



# What is **YOUR** Mother Tongue?

Answers to a complex question

**BY ALICE LAPUERTA**

### One reader wrote to Multilingual Living Magazine recently:

"I was at a job interview yesterday and we had to fill out a form in which one of the questions was to specify what our mother tongue was. I spent a few minutes trying to decide what MY mother tongue was, what exactly is meant by mother tongue? The language my mother speaks to me? The language I speak/read/write best? I grew up as a trilingual so it's not such an easy question. In my case the language my mother speaks isn't the language that I'm most fluent in, even though I speak all 3 languages at a 'native' level but my literacy level is different in all 3. So what is considered a multilingual person's "mother tongue"?"

That's a good question. Books have been written on this, so this question isn't exactly easy to answer. Alan Davies, author of *The Native Speaker: Myth and Reality* writes that "The mother tongue is literally just that, the language of the mother... who provides most of the spoken input for the child and with whom the child identifies and wishes to exchange meanings" (page 16). It seems simple, but at a closer look this is anything but straightforward.

"The concept of 'mother' can be problematic," writes Colin Baker in his *Encyclopedia of Bilingualism and Bilingual Education*. "Not all children are raised by their biological mothers. Many are raised by fathers, grandparents or other relatives. Some live with adoptive or foster parents. Others spend most of their time in a nursery from birth through to schooling. What is the mother tongue of such a child?" Furthermore, he asks, "does use of 'mother tongue' understate the language role of the father?" (page 47)

### We are definitely getting into hot waters, here.

To complicate things more, "mother tongue" is often confused and used interchangeably with a term like "first language," and "dominant language." This isn't without its problems either, as Colin Baker explains: "If the mother tongue is defined as the language a child learns first, what is the implication if a child soon becomes dominant in the second language? If the children and parents become guest workers or in-migrants to a particular region and start switching to the majority language of that region, what is the mother tongue? The language learnt first or the language which becomes dominant in the family and particularly outside the home?"

I suppose in the interview form they actually meant to ask what the reader's dominant language was, by mistakenly assuming that one's mother tongue is equivalent to one's

dominant language. It's one of those myths that society's prone to believe.

But all this discussion on how difficult it is to define "mother tongue" doesn't really help us answer people when they ask us what our mother tongue is. Retorting "Mother tongue as a term eludes any sort of concrete definition, hence this question has no merit" is probably not a very diplomatic thing to say during a job interview.

### So, what DO we say?

Instead of giving them a one-word answer, I usually rattle off half of my bio (how else are they going to understand?). "My mother tongue is, literally, German, because my mother is Austrian and she speaks German. But my (academically) dominant language is English. I also speak Korean, which is my father tongue. I am, in fact, a trilingual." This is

"The usual way is to define the mother tongue(s) as the first one(s) to have been learnt (i.e. order of acquisition). Some say the first languages in the first 6 months, other say that any language acquired before age 2 is a mother tongue." Jean-Marc Dewaele

probably not very practical when it comes to filling out a form, though.

Michal Paradowski suggests the following: "If you've been a balanced bilingual since birth, when filling out a form and vacillating which vernacular to enter as your mother tongue, think in which language version you'd have picked the sheet in the first place. In cases of less straightforward linguistic experience, the apposite option is probably the language in which you are fluent and which you had acquired earliest."

Madalena Cruz-Ferreira counters: "I would answer: What makes you think I have one mother tongue? It's like asking 'How do you get along with your sister?' of someone who has no sisters. It just shows lack of awareness of other people's realities."

In her article "Funny-lingualism" in this issue, Madalena brings it to the point: "Who says that people can have only one mother tongue?"

Now, that's a neat answer! The next time people pop this question at you, how about responding: "I have three! German, English and Spanish." ❖