The Bilingual Family Newsletter

MULTILINGUAL MATTERS

Editor:
George Saunders

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EDITORIAL

I apologise to readers for the delay in publishing this issue of the Newsletter. At the time material for the present issue was being prepared, my family and I, who were spending our Christmas and summer holidays in Tasmania, had the misfortune to be involved in quite a bad car accident. Our car collided head-on with a truck, and we were all injured to some extent.

My wife, Wendy, who suffered a fractured vertebra, and Katrina (6), who had severe seat belt bruising of the abdomen and suspected internal injuries (which, fortunately, turned out not to be the case), spent a week in hospital. Frank (12), who also spent a night in hospital, received a fractured cheek bone and had one of this top front teeth knocked out. I myself suffered bad seat belt bruising, and Thomas (14), whose section of the car took the brunt of the impact, miraculously stepped out of the wreckage with nothing worse than a bleeding nose.

All in all it was a very traumatic experience for us all, but we consider ourselves very lucky to have come out of such an accident with relatively minor injuries. We certainly have an increased appreciation of the value of seat belts! Needless to say, it was a few weeks before I could concentrate again on getting this issue of the *BFN* ready for printing.

By the time you read this, we will no doubt have fully recovered from our injuries. I certainly hope that our readers had a less eventful start to 1988!

In this issue we have an interesting article by Hilary Sutherland on a special type of bilingualism where one of the languages involved is Sign Language – a type of bilingualism we have not covered before. Hilary vividly outlines the richness of Sign Language, a language which unfortunately over the years has come under constant and unwarranted attack. As François Grosjean writes in a thought-provoking section of his book *Life with Two Languages* (Harvard University Press, 1982) on discrimination against the Deaf (p. 87):

> There have been endless efforts to suppress it, mainly by forbidding its use in schools and by ridiculing it outside the schools, or to dialectize it by making it more English-like. The negative attitudes of hearing people toward Sign Language have been adopted by many Deaf themselves, who until recently were embarrassed to use their language in public.

Yet it is this very language which is the natural language of the Deaf, the language which is used in the family, with friends, and other members of the Deaf community.

Readers interested in this subject would certainly enjoy reading, as I did, Lou Ann Walker's fascinating and moving book *A Loss for Words. The Story of Deafness in a Family* (Fontana Paperbacks, 1987, price £3.50), in which the author describes growing up as a hearing child of Deaf

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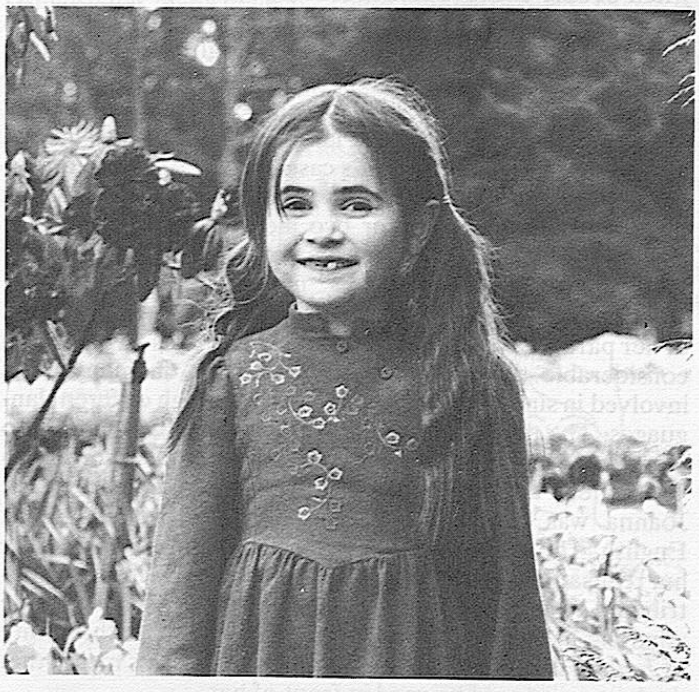
INTRODUCING MEMBERS OF OUR ADVISORY BOARD

The Clyne Family, Australia

We are fortunate to have Michael Clyne as a member of our Advisory Board. His tireless and enthusiastic encouragement of research into sociolinguistics, and into billingualism in particular; has been of great assistance to many researchers both in Australia and elsewhere over the last twenty years or so. Michael is Associate Professor of German at Monash University in Melbourne and is a prolific writer of articles and books in English and German on sociolinguistic matters. His first book, *Transference and Triggering. Observations on the Language Assimilation of Postwar German-speaking Migrants in Australia* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1967) was the first in-depth study of language contact in Australia and paved the way for future researchers. Michael has been a strong supporter of the *Bilingual Family Newsletter* from the start. He himself takes every opportunity to encourage parents to bring up their children bilingually and to fight for better consideration of billingual children in the Australian education system. In the following article, Michael introduces readers to his own bilingual household.



Joanna Clyne

SOME REFLECTIONS ON SEVEN YEARS OF BILINGUAL LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Michael Clyne

Statistics on language maintenance in Australia indicate that there is little German passed on to the children of "mixed marriages", (the 1976 Census records a shift of 96.16 per cent in such families) and that there is little probability of an ethnic language being maintained beyond the second generation, especially in the home domain.

Joanna was born in Melbourne. My wife Irene is a monolingual English speaker who has good passive skills in German which have been perfected largely because of Joanna's bilingual acquisition but speaks very little German. I was born into a multilingual family in Melbourne (Austrian father, Hungarian mother and grandfather, Yugoslav grandmother), was brought up bilingually in German and English, and have intensified my contact with German through academic work. I was fortunate in being familiar with the literature on bilingualism before Joanna was born, in being able to benefit from the experiences of my former colleague, George Saunders, and in being involved in partial immersion programs in Melbourne primary schools.[1] This facilitated "planning" of Joanna's language acquisition.

Now that Joanna is seven, I would like to reflect on what "went right" with Joanna's bilingualism, for she is a fluent speaker of English and German. Her German is less grammatical than her English, in which she has above-average competence. She assessed her spoken English as better and claims to understand and read both languages equally well, and write English better. Her bilingual language acquisition is certainly not dependent on equal input of the two languages. Crèche and school have given her perhaps eight times as much exposure to English as to German.

The first positive factor in Joanna's bilingualism has been *consistency of model.* Since her birth I have spoken only German to her, and Irene has spoken nothing but English to her (Irene and I use English to each other). For several years, Joanna was confused by code-switching and chose English when people engaged in it. As she became more assertive, Joanna simply raised an objection, e.g. to a family friend in Germany: "You don't need to speak English to me, you're not my Mummy". (Age 3;4). She now persists even with people like my mother who sometimes switch to English. One or two interlocutors in a language have proved ample, as became evident in Joanna's case both in Australia and in Germany, where we spent three months in 1984 and Joanna attended a kindergarten for two months. The interlocutor principle (one language, one person) there facilitated the maintenance of English when "majority" and "minority" languages changed roles. The second factor is that, because of her parents' work commitments, Joanna has always spent considerable time *alone with each parent,* in many cases involved in similar activities expressed through different languages. The third factor is the *time* at which Joanna went to Germany – towards the end of the phase where, according to Taeschner,[2] the "majority language" gains control. In fact, Joanna was by then (3;2) sometimes answering me in English. The strengthening of German input, and especially her realisation that German was also spoken by children contributed to the new situation where she never again spoke anything but German to me. The fourth factor is the ability of *Joanna's mother* to comprehend German. This meant that the language could be used in front of her.

Finally, the *prevailing attitudes in Australian society* are conducive to bilingualism. When I was a child, my use of German was restricted to home (when there were no English-speaking visitors). Speaking German in any other place was an impossibility. Now it can be heard in public, on radio, and on TV. Joanna uses German unashamedly on the street, at school, in shops. Australia now regards itself as a multicultural society. Joanna's school encourages her bilingualism by occasionally asking her to read or write in German. Her teachers have held her up as an example to other families with a bilingual background.

Apart from the actual language skills, heightened early metalinguistic awareness is an asset of bilingual language acquisition. As I have shown elsewhere,[3] Joanna made comments on language separation and the interlocutor principle from the age of 2;1, on correctness and language mixing as from 2;7; on language acquisition as from 4;6. By 2;9 she recognised other languages, and from 3;7, she made remarks indicating pride in her bilingualism. From 3;3 she showed creativity through puns and neologisms. My previous article dealt with Joanna's bilingualism up to the age of five. Since then, she has continued to express her metalinguistic awareness in relation to language contrasts, "entymology", and gender. For instance, when pretending to take a photograph, she asked me to "sag 'Sie'. Wenn du sagst 'Käse' auf deutsch, dann lächelst du nicht". (5;9). (*Say 'Sie' (you). If you say 'Käse' (cheese) in German, then you don't smile).* In the same month, while writing to thank friends for a stuffed cockatoo. "Ich muß schreiben 'die Kakadu ist meine beste Freundin; *Der* Kakadu kann keine Freundin sein. Es ist ein Mädchen'." *(I have to write 'die kakadu is my best (girl)friend; Der Kakadu (correct gender) can't be a girlfriend. It's a girl').* A month later, in a discussion on whether a toy frog was male or female, she distinguished between natural and grammatical gender. "In deutsch sind alle Frösche der." *(In German all frogs are 'der').* In discussing what day of the week is was, she explained: "Es heißt Mittwoch, weil es ist mitten in der Woche". *(It's called Mittwoch (Wednesday's) because it's in the middle of the week).* (5:9).

Her pride and interest in bilingualism has not declined. After three days at school, she "surveyed" all the girls in her class, establishing that half of them had a family background in a language other than English and deplored that most of them did not speak that language. She also complained about the lack of German books in the junior school library and took the first opportunity to bring along and "read" to her class a German book which she knew by heart. She describes knowing a second language as an advantage because you can communicate with people in other countries but also exclude monolinguals.

We hope to spend five to six weeks in Germany this year. This may help promote Joanna's literacy skills in German and alleviate some fossilised grammatical phenomena, such as the generalisation of subject-verb-order and *de* for *der* and *das.*

1. Described in Michael Clyne (ed.), *An Early start. Second Language at Primary School.* Melbourne: River Seine Publication, 1986.
2. T. Taeschner, *The Sun is Feminine.* Berlin: Springer, 1983.
3. 'Don't you get bored speaking only English?' – Expressions of metalinguistic awareness in a bilingual child. In R. Steele and T. Threadgold (eds), *Language Topics, Essays in Honour of Michael Halliday.* Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1987.

SIGN LANGUAGE: "POETRY IN MOTION"

Hilary Sutherland

My family is bilingual, but with a difference. My husband and I are deaf and we have two children, a girl aged seven years with normal hearing and a deaf boy aged five years. In our family we use British Sign Language (B.S.L.) and English. Both our children are conversant in B.S.L. and English. Fiona may go to a normal school but has a mixture of deaf and hearing friends. Iain goes to a special school for hearing-impaired where they use Total Communication which consists of sign language, lip-reading, speech, etc. He also has a mixture of hearing and deaf friends. We do not see ourselves as different from any other "normal" families except we make more use of our eyes to compensate for the loss of hearing. B.S.L. is a visual language which I will enlarge on later.

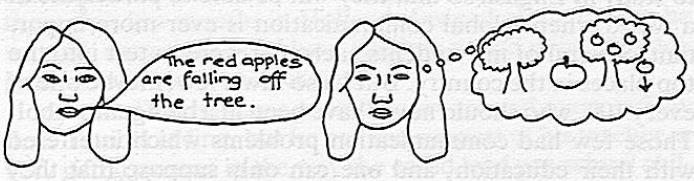
Whilst hearing aids can be of great value to the severely and profoundly deaf particularly with the technological advances of recent years, they do not "cure" deafness. A hearing aid makes sounds louder but it cannot pick out speech from other background noise. Everything is amplified equally – someone coughing, a radio, passing car, noisy children, and so on. Nor can a hearing aid help a deaf person to hear sounds normally – as a hearing person could. Nerve damage makes it impossible for deaf poeple to hear certain sounds, usually the "high sounds" – like s, t, k, sh, f, h, and p.

Lipreading – the ability to understand what a person is saying by watching them speak but being able to hear little or nothing is not an easy task. Many sounds look identical – have a look in a mirror and see! Try these:

map	bap
goat	coat
fan	van

Many people speak very quickly, look down or away, stand behind you or with the light behind them – making lipreading impossible. It has been estimated that only fifty per cent of the sounds of English are visible in any case, making lipreading a difficult and demanding task. Hearing aids are not a cure for deafness and lipreading is not easy for the deaf.

For those who are born severely or profoundly deaf I believe sign language is their natural form of expression. It is their first language, the language which should allow a deaf person the most natural and fluent method of communication. A deaf person has a visual mind, before they sign or speak they "see" what they want to say. In sign language the subject must come first, an example to illustrate why is given below:

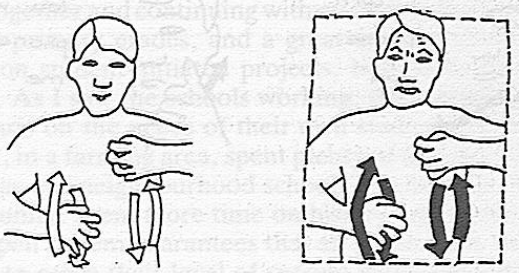


Context is also an extremely important feature of sign language, for example there is no one sign for the word *back,* the sign used would vary with the situation in which it was being used. Here are some examples.

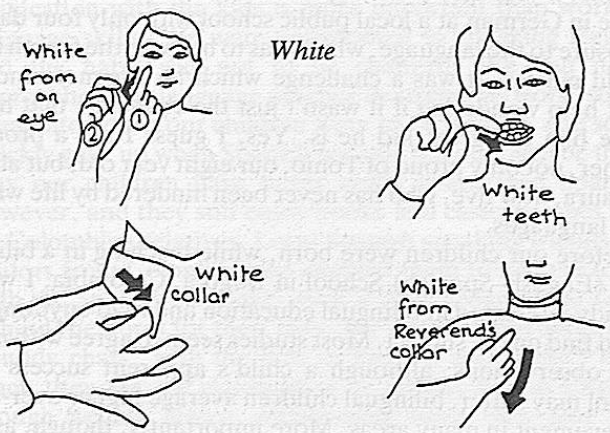
Grandma's *back* is cold
Give it *back* to me
Put it *back* on the shelf again
She is at the *back* of the hall
Shall we *back* a horse.

A different sign would be used for *back* in each of these sentences. You can see it is not enough to simply ask "what is the sign for back?"!

Sign language is also a very expressive language in which the whole range of emotions and feelings can be expressed. It is of course visual but also three dimensional and moving. It is not simply two hands moving in isolation making a series of handshapes. Sign language involves the whole person. Each person has a space around them, "an empty box", within this they have the potential to use their whole body, eye contact, facial expression, handshape and body position in order to communicate in sign. Anyone using handshapes alone is not signing, or communicating. Whilst a hearing person may pick up clues as to a speaker's frame of mind, worried tone in their voice, a suggestion of anger and so on, a deaf person is constantly watching for visual clues and using the body language we all transmit.

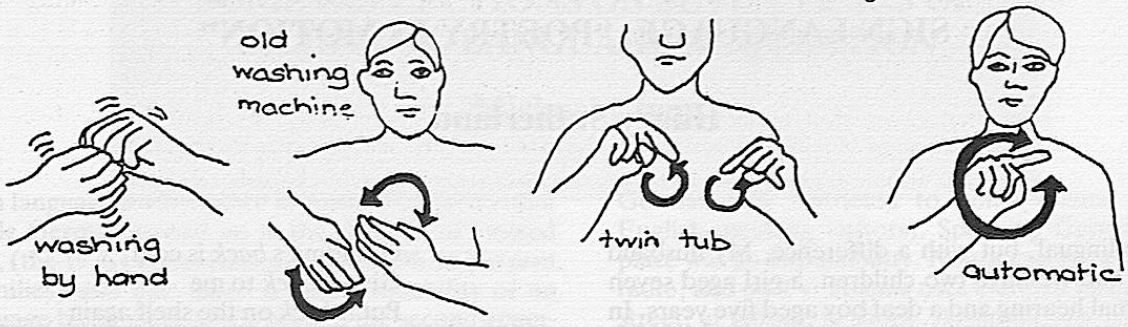


B.S.L. does have regional signs in the same way as spoken English has many dialects. These regional dialects of sign do not prevent communication, all the basic body movements, use of context, eye contact and expression still apply and overcome any apparent difficulties. This is one of the great advantages that the deaf have in communicating with deaf people from other countries. There may be very different signs and syntax but the visual components which fill the "empty box" will ensure there is little difficulty in communicating. The task of learning vocabulary, pronunciation, syntax and so on that a hearing person has to overcome are not relevant to a deaf person. Their visual minds allow a natural communication with any other native signer.



Many signs have an interesting origin which may go back a long time.

Washing



No one knows the exact history of sign language, it has certainly been used for thousands of years, but its exact roots are lost. For centuries sign language has been suppressed by hearing societies who not only failed to see it as a language in its own right, but also seemed to fear it. It is only within the past few decades that sign language has been recognised as worthy of scientific study. Only recently have its complexities been studied and as a result sign language has become respectable.

Sign language is in a true sense a "living language". It has its own grammatical rules; placement is a good example. In describing who is telephoning whom, the direction in which the sign for telephone is being moved is the information giving item. This is easier to illustrate in pictures – naturally!

Signs change over time and new signs emerge – there are now signs for microwave and video, for example. The sign for train has metamorphosed from steam train to train to 125, we would need a video to illustrate this!

Learning sign language is not an easy task for hearing people. Many find it hard to master the visual nature of the language, they cannot make the picture in their mind and find it hard to fill their "empty box". In the same way, many deaf people find difficulty in expressing themselves in the written forms. Where a hearing child is brought up within a deaf family who use both sign and spoken language he or she will naturally acquire both. The real problem arises when a hearing family are suddenly presented with a deaf child. The mother tongue may not provide contact between parents and child. The decision to use sign is not an easy option or a decision taken lightly. Using sign language means the whole family has to learn to think and act differently. You can't call someone down from upstairs if they can't see you or hear you, or sign when you are driving the car or washing up. There can be no "goodnight" sign in the dark or "I'm coming in a minute" when a child is crying in another room.

Learning sign language does have its rewards. Sign language has a charm and beauty which is hard to put into words, for me it really is "poetry in motion".

FLOURISHING EVEN WITH FOUR LANGUAGES

Nancy C. Peláez

Yesterday I met with my son's second grade teachers. It was parent–teacher conference day. I stumbled a bit with my poor German, but we managed to communicate. Was I ever a proud mother as I understood how pleased they are to have a student like Tonio, who is always ready to tackle any activity! Just a year and a half ago our son, Tonio, entered first grade in German at a local public school with only four days exposure to the language, which was to become the fourth he would master. It was a challenge which he has met, and I can't help wondering if it wasn't just the challenge that has made him the great kid he is. Yes, I guess I am a proud mother, not only proud of Tonio, our eight year old, but also of Laura, now five, who has never been hindered by life with four languages.

Before our children were born, while teaching in a bilingual (English–Spanish) School in Bogotá, Colombia, I was already interested in bilingual education and read anything I could find on the subject. Most studies seem to agree with my own observations: although a child's apparent success in school may suffer, bilingual children average higher over-all achievement in many areas. More importantly, though, as a teacher and a parent, I believe we must interpret these reports carefully. Our duty is not to an average child, but to help along the development of unique individuals, our own children, whatever their abilities and personality may be and according to their circumstances. The Colegio San Carlos where I taught in Bogotá is a highly selective school. Only about 100 of 400 or more mainy Spanish speaking six-year-olds who apply are accepted at the school. Most of these are children of educated Colombian families who want their kids to study in English so that they will be able to participate in a world where global communication is ever more important. Several of my students each year were to test into the top places in the country. But I also saw a few, maybe one of every 100, who should never have been in a bilingual school. Those few had communication problems which interfered with their education, and one can only suppose that they would also have had problems, though less severe perhaps, in a monolingual school.

An individual's happiness, initiative and ability to tackle problems is closely tied to his or her self-esteem. Failure in school is undoubtedly destructive to self-esteem. In case our

children were to end up in that small percentage who couldn't make it with bilingualism, we have always been ready with a "way out". Namely, by conscientiously maintaining proficiency in English, our kids could afford to venture into other languages. English was our natural choice for a priority language because good English language schools are available throughout the western world. No language enthusiast would deny that English is now the dominant western language.

Along with our English language priority, we have had another goal: to give our children the opportunity for natural interactions and development within their immediate surroundings. This has brought them to learn spanish, Dutch, and German, in addition to English, all by the ages of five and seven years.

We are basically a bilingual family, as I am American and my husband is Colombian. We have always spoken English within our home, but the children, born in Colombia, were also exposed to Spanish from the very start with Colombian family and with our maid who "mothered" them from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. while both my husband and I were working. We knew that the kids would need more of our time and attention to learn good English, so we have always worked on it conscientiously with the motivating help of an American family who send us books and cassette recordings. In Colombia, each of our children developed normally and simultaneously in both Spanish and English. We found it amazing to observe in their early language skills how differently they approached the two languages. Their first words with us in English were "ball", "sun", and "cow" (nouns), while in Spanish they began with "te quiero" *(I love you)*, "vamos" *(Let's go)*, "ven" *(come)*, and "mira" *(look)*, (all verbs!). They knew with whom to speak each language, English being our "family language", and their only mistake was on our first trip to the U.S. when they tried to speak Spanish with the first few people they met in public, in a restaurant. In Colombia, our children had the best of both worlds, from the modern didactic play-materials and child-rearing information available in English, to the over-flowingly loveable family environment typical in Colombia.

When my husband was transferred to Holland, we were already happy-to-be bilingual. At four, Tonio was a sociable organiser and leader who wanted to start school immediately in Holland so that he could make new friends. Laura was almost two but "going on five", according to friends – an apt description of her fluency and manner of being quietly but happily in control.

Tonio's struggle started soon after our arrival in Holland. There was no room for him in our neighbourhood Dutch school, we would cycle across town where he could attend a smaller school. It distressed our sociable son to be suddenly incapable of communicating enough to play or share with the others. Misunderstandings would lead to aggression, and eventually Tonio chose instead to play alone. The children in his class ranged from four to six years old, and the oldest classmates would patiently show Tonio what to do and where to go – at least he wasn't being rejected! But Tonio would have preferred a different type of interaction, and I can still see that sad look in his eyes in the photos taken of him during those first few months in Holland. Instead of the friends he wanted, suspicious neighbour children would point their toy guns at us in our own back yard!

My own Dutch language studies progressed more rapidly than Tonio's at first, but he had the support of his teacher, a very gifted woman in the way she could lead pre-school children. Perhaps it was her interest in inviting Tonio to her house each week to teach him the language that kept him from giving up. Then Tonio learned to ride a bike and he would pedal after the neighbourhood kids for hours. He never spoke a word in his first Dutch school, but by the time he could enter our neighbourhood school, seven months later, he had a few friends and was speaking Dutch sufficiently to interact again. Several of those boys who were at first so aggressive even became his best friends – which was as good for them to have experienced as it was for Tonio. I have to think of what the result would have been had we not had the patience to bridge the language gap. Within two years, Tonio was so fluent that when a speech therapist checked the school children for language problems, it wasn't even noticed that Tonio was tri-lingual. At school, Tonio became interested in acting and was the star in the kindergarten "graduation" performance. He also practised judo, violin, and at home in our family "English school" learned some English reading basics.

Laura had it much easier in Holland. She escaped Tonio's crisis of immersion. Laura could express herself quite well in both Spanish and English, so language skills were no barrier for her, she could easily associate with the other two year olds and by three, she attended pre-school and never seemed to have any problems in communicating. At four, Laura entered our neighbourhood primary school where her classmates would compete so fervently for her attention that her only difficulty was in finding some time for herself!

Languages enabled us to enjoy the best of all worlds in Holland. The Dutch have developed excellent primary schools. They did this by creating competition, each school being free to design their own methods, but the amount of money each receives from the government depends on how many students the school can attract, which, since this has been going on for many years depends mainly on their success in teaching. As a result, the typical Dutch school today uses an open system, starting four to six year olds in the same class together and continuing with much interaction between all the primary grades, and a great amount of the time is spent on student-initiated projects, both individual and in group. As I saw the schools working, they seemed to place emphasis on the needs of their own students (Tonio's first school, in a farming area, spent plenty of time on carpentry, whereas our neighbourhood school, in a more professional community, spent more time on history and world affairs.) The open system guarantees that all pupils have the opportunity to reach their level of success with very little energy lost on rebellious or "anti-learning" activities. We also found plenty of out-of-school activities in Holland, one benefit of living in such a densely populated area. Still, our children's popularity might be traced to our more relaxed and sociable Colombian–American combination, perhaps due to the fact that we tend to be less intimidated by the conventions of society. Or is that the advantage one has, living in a country as a foreigner?

I must admit that while in Holland, our children's progress in Spanish dropped off. My husband would like to be speaking only Spanish with them, but in practice this soon became impossible, perhaps because his work requires him to spend time travelling. When he is at home, close contact and communication with the kids is more important than work on language skills. We were accustomed to speaking English and the habit was not to be changed. We had never approached our language practice as strenuous work, something into which our children were to be pushed, and so we quickly gave up when Spanish became tedious. Maybe that's why our children have never really abandoned Spanish, however, and they still enjoy books and cassette tapes sent by Colombian relatives. Local Spanish speaking friends and visitors from Colombia also enabled them to keep in touch with the Spanish language, even if their progress has fallen behind the norm for their ages. My husband has occasional "buddy chats" with the kids in Spanish and doesn't mind when they ask for clarification or answer him in English, though we are always encouraging when they play with

phrases in Spanish. It was amazing and satisfying to see how quickly they began using their Spanish when we moved to Germany and their first young contacts spoke only Spanish and German!

I don't think we could spend our entire lifetime moving around acquiring new languages, but when the opportunity came for us to move to Germany, we all felt ready for one more language and culture. Admittedly, with English and Dutch behind us, German was much easier for us the first few weeks in Hamburg than it was for Laura's newly arrived Japanese classmates with their oriental language background.

Tonio entered first grade in our local German school with nothing to lose. He felt ready, remembered having survived the problems he would encounter, but he wanted to be able to make friends in our own neighbourhood as he had always done before. Tonio was armed with enough reading basics in English that in case of any unforeseen complications he could always have transferred to the English language International School in Hamburg. Our first surprise was that first grade in Hamburg lasts only a few hours each morning, which gave Tonio plenty of time to unwind at home, but it limited his exposure time to German, so we ended up looking for extra activities each afternoon to give him more contact with others.

In first grade in Hamburg, Tonio was provided with excellent educational materials and it was amazing how quickly and efficiently the children learned. Thanks to his Dutch pre-school, Tonio started ahead of his classmates. In Hamburg, most parents and kindergartens opt for free and unstructured play until the age of six or even seven, giving the children their chance for fun before starting their school years, at which time they are expected to work very hard. We were grateful that Tonio's Dutch preparation made it unnecessary for him to attend the extra class hours offered to children having difficulty in keeping up with the rest of the class. His judo skills earned him respect and gave him a way to establish initial contact, though as he improved his verbal skills, Tonio decided to drop judo, tired of always competing. He wanted to find a better level of social interaction. Now, having been in Germany a year, Tonio's only language problem is in expressing himself with tact, but he has built a good relationship with neighbours and friends, so politeness will surely follow. Tonio still misses Holland, but mainly because people in Hamburg, even children, normaly remain more isolated and independent from each other than what we are used to. Now he is even learning to appreciate activities that he can best do on his own, like carpentry and model building.

If Laura developed frustrations following our move to Germany, it is not due to the language, but because we had so thoroughly adapted to Holland where children have the opportunity to be active in their own safe world starting at a very young age. In Hamburg, at four years and without having her name on a long waiting list at the few existing intensive programme kindergartens, she could only attend preschool two afternoons per week. Laura, who had been enjoying life as a full-time primary school student for several months, was disappointed. However, two afternoons were enough to enable her to pick up German slowly, but comfortably. She also enjoyed being left alone after having been the centre of attention which she found so tiresome in Holland. Within a year, although Laura still lacked some vocabulary and spent much of her time with younger children, she could communciate without difficulty. Now five, Laura can finally attend kindergarten each morning. She continues to perfect her language skills but because there is so little opportunity for structured activities at which she might excel, her self-esteem is lagging and she remains somewhat withdrawn at kindergarten. She must have been surprised when we visited Holland to see how her old friends, with whom she maintains contact through letters (in Dutch), had continued in their progress! We're not worried that Laura may be a bit behind at the moment because we know she's bright. Quite often when we stumble with the meaning of a word in German, Laura is the one who can provide us with an explanation and examples! So we know she'll feel better about herself once she has had the chance to build closer friendships which will enable her to share more of her non-stop ideas, and when she starts school where she'll be able to accomplish something that she'll feel proud of.

We are past that awful initial "bridging of the language gap" with German, and at this point feel not ony proud of the courage that our children have shown, but grateful that they can once again enjoy the best of all worlds. It is good to watch them learn to be responsible, disciplined, and orderly along with the other kids, even at a young age, in Hamburg. The Hamburg school system is modern and efficient, and if we're sorry that school here means so few hours of unnaturally concentrated hard work, we also enjoy all the free time to spend together as a family given by this system. Again, I feel lucky that we are more relaxed about and less intimidated by rules – not that we disrespect them, but we tend to have a more creative atmosphere of "why not? Let's try it", which many German children may miss as they abide by authority. And we have learned to look for and use the opportunities around us: swimming, ballet, football, scouts, books, stories, letters, and recordings. In short, there are never enough hours in a day. Language has certainly not been an obstacle!

We are not fooling ourselves, though, so let me make it clear that to say that we are using our fourth language does not mean that we are perfectly quadrilingual. The children's

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BILINGUAL HUMOUR

Geoff Perrin, Bonn, Germany

The scene is a bedtime one involving myself and two of our three bilingual (German/English) children, Anna (aged 5) and Stephan (aged 7):

Me: Anna, go into your bedroom and put your pyjamas on, and put your clothes in a neat pile, please.

Anna: A neat pile? Was ist denn "a neat pile" (What's . . .)

Stephan: Anna, das ist ein Essenshaufen. (Anna, that's an eat-pile, i.e. a pile of food!)

Continued from page six

pre-school Dutch still enabled them to talk with their kindergarten teacher from Holland when she came to visit us recently, but they won't be conversing in Dutch 15 years from now after just two and a half years with pre-school Dutch language. Nor would I ever expect to see a sign like the one written in German hanging on their door right now, written in Spanish: "Keine Zutritt ohne zu kloppen!" *(Do not enter without knocking!)* They are experiencing this stage of their development in German. But they have learned that they can succeed in any language, and while we continue our family-life in English, they will no doubt keep up with Spanish on their own in order to keep in touch with Colombian relatives. They know that each language is as important as communication is to participating in society.

Our children have been successful, but we have also been lucky. We are lucky that they are among the percentage of the human population capable of acquiring several languages without any unusual difficulties, and with the personalities to enjoy this adventure. And we're lucky to have English as our mother tongue: from movies to pop music, from T-shirts to the fact that there are international schools in English throughout the western world, it is readily apparent, even to the children, that English will be useful to them no matter where they are and what they choose to do with their lives. We have been lucky to have received support from those around us. Never have we been discriminated against or made to feel inadequate by teachers or family or anyone of importance to us anywhere. Only an optimistic attitude has given us the strength to confront the challenges, but we have earned many rewards. Through our experiences we have had the privilege of discovering that even though customs can vary so immensely that understanding can become difficult, people are really the same deep down everywhere we've been. And I'm sure that our children will agree that all we have gained through these experiences has made even the most difficult moments a privilege to bear! Four languages? Why not!

LETTERS FROM READERS

IDENTITY

It's a good idea to have a newsletter aimed at encouraging bilingualism. I come across so many resigned or disappointed parents who had hoped to bring up their children bilingually.

After reading the July issue I would like to make the following comments about the question of identity. In my case I have a German mother and a Nigerian father. I grew up in England and am married to a German. I've spent 21 years in England and seven years in Germany. As far as my nationality is concerned, I am British, and I can identify with that. But my home is now Germany, and I must admit that before my marriage I never felt that I had a permanent home where I felt comfortable and accepted. Although I speak fluent German, I don't ever think I would be accepted as a German, simply because of my appearance (I am frequently asked where I come from). I feel accepted here as a foreigner (not rejected).

My oldest child Andreas (nearly five) feels totally German and is accepted as such. His German is fluent, his English is clumsier. I talk to him exclusively in English, but most of his other language exposure is German. The main problem I see arising from Andreas's bilingualism will be when he is ten and starts learning English at school. I'm not sure that the German school system is flexible enough to put him into a more advanced class. His difficulties will be different to those of children learning English as a foreign language.

I found Ana Vivet's article on the emotional difficulties of the bilingual child very good, in that it shows that factors other than language exposure can play an important part in a child's wish to comply to the language expectations of the parents.

It's a shame 1.5 pages had to be devoted to Barbara Suzuki's problem. I found both joke and picture in rather poor taste.

To close, a little anecdote from Andreas, aged 3;6. We were going to say hello to some horses and he asked, "Do the horses speak English or German?"

Ruth Pilot, Göttingen, Germany

Thank you for your comments. I hope you do not have any problems when Andreas begins English in grade 5. A lot will depend on the attitude of the school and on your determination to press for having Andreas taught at an appropriate level in English. This is a problem for many children throughout the world who speak English as a home language in a country where English is a compulsory school subject – as is the case in Germany. I had the same problem with my son, Thomas, when we lived in Hamburg for six months in 1984. He began grade 5 there in August and, although English was the stronger of his two languages, he was expected to begin learning English with his classmates. I approached the school principal with the request that he be permitted to go into a higher class (perhaps grade 7 or 8) just for the English lessons, as he would then at least gain something from the instruction (maintenance of writing skills, for example) and could be a useful conversation resource for the other pupils whose English by that stage would be beyond the beginner stage. I said I considered it educationally unsound to treat a child with native speaker proficiency in English as if he knew no English. However, my reasoning and my request were rejected on the grounds that to do this would be "socially inadvisable" and "organsationally impossible"! The first reason is very debatable, the second simply unbelievable in a school of some 800 pupils, all of whom had a compulsory five periods of English per week. Since we were staying for only six months, I did not press the matter as much as I perhaps should have. However, in a case such as yours, where Andreas will be attending a German school for many years, it would perhaps be advisable to approach the school and argue your case, seek support, etc., well before his first day in grade 5. We would be interested in hearing from other parents, who have faced a similar problem, about how they have gone about finding a solution.

George Saunders

Continued from page one

parents, bilingual in Sign Language and English. In one passage in the book, where she relates how she interprets her father's speech at her sister's wedding, she poignantly portrays the richness of Sign Language (p. 205):

> My interpretation was inadequate. My father's signing was graceful and expansive. It had the beauty of a conductor leading a symphony orchestra. There was nothing clichéd in what he signed. No translation could have been as expressive or as moving as the way he drew his hands through the air. They were gestures made in public, but the meaning was private and loving.

We would be most interested in hearing from readers who have had experience with this kind of bilingualism.

Have a happy Easter – and drive safely!

George Saunders

Please send your queries, answers and/or contributions to George Saunders at either of the two addresses below:

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Name, address, languages spoken in the family, children's birth dates and specification of the type of families with whom you would like to get in touch.

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