pointing at the English text as you do, and then talking about or retelling the same story in Indonesian. If you are worried about this, you may want to ask yourself why you chose to translate stories from one language to another. There are many stories that are the same or very similar across languages and cultures, but there are also stories that hang together with particular cultures. In the latter case, it may make no sense to the child to discuss those stories in a language which is not meant to be part of them. Languages are not just alternative ways of talking about the same thing, they are an intimate part of the cultures associated with them.

You can spend part of your reading sessions talking with your child about how different languages add different 'flavours' to similar story plots, or why an Indonesian story is Indonesian. Ask him what he thinks about this. Raising your child's awareness of the uniqueness of each language can only be beneficial to his bilingualism and biculturalism. Children love finding similarities and differences of this kind, including in languages, and they are very good at this.

Question: Should I use another language than my own with my child? I ask this for two reasons. First, other people tell me that my child is much more fluent in my own language, and I should help him develop his father's language too, which is besides the language of the country we live in. I know in the end he will be fine and completely fluent in each, but I have to ask whether I should start focusing on his other language only. Second, I notice that strangers sometimes give us strange looks when they hear me speaking to my child in a language that they don't understand and even ask what we are saying. Is it rude to use my language in public?

Answer: There is no problem in using different languages with your child, if you so choose. I gather from your questions that this is not what you want to do, though. First, your role as a parent is not to help your child develop the languages that other people find relevant. As you say, your husband's language will develop properly as and when the child sees the need for it. You may even come to witness a complete switch in your son's language preference. When you do, it will be interesting to ask those same people whether they think you should then start focusing only on your own language. Second, I had exactly the same problem with my children as you describe here. For some strange reason, (monolingual) people always assume that what they don't understand is necessarily wrong, or even targeted at them! The way I found to try to assuage their fears was to explain nicely to them that I was only doing what they all do, speak **my** language to **my** child, and that if they really wanted to know, what I was saying was exactly what they all say to their children: take your finger off your nose (that's rude!), look at the birdie there, are you hungry? and all kinds of boring things like that. This didn't solve the matter completely -- I still got stares and frowns -- but it did help a little.

Just go on as you are doing now. If you chose to use your language to your child, go on doing it. It can be very, very confusing to a child to suddenly switch to another language with him. Just imagine your husband one day starting speaking to you nothing but a language you never heard from him!

Question: We have a two-year old daughter and my husband and I decided to follow the OPOL policy. I always speak my language to our child, and my husband always speaks his. We live in my husband's country, but I am the one spending most time with the child at home. I notice that our daughter now addresses me and replies to me in my husband's language, even when I try to make her repeat what she said back to me in my own language. It seems like she just wants to use my husband's language. Sometimes she mixes languages too when she talks to me, which she didn't do before. What should I do for her to go on speaking my language? Is it cruel to make her repeat things in that language, or pretend that I don't understand what she says in her other language?

Answer: There are several issues here, all typical of young bilinguals' language development. First, and most importantly, your child's age. She is at the stage when all children start becoming aware of their surroundings, and exploring them. For bilingual children, this means that they now realise that mum and dad 'talk different'. She is simply trying out the patterns that she finds around her (like the OPOL pattern you're following), to see how they work. Second, you ask whether you may try to 'pretend' not to understand another language. This means that you do understand it, and this also means that whatever you do, you won't be able to fool your child about this! She's heard you use the language countless times, all the more so if you live in your husband's country, surrounded by that language, so why should you not understand it only when your daughter uses it? This makes no sense to a child's budding awareness of what languages are all about. So just go on responding to her in your language. If you give in, and give up your language, what you are showing her is that there is no need to use your language. Third, forcing children to use a language. I don't think this works, because languages are not about enforcement. They either come naturally, or they don't at all. Show her the wonders of your language instead, by doing with her as many fun activities as you can think about, all from playing hide-and-seek around the house with different toys (who speak your language only!) to serious tickling sessions.

Lastly, the mixing of languages. I'm sure you have also noticed that your child is now attempting to speak in longer utterances? This is a very complicated thing to master. Her strategy is that she will say whatever she needs to say and she can't be bothered about 'the' language. She does this because her two languages are developing differently (they must, since different people say different things to her in each), so certain things come easier to her in one language rather than another, and because she has no idea that languages are things to pay attention to. The bottom line is that she will sort out both the languages and their users in time. I'll give you a preview: the next stage will be that once she associates a language with a person, say, when meeting new people, she will vigorously refuse to use any other language with that person.

Question: What do you do when you have tons of books (and other media) in one of the languages and it is hard to find any in the other language -- there are not even many produced for young children in the home country?

Answer: I should start by saying that children won't learn languages through any commercially available media goods. Books are clearly important, but this is because they usually involve human interaction in a reading session (I presume this is your case, since you don't say how old your children are.) Otherwise, media products are an entertaining way of using what is already there. Even self-advertised 'interactive' media simply target passive abilities, letting children explore only what someone else (an adult, besides...) decided they should explore.

You are very lucky that there are no media in your language and you can make a big difference here, by being the 'media' yourself. Take your child out to explore the big world out there in your language, to observe and classify insects on a patch of grass, or to the kitchen to help out cook a delicious home-made meal and learn all about ingredients, quantities, spices -- and nutrition. Teach your children to sew buttons on a piece of cloth, to sing traditional songs from your country, tell them stories, ask them to invent a story about anything or anyone interesting to them. Talk to them and enjoy them talking back to you. That's what languages are for. There are no better 'language lessons' than the ones that do not target the languages themselves.



*Madalena Cruz-Ferreira, a native of Portugal, is the author of **Three is a crowd? Acquiring Portuguese in a trilingual environment**, (2006) Clevedon, Multilingual Matters (www.multilingualmatters.com). She has received postgraduate degrees in linguistics from the University of Manchester, UK and is currently a Senior Lecturer at the National University of Singapore. Her main research interests are child multilingualism, multilingual phonology and intonation, and the language of science. She has lived in Singapore for over 10 years with her Swedish husband and their three trilingual children.*

