

Moving country, Moving languages

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When you move to another country, you take your language(s) with you. This article deals with what may happen to your children's language(s) in a new country, drawing on my own experience as a globe-trotter parent of three multilingual children. Our family started off bilingual in Portuguese (my language) and Swedish (my husband's language), and became trilingual (with English) since our move to English-speaking countries, first Hong Kong and then Singapore.

Since parents usually express their concerns over their children's language use around a core of questions and worries, I chose to present the article in dialogue form, with a number of commonly raised issues as headings.

I was offered a great job abroad, where my whole family is welcome. But I'm thinking of rejecting the offer because my children are too old to learn a new language.

The child's age is irrelevant for purposes of language learning. Motivation is what makes all of us learn whatever we find it useful to learn. A move to a new country, where your children will come to socialise with peers who speak a different language, is one of the major reasons to want to learn a new language. Children, young and old, are like sponges absorbing all kinds of intriguing new experiences, and language is no exception. There is nothing more exciting than being able to understand new, interesting, funny, exotic peers, and thereby gain access to their groups. One added incentive, of course, is the likelihood of coming to master the new language decidedly better than mum and dad, who are less likely to become fully immersed in undertakings involving local languages.

Our children will have to attend a local school. How can they be taught in a language that they are learning at the same time?

A language is a tool, something that you use to do other things with. You learn to use a tool by using it, and the more you use a tool, the better you get at using it. This is also true of languages. Your children may need a kick-start, like ours did. A few months before our move, we hired a private tutor to introduce them to English, their all-new language. We went on with private tutoring a few months into the move too. From then on, their English took off on its own, full speed ahead. It didn't matter that our children went on not fully understanding what was going on in the classroom for a couple more months. Their native friends sometimes didn't either, and clearly not for linguistic reasons. But asking, reasoning, expressing bafflement, attempting to explain what went wrong, being told off and praised, sharing ignorance and knowledge in a language, on a daily basis, is definitely the way to make it yours. This is exactly how babies go about learning their languages too.

My child has problems with the new school language. Should I start using that language at home to help?

No. Definitely not. Language use must come naturally, and a language which isn't yours cannot be used naturally with your children. Most of us in fact learn new languages in school in this unnatural way. My English teachers were Portuguese, and the English I learned in school was good enough to pass tests and exams in Portugal. But I was unable to communicate in it, which is what a language is there for, as I realised with dismay

when I first travelled to an English-speaking country in my late teens.

Parents parent, and teachers teach. The home and the school involve specific and quite different communicative needs. What you can do to help your child is to find (or create!) playgroups of neighbours or school-mates, or hire a tutor, depending on the child's age and personality. We tried both with our children, and after a few months the new language had no secrets for them.

And *please*: pay no attention to teachers, school psychologists or speech pathologists in the new school who assert that you must use the new language at home in order to avoid lifelong delay or impairment in your child's development, academic or otherwise. Pay no attention either to their blaming of any behavioural issue which may arise at school on your child's multilingualism. Do this instead: listen attentively, agree with everything they say, and then go on exactly as before at home. This is precisely what we did in my family, when my husband and I were summoned to our children's first English-language school, and sternly warned that it is clearly impossible to have so many languages in one family. Monolingual school authorities simply have no idea what they are talking about.

Why do my children mix their languages all the time now? Aren't they risking becoming semi-lingual?

Children mix languages for the same reasons that fully grown, fully competent language users do: because different languages offer more, and often more precise, ways of expressing ourselves. Language mixes arise because we find, in words or expressions from other languages, a feeling or an appropriateness to what we want to say which is lacking in our own language. 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 are not there, because they lack their 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. Children (and adults alike) simply ignore such *finesses*. They borrow and mix the right word which comes with the right *nuance* of meaning instead. Especially if they get *kudos* for doing so. After all, if all my *amigos* do it, why not me?

Mixes in fact involve deep knowledge of the languages which are so mixed, and of their systems, be it sound system, grammatical system or their vocabularies. We can only mix things that are clearly differentiated, which means that language mixes provide no evidence of confusion or of deficient linguistic competence. In addition, multilingual children as well as adults mix only when they know that their listeners understand mixed speech. That is, they mix in multilin-

gual contexts, among other mixers. Borrowed words and expressions began their linguistic lives in a new language as mixes. We borrow as and when the need arises, and it is up to us users to decide whether to keep borrowings or discard them. All words were new, once upon a time. It is, besides, becoming less and less realistic to assert that a language is there for the purpose of keeping itself 'pure', whatever that may mean, especially in cosmopolitan surroundings. Children and youths, particularly if multilingual, stand for the lion's share of new words and expressions in the world's languages, and these are what keep a language alive and usable. Children's mixes show that they are becoming fully-fledged members of international environments.

And by the way, when you talk about *pizza*, *typhoons*, *bureaucrats*, *judokas*, *robots* and *smorgasbords* in English, are you (i) mixing? (ii) showing signs of semi-lingualism?

My child now refuses to speak our language. What shall I do?

Human beings always take the easy way out of any situation, be it at work, when socialising or when using language. This is why you say (and perhaps also write) *wanna* instead of 'want to', and *didja* instead of 'did you'. Choosing to not use a language is not necessarily a matter of refusal, it may rather be one way of checking out whether there are other, easier, possibilities out there. If there is evidence that you can get away with using one single language, why bother using several? This is why everyone automatically turns to English in international settings, not Mandarin or Portuguese. You 'can get away' with English in China, in Portugal and in many other countries.

If the parents switch language according to the child's uses, and therefore provide evidence that the child needs to use one language only, the family will end up with one language only. This is how monolinguals become monolinguals. It's up to the parents, not to the children, to decide the family's language policy. If several languages are deemed relevant, parents must make it clear that this is so through continued use of their own language(s) at home. Try making mental notes of when your child uses the 'wrong' language. You may find out that it is when the child just got home from school, with a head full of another language, or when reporting incidents which took place in that language. Different languages associate with different happenings and different experiences, as is also the case in my family. My children ended up spontaneously asking permission to speak English, which was duly granted, to tell us parents what went on in school. That done, usual household business could then proceed in our home languages. Respond to the

child in your usual language, ask the child to try to repeat in that language what was just said in another one, help your child along the discovery of alternative means of expression in different languages, explain why it is important to keep the home language(s) in good working condition -- to be able to enjoy grandparents, cousins, friends back home, for example.

My children have stopped using our language among themselves.

Welcome to the club... This is precisely how my own family became trilingual, instead of bilingual as planned. Our children, now in their late teens, go on using Portuguese and Swedish with each parent, as always, but English has become their common language. The reason why this happened is that English represents a model which is quite irresistible, in two complementary ways. It is the language of schooling and, more importantly, it is the language of peer bonding. 'Irresistible' is the right word: we parents tried all we could think of (yes, including bribes and threats) to exclude English from our home, but we were soon forced to admit that we were fighting a losing battle. So we gave up, and we welcomed English instead. The children use our languages with us, mum's language and dad's language, so they can have their own, children's language too.

We have found no reason to worry about this at all. Many families, where a new language emerged through their children in similar ways and who returned home after their posting abroad, report that the children recovered the home language as their peer language a few months later. School and peer pressure appears to work in the same way at home as abroad. My family are still 'abroad', so we'll see how things develop in due time.

One last word.

Worrying about our children, including their language(s), is part and parcel of being a parent. You are not alone, and neither are your children. Let us know about your worries, so we can all learn from one another?



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