The Bilingual Family Newsletter

MULTILINGUAL MATTERS

Editor:
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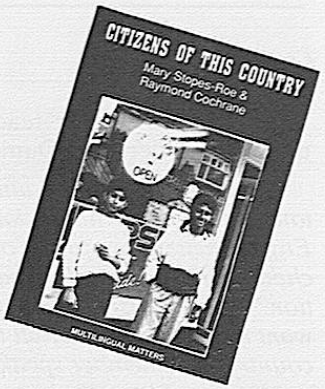

EDITORIAL

I would like to take this opportunity to thank readers for their interest, contributions, suggestions, criticisms and support during the year.

I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to Marjukka Grover who so ably handles much of the *BFN* correspondence and tries valiantly and with incredible patience to get the Editor to stick to publication deadlines – *parhaat kiitokset avustasi, Marjukka!*

I wish you all a very happy New Year and every success with your bilingual endeavours.

George Saunders

FROM BILINGUAL CHILD TO BILINGUAL ADULT

George Saunders

At the University of Western Sydney I have developed and now teach a course called "Bilingualism" which is taken by all students enrolled in a degree in languages or in a degree in interpreting and translating. All of these students are bilingual in some way, and many of them have grown up bilingually in a variety of circumstances.

In the *BFN* we publish a lot of articles about the bilingualism of children growing up with one of their languages represented by one or both of their parents and the other by the environment. Many of these articles concentrate on young children, which is understandable, since in the majority of cases this is undoubtedly the crucial period; if the children do not become bilingual then, the chances of them becoming so later on are usually not good. However, in the present article I would like to report on the bilingualism of a young Australian from childhood through to adulthood. I hope it will provide some encouragement and inspiration to parents whose children are still young and who are wondering what the prospects for their children's long-term bilingualism could be.

The subject of this report is Daniela Santi Amantini who has both talked to me at length about her bilingualism and has also written down some of her impressions for me. Daniela is now 21 years old. She was born in Australia of Italian parents in July 1969 and is an only child. At the age of nine months she went to Italy, but returned to Australia when she was 18 months old. Two years later, at the age of 3½ she went back to Italy for about 2½ years. While there, she did her first year of schooling, the so-called *asilo*. During that year she learnt to read and write Italian. Shortly afterwards, when Daniela was 5½, her family returned to Australia.

Daniela Santi Amantini

At that time Daniela was thus basically monolingual in Italian. Her mother spoke only Italian and was reluctant to make the effort to learn English, since she intended to remain only a short time in Australia, although this was not to be. Daniela's father spoke Italian and some English, although her parents spoke only Italian at home.

The family constantly socialised with Italian speaking friends and relatives. They considered it important to maintain ties with their native language and culture.

When Daniela started school in Australia in the first grade, her English was virtually non-existent. She felt helpless, isolated and disoriented, as she was unable to express her feelings and thoughts in the new language. She was placed in a linguistic situation where she virtually had to

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"sink or swim". Her teacher was monolingual and thus unable to understand Daniela's Italian:

"My teacher had the attitude that we immigrants should totally forget our native language and that we would learn English better if we forgot our home language. But how can a child totally forget its language, its only means of communication? After all, isn't language part of one's culture? Did they want me to throw away all the ties and links with my parents' country? I remember speaking in Italian in the class and the teacher would totally ignore me unless I made an effort to speak in English. She would say, 'Don't you dare speak Italian! Go away!', and I would cry. I can now understand that the large number of minority languages of immigrant children would make it virtually impossible always to have available teachers who speak their languages, but an attitude like that is still very bad."

> "She felt helpless, isolated and disoriented, as she was unable to express her feelings and thoughts in the new language."

Fortunately, however, Daniela was then placed in an ESL (English as a Second Language) class, where the teacher was bilingual and at least understood the situation, allowing the children to use their minority language until they were able to communicate in English. For the first time in her Australian schooling she felt accepted and not intimidated. Her initial negative attitude towards English disappeared: *"Slowly, as I learned English, my insecurity turned to confidence. The teachers were amazed at how fast I picked up the language. Merit certificates were sent home commenting on my major improvement in English. I now really enjoyed going to school."*

At home Daniela's mother and father continued to speak Italian to her: *"My parents felt that with me constantly being exposed to the English language day after day I would lose my knowledge of Italian. For them, the major worry associated with me becoming bilingual was its effects on the minority language – Italian."*

This constant exposure to both languages was a highly favourable situation for Daniela to become bilingual. She spoke only Italian to her mother, yet when speaking to her father she sometimes used English, as she knew he could also understand English: *"However, my father would constantly correct me, as he felt that it was essential to keep the home environment free of English influences, especially since my mother could only understand Italian."*

By the time Daniela started third grade, she could read and write well in both English and Italian. Her parents constantly bought her books in both languages, and relatives in Italy also used to send her Italian books. Her parents used to read the Italian books to her, always making time for questions and discussions: *"This would enable me to express my feelings in Italian and also to increase my vocabulary."* Such an activity is highly recommended for reinforcing and extending a minority language. Books expose children to a greater variety and richness of language than they will hear in their parents' speech. It is also worth pointing out that reading books to children and talking about them with them is an activity which virtually anyone can do. It does not require a high level of education. Daniela's parents, for instance, only went to primary school: they did not go on to high school. Her father is a painter and decorator and her mother is a housewife.

Daniela was also exposed to children's records and tapes (with songs and stories), games, etc. When she was in grade 4 at school, a teacher offered to give a one hour Italian lesson one day a week after normal school hours for those children of Italian background who were interested. With her parents' encouragement, Daniela attended this class for a year and it proved very useful for developing her reading and writing skills in Italian. Unfortunately, this particular teacher left at the end of the year and the class ceased. Having seen the benefits of even this small amount of formal instruction in Italian, Daniela's parents wished to maintain the gains that had been made and decided to enrol her in an Italian Saturday School, which she attended for the next four years. The Saturday school ran for three hours on Saturday mornings, and was a programme designed to meet the specific needs of the children of immigrants. For children such as Daniela English was becoming or had already become their dominant language and their Italian was in danger of eroding.

At high school, which in Australia begins in grade 7, Daniela was fortunate to be able to take Italian as an elective subject from grade 7 to grade 12. On completion of her Higher School Certificate, Daniela's proficiency in Italian and English enabled her in 1988 to be accepted into a degree course in interpreting and translating at the University of Western Sydney. This course, which requires her to use her Italian at a high level not only for interpreting and translating but also in some of her subjects which are conducted entirely in Italian. This has helped to improve her Italian vocabulary and increased her stylistic range in the language.

> "Books expose children to a greater variety and richness of language than they will hear in their parents' speech."

By the time Daniela started university the linguistic situation had changed somewhat from when she was younger. She now conversed with her parents in both English and Italian. This was partly due to the fact that her mother had by now learnt English fairly well, at least as far as comprehension was concerned. Italian was still the main language of the family and the one which came most naturally to her parents. Daniela estimates that she spoke about 70% Italian and 30% English at home. About 10% of what her mother said and about 20% of what her father said to Daniela was in English. Outside the home environment her mother used English

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A PRODUCT OF TWO CULTURES

Jane Assimakopoulos

My daughter Daphne, aged 17, is finishing high school (third class Lykeio) and is applying to universities in the US. The following is an essay she wrote for one of those universities describing herself and her experiences as a cross-cultural youngster growing up in Greece.

I would describe myself as a product of two cultures. My father is Greek and my mother American. They met while my father was studying in the United States and soon after they graduated they married and moved permanently to Greece. Although I was born in New York, I spent the first six years of my life in Athens and then moved to Ioannina, a small university town in Northern Greece, near the Albanian border. Life in Ioannina was simple and easy, almost without a care. I attended the local public elementary school, which fostered in me a strong sense of security and camaraderie with the other children in the neighbourhood.

When I was 12, we moved to Athens where I am at present completing high school. I had a difficult time adapting to the noise, pollution, more hurried and impersonal way of life of a big city, but there were many compensations. Athens, being a very cosmopolitan city, afforded me opportunities for educational, cultural and personal enrichment I would never have had in Ioannina. For instance, I was accepted at both the National Conservatory of Dance and the National Conservatory of Music.

> "On the Greek side of the Atlantic, I learned to curtsy slightly and kiss an aunt on both cheeks while on the American side of the Atlantic I would simply say "hi" and perfunctorily brush only one cheek when greeting a relative."

My formative years, however, were not spent solely in Greece. Every summer I visited my grandparents in the United States and spent two or three months with my American cousins and friends. During these extended visits I absorbed many aspects of the American culture and customs, although they were often quite different from what I was used to in Greece. First and foremost, my Greek grandparents and most of my Greek relatives spoke only Greek whereas to my American relatives, well, the language I used at home was simply "Greek to them". On the Greek side of the Atlantic, I learned to curtsy slightly and kiss an aunt on both cheeks while on the American side of the Atlantic I would simply say "hi" and perfunctorily brush only one cheek when greeting a relative. (While I profoundly respect all my aunts, I must admit a strong preference for the American custom!)

Eventually I came to feel equally comfortable in Ioannina, Athens or New York. This was not always easy. While growing up, this dichotomy of cultures often created a sense of insecurity and uneasiness – one might say a sense of lack of identity. Was I Greek or American? Would I be accepted and fit in either society? And to me, most important, which country and countrymen would I eventually serve with the skills I acquire through my education?

These questions troubled me for a long time but I have now come to believe that it is not necessary to try and fit into one culture exclusively. It is far better to chose aspects from both cultures which suit my own character, idiosyncrasies and aspirations. I often feel privileged in comparison to my mono-cultural peers because I realise that my broader cultural horizons offer me more options to choose from.

In Greece, I have learned to appreciate a deep-rooted sense of tradition and to admire the individuality, openness of emotions, warmth and spontaneity of the Greek people. In America, I admire the pragmatism and efficiency with which things get done and the straightforwardness with which people express their ideas and opinions.

One of the reasons I want to study in the United States is, in fact, having spent more time in Greece than in America, to further broaden my American cultural horizons.

For me, the important thing is no longer to be a member of a nation or a clan but to be a member of the human race and to judge others not by their origin, language, religion or colour but by their own intrinsic value: their morality, kindness of heart and astuteness or lack of these qualities. I like to think of myself as a "citizen of the world" and I believe more and more people of my generation are beginning to feel the same way.

> "I often feel privileged in comparison to my mono-cultural peers . . ."

One of the most important steps being taken to promote this new, cosmopolitan mentality is the unification – or almost unification – of Europe in 1992. This is a development that I anticipate with great hope and excitement. I believe that my upbringing in a dual culture and especially my Greek heritage have prepared me for this historic event. On the one hand I feel that I shall not have a great difficulty in assimilating the customs, understanding the idiosyncrasies and confronting in a friendly way the tempers of the French, Dutch or Italians. Greek history has also taught me that this is exactly the transition that resulted in the present unified state of my country of origin two thousand years ago from the concatenation of the city states of Athens, Sparta, Corinth, Macedonia and many others.

My hope and desire is that, after I acquire a good education, I can contribute to this great idea of the unification of Europe and help make all Europeans feel like "citizens of the world".

Thanks to the Cross-Cultural Association of Athens for permission to reproduce this article from their quarterly newsletter No. 39.

BILINGUAL HUMOUR

The following letter, written by Adrian Park, appeared in a Canadian newspaper, Globe and Mail, *on 6.2.1990.*

THE FINNISH FORMULA

With reference to several recent correspondents, I would like to draw your attention to the idea of adopting Finnish as Canada's official language. Such a move would solve several pressing problems immediately.

Finnish has no gender, so there are no separate personal pronouns such as "he" or "she" and no titles such as "Mr", "Mrs", "Miss" and "Ms"; the formal form of address being first name followed by surname. This would go a long way toward removing perceived gender bias from everyday speech without bastardising the language with artificial word constructions. This principle extends into religious matters too: the words for "God" and "the devil" are also gender-neutral.

Bilingualism as an issue would vanish at a stroke; as Finnish for non-native speakers is just about the most difficult language known, we would all be equally illiterate, incoherent and inarticulate.

BOOK REVIEW

Emer O'Sullivan and Dietmar Rösler: *I Like You – Und Du?*
Reinbek bei Hamburg: rororo rotfuchs, 1986.
Price DM5.80*

Reviewed by Katrina Saunders

In *BFN* 2/1990 we had an interesting article by Viv Edwards about a new series of books specially designed by her and Nicole Bérubé for bilingual children, the first of which is called *Découvrez . . . Who Stole Granny?* This reminded my own children of a similar type of book which was published some time ago in Germany and which they have all read with amusement and enjoyment. The book was originally intended for children learning English at school in Germany, but it is also very suitable for children growing up with English and German. I asked my daughter, Katrina, to jot down her impressions of the book.)

This book is about an Irish boy called Paddy who comes to Germany and has to adjust to the different ways of the Germans. This results in many misunderstandings, some of which are very embarrassing for himself and for Karin, the daughter of the man Paddy and his mother are staying with. For example, poor Paddy puts on a suit and tie to go to school with Karin, which you would never do in Germany. Karin groans and says: "Willste mir das wirklich antun? Ich kann dich doch nicht so mit in die Schule nehmen." (= *Do you really want to do this to me? I can't take you to school like that.)* Paddy didn't understand what she meant . . . "What's the matter? Am I not neat enough?"

This book has a clever way of telling the story from both children's point of view. The language is switched every couple of paragraphs, and sometimes in mid-sentence. It is very interesting when this happens, because if the switch is from German to English, then that means Paddy is now telling the story. It could also mean that Paddy could be speaking or at least doing something. As soon as the language changes to German, the reader knows that one of the German characters is speaking, thinking or doing something.

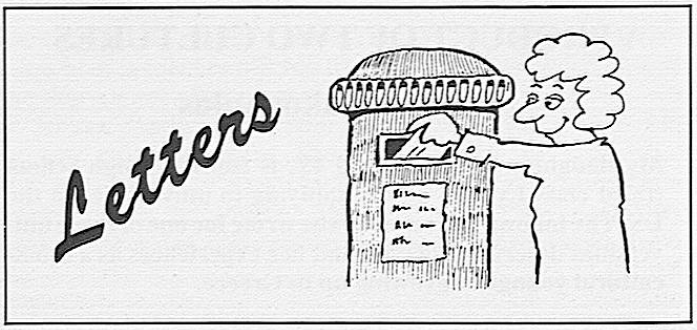
I think that if you only spoke German you would probably enjoy *I Like You – Und Du?* without having to worry about the English parts, but it would be hard to understand if you only knew English, because there is much more German text than English.

But to really enjoy the story, it's best if you know both languages. I thought it was very amusing to keep changing backwards and forwards between the two languages as I was reading. At times it reminded me of my own family, especially when Paddy's mother spoke English (like my mum) and Karin's father spoke German (like my dad does to me).

On the cover of the book it says "Ab 12 jahre", which means it's supposed to be for children 12 and over, but I think kids my age (nine) would understand most of it without too much trouble.

I'm really looking forward to getting hold of the sequel to this book, which is called *It Could be Worse – Oder?* and is about Karin going to Ireland to visit Paddy.

Publisher's address: Rowholt Verlag Gmbh, Hamburger Strasse 17, Postfach 1349, D-2057 Reinbek, Germany.



MAINTAINING BRAZILIAN PORTUGUESE IN ENGLAND

We have subscribed to the *BFN* since its beginning and always find it very interesting and a source of encouragement. I have not yet seen an article or anything related to Portuguese/English speaking families (especially Brazilian Portuguese). I wonder if you or your readers would be interested in our experience.

I am Brazilian, my husband is English and we have two daughters, Laura aged 7;10 and Silvia 5;4.

Since their birth I have tried to speak to them only in Portuguese and my husband in English. This worked reasonably well until our return from our first visit to Brazil as a family, begun when Laura was 3;5 years old and Silvia one year old exactly. Laura's Portuguese on our departure was almost as good as her English, and to our great relief and encouragement she was better in both languages than the average monolingual child of her age. Silvia, in the few words she could speak and in what she could understand was a balanced bilingual. They were both early speakers. We spent two months in Brazil in a 100 per cent Portuguese environment. When my husband joined us for a third month, Laura and Silvia were unable to talk to him in English, though Laura could still understand it (Silvia didn't even recognise her daddy!) During that month my husband made no particular attempt to press with their English, as we would soon be back in England. When we returned, it took Laura about two weeks to get back to being a fluent speaker of English, this with my husband switching back to speaking English to the girls on our arrival home. Silvia, being only 15 months old then, took a little longer.

> "At the time I felt a failure, but looking back I can console myself with the fact that I was really fighting against everything."

But over the following three years (1986–89), gradually they began dropping their Portuguese, as their English gathered strength. With school, friends, and all the stimulation around them being in English, eventually even I found myself talking to them in English, against my convictions (and my husband's). It finally came to the point when they could hardly understand any Portuguese, let alone speak it. At the time I felt a failure, but looking back I can console myself with the fact that I was really fighting against everything: there are no other Brazilians or Portuguese-speaking people where we live, no videos or television programmes; we had not had any visits from the family and we had not been to Brazil for three years.

So in May 1989 when Laura was 6;5 and Silvia 4, we decided that it was imperative to rescue their Portuguese before it became too late. The girls and I set off for a four-and-a-half month visit to Brazil, leaving dear daddy on his own in England. When we first arrived, the girls could not

speak at all, though Laura could understand a little. By the end of the first week Laura was beginning to say a few words. But Silvia was still being left out of games with their cousins beause she couldn't understand anything yet. Amazingly, however, by the end of the third week she was already saying a few words and understanding a lot more. By the fourth week she was speaking in proper sentences. As we were in an all Portuguese-speaking environment, by the end of her sixth week, Silvia switched languages completely and used only Portuguese. During these first six weeks and for a while afterwards, I always repeated in English what I had said to them in Portuguese, to make sure they had understood. Once their Portuguese was well established I dropped English altogether in the hope that the pattern of speaking only Portuguese to me would be well rooted and maintainable by our return to England.

They both attended school whilst in Brazil, although Silvia's attendance (to play school) was somewhat sporadic. Laura accompanied Silvia to her class in the afternoon for the first few weeks (having attended her own classes in the morning) to help as an interpreter. Attending school and playing with their cousins was an invaluable help in the recovery of their Portuguese.

When we went, Laura was already a proficient reader in English. I gave her a few lessons about reading in Portuguese when still in England, and the transfer of skills was very straightforward, although at the time she frequently couldn't tell the meaning of the words she was reading. Once in Brazil she had no problems at all with her reading at school.

> "... she too loves Brazil and the family and is proud of her bicultural background."

By the time we came back to England in October, they were proficient in Portuguese and practically as good as their monolingual peers. Back in England, Laura's English seemed unharmed though she preferred to speak in Portuguese for a while. Her handwriting took a few weeks to become neat again, as in England they print at this age-group, and in Brazil they go straight into joined-up writing. But these were minor problems, soon overcome, compared to what she had gained. Silvia had again forgotten all her English, but this time we were determined to try to keep their Portuguese, so we carried on speaking it at home, including my husband. However, Silvia was having a hard time at school, unable to talk, so to speed things up Daddy returned to speaking English to them. It took her about four weeks to get back to her previous standard of English. She then settled well at school (at 4;5 years of age this was her first year at proper school, to which she arrived one month late) and soon caught up with her classmates in both speech and school-work.

Now, 11 months since our return, we are once again struggling to keep Portuguese going. I try very hard to speak to the children in Portuguese, although I don't always succeed, but they very often answer me in English. They both try and make an effort to speak in Portuguese, but often forget, since everything around them is in English. Our main problem is lack of stimulation in Portuguese, lack of people who speak that language and lack of formal situations in which they would have to speak Portuguese. Apart from the books which I brought back with us, some tapes of music and stories, and the occasional telephone call to or from their grandparents, they have no contact with the Portuguese language. Laura still manages to talk to her grandparents on the phone, but Silvia is beginning to find it hard to think quickly enough in Portuguese.

Laura is now well grounded in Portuguese, especially that she can read and write in it. We subscribe to a monthly Brazilian children's magazine which she reads avidly and she is proud of her Brazilian background. I am confident that she will retain her Portuguese against the odds.

Silvia has had less chance as yet, being younger, but she too loves Brazil and the family and is proud of her bicultural background. I am very hopeful that she will follow in Laura's footsteps. At the moment she has lost more of her fluency in Portuguese than Laura, but her understanding of it seems to be still intact. She is now a confident reader in English and we are working on her reading in Portuguese. As with Laura, the transfer of reading skill from English to Portuguese seems to be amazingly straightforward.

We are planning another long visit to Brazil next year, 1991, including again a spell at school. We realise this is the only way in our circumstances, to help them with their Portuguese, their bicultural identity and with establishing the mutual affection between them and their Brazilian family.

I am now reluctantly beginning to admit that I failed to establish myself as a purely Portuguese speaker to them. As soon as English becomes their dominant language again they almost involuntarily switch back to speaking English to me, although they do try to speak Portuguese when they remember to, or are reminded. They usually make this effort unless they are unable to express themselves in Portuguese on that subject. It is interesting, however, that in some specific subjects they still prefer to talk in Portuguese.

I am determined to carry on talking to them in Portuguese even if their replies come in English, and as an additional, vital boost, to have regular long visits to Brazil (about every two years for about four months).

I very much regret the difficulties faced by a Portuguese-speaking family in this country, as we have practically nothing to make our task easier and with the distance and prices, visits to Brazil or from relatives can't be as often as we would like. I would love to have suggestions from readers, or hear from any English/Portuguese-speaking families in similar circumstances (see address in the Contact Section).

Lastly, I would like to stress that our girls' bilingualism has been a most interesting experience. It is marvellous to watch their development and most rewarding to see them being able to communicate with their families, with a sense of belonging, whether in their mother's or their father's homeland.

Marilane Magalhães Vearncombe, Stafford, England

STUTTERING AND BILINGUALISM

I have just read *BFN* 2/1990 and was moved to fire off a letter immediately in response to the letter from Anita Fischer-Sells, who was concerned about her son's stuttering. My bilingual Spanish/English daughter, who is now five, was terribly slow in beginning to speak, and when she finally got going, sometime in her threes, she too stuttered awfully. I checked with a cousin, who is a child psychologist and a mother, and she chuckled and recalled that her own monolingual (Spanish) son, who was about five at the time and had been a very precocious speaker, skilled from quite an early age, had also stuttered heavily in the early years of speaking. She said that his ideas piled up much faster than his limited speech skills could cope with, and the problem seemed to be merely the effort to get it all out fast enough. The same seemed to be true of my daughter, so I stopped worrying about it, and the problem has nearly disappeared. It occasionally resurfaces when she suddenly finds herself in

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a new linguistic environment and has to re-adjust. For example, vacations from preschool are spent speaking mostly English; when school reopens and she has to return to Spanish, she stutters a bit until she gets back into the habit of frequent switching. I have found that the most important way to deal with this is to sit down, listen to her, and give her the time she needs to sort out her ideas. Don't rush the child, criticise or pressure, because the resulting self-consciousness could actually create a problem that didn't exist before. Occasionally she gets so stuck that she can't get anything out, and usually a bit of very gentle teasing, followed by a shared laugh, solves the problem. Or sometimes I prompt her, if I have a pretty good idea of what she was trying to say. If Ms. Fischer-Sells' son gets over the stuttering, and these people really believe she should not be raising him bilingually, they will surely come up with some other compelling argument to replace the stuttering one! So then it becomes their problem, not hers!

By the way, I do enjoy reading the *BFN,* and I feel such a sense of identification with many of the people who write.

Elizabeth M. Lewis, San José, Costa Rica

Thank you for your perceptive comments on this matter. I expressed similar sentiments in ***Bilingual Children: From Birth to Teens*** *(Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 1988, p. 102), including the following remarks:*

Attributing the problem (i.e. some degree of disfluency) to children's bilingualism and trying to solve it by removing one of the languages would seem to be not at all satisfactory. In fact, such an action could have the opposite effect, merely increasing children's anxiety, especially since, in most cases, it would be the language of the home which would be the one to go. If children are suddenly told that they cannot use the familiar home language, the language associated with the warmth and security of the family, perhaps even the language in which they feel most confident and at ease, they cannot fail to become aware that people consider that they have a speech problem, undoubtedly a serious one at that for such drastic action to be taken. It is very doubtful that such an experience and realisation would lead to improvement in fluency in the language remaining.

The solution lies rather in the attitude of the listener, and much of the advice given by Wendell Johnson, Professor of Speech Pathology and Psychology, in his book *Speech Handicapped School Children* (Evanston and London: Harper & Row, 1967, pp. 229, 543) to parents, teachers, etc. who have contact with children with disfluent speech applies equally well to people coming into contact with bilingual children:

(i) "Make talking enjoyable. See to it that the children have as much a feeling of success as possible in speaking. (One) should do all (one) can to make the children's speaking enjoyable and rewarding. Certainly (one should) not make a point of criticising them for mistakes in grammar and pronunciation . . . or for other things about their speech that are not important in relation to the fun and satisfaction they get from speaking as well as they can."

(ii) "Try to be the kind of listener (the) children like to talk to . . . when they are 'talking over their heads' be patient, and now and then supply them with a new word which they had not yet learned but which they need at the moment. To a reasonable extent and in meaningful ways help them to add to their vocabulary – preferably at those times when they need words they haven't learned in order to tell you things they had never tried to say before."

(iii) "Read to (the children) whenever you can. In reading or speaking to them, enunciate clearly, be interested in what you are reading and avoid a tense, impatient, or loud voice. Enjoy this reading and make it fun and companionable. Do some of it every day, (if a parent) preferably just before bedtime, if possible."

As can be seen, this advice, if followed, reduces children's anxiety about speaking and make it an enjoyable experience for them. Whilst Wendell Johnston mentions these steps specifically as effective means of building confidence in the disfluent speaker, they would seem to be a sound procedure for assisting also bilingual children who are having difficulty in expressing themselves.

WHICH LANGUAGE SHOULD MY HUSBAND USE TO MY SON?

I've finished reading the book *Pour l'éducation bilingue* by Anna Lietti, in which your Newsletter is mentioned many times. The book was very interesting, but unfortunately it does not mention the type of case which I'm interested in (and which occurs more and more nowadays).

I am French, and I recently married a German and I have been living in West Germany since the beginning of June 1990. My German is still not of a high standard, four years of study in high school a long time ago not being sufficient, but my husband speaks almost perfect French.

From a previous union with a Frenchman I have a six-year-old son, whose native language is thus French. He has moved to Germany with me, without, of course, any basic knowledge of German.

At the beginning of September my son started in the first grade at the French primary school in Munich where he will be taught in French and German. He has also joined a football club, the members of which are solely German.

Since we met, my husband I have only spoken French together as well as with my son. Only outside the home do we speak German with German-speaking people.

My son's teachers have advised us that from now on my husband should speak only German to my son, even at home.

What will happen then? What are my son's chances of becoming rapidly bilingual? I suppose, in view of his age and his external environment, that they are great. But then, what will happen with me? I won't learn German as fast as my son and in the beginning I'll miss a lot of his exchanges with his stepfather.

Besides the fact that my son will regularly go back to France to visit his father, and thus then speak French, I know that I must, for affective reasons, go on speaking French to him.

So, what must we do to give my son the best chance of rapidly becoming a well-balanced bilingual child, while also maintaining harmony as a couple and between the three of us?

Our situation is somewhat different from the one encountered when a child hears, as soon as he or she is born, two different languages. I think that situation is simpler to handle.

H. Kern, Germering, Germany

The conditions are good for your son to attain a good level of bilingualism. Firstly, he is not being submerged in German at school without the possibility of having recourse to his native language (which is what happens to so many immigrant children). He is being given a gentler introduction to the language, since his native language, French, is one of the languages used for instruction at his school, which means he will always be able to communicate.

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AN EYE FOR AN I

When my daughter Stefanie was 4½ years old, I started to teach her the alphabet – in English first – since she would learn to read German at school at the age of six (a method which, by the way, has often been recommended in the *BFN*). Soon Stephanie was able to recognise a number of letters including the letter "I". On another occasion, I asked her in German what that letter was (the name of the letter is pronounced in German in the same way as the letter "E" in English, to confuse matters). She answered: *"Ein Auge"*. (German for "an eye").

Constanze Taylor, Langen, Germany

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mainly only for shopping, but at university and work Daniela and her father had to use English over 90% of the time. Even with her peers from a similar Italian background, Daniela spoke (and still speaks) mainly English: *"You try to speak Italian, but you keep going back to English, because it's much easier. Sometimes, if you can't find the right English word, you use Italian. Or if you don't want someone to hear something, you say it in Italian."*

Now in the third year of her university, Daniela says that the effect of constantly having to use Italian at a high level in her interpreting and translating course has been to give her greater confidence and pride in her Italian. This has carried over to her home, where she now uses mainly Italian, at least 90% of the time. She has also becomes even more aware that the more she uses her Italian, the more proficient she becomes. Her parents are delighted with her increased use of

> "... the more she uses her Italian, the more proficient she becomes."

Italian. Daniela is now reluctant to use English at home, although she says she still has to at times when she cannot find the Italian word or does not know how to express a particular idea in Italian. Sometimes English words also carry over unconsciously into Italian discussions of often heard English news broadcasts, etc., e.g.: Daniela (to parents) "La *bushfire* era veramente *dangerous* perché era vicino la *road.*" (= The bushfire was really dangerous because it was near the road.) Her parents, aware that she wishes to improve her Italian, now correct her more when she uses English and, if they can, give her the Italian equivalent.

Daniela makes other efforts to maintain and develop her Italian. She reads Italian newspapers and magazines, watches Italian movies and news on the SBS (Special Broadcasting Service, Australia's multilingual television station which transmits in the capital cities of the states and also in some country areas), listens to SBS radio broadcasts in Italian, attends Italian clubs, visits Italian friends and relatives, and writes letters to friends and relatives in Italy. She considers these efforts to be very effective in maintaining her Italian and keeping her up to date with events in Italy and with developments in the language.

However, English is still the language Daniela regards as her dominant language, the language in which she has greater proficiency and in which she feels most comfortable. She rates her English as being equal to that of an English monolingual, whereas she believes her Italian would need further work to reach the standard of an Italian monolingual or the same standard as her English. She feels that studying Italian at university has enabled her to narrow the gap considerably between her English and Italian. Before starting university she felt some uneasiness when speaking Italian in formal situations to Italians fresh out from Italy, as she thought her home Italian was somewhat undeveloped in comparison and put her at a linguistic and psychological disadvantage. Nowadays she feels much more confident in such situations. Daniela has never really had any doubts about her linguistic ability when speaking in Italian to people she knows.

Daniela gives much of the credit for her successful bilingual development to her parents: *"If it hadn't been for their constant support and encouragement I would not find myself in my present situation. They always maintained a positive attitude towards bilingualism and this attitude transferred to me."*

She admits that to acquire a good level of bilingualism a certain amount of effort is required from both parents and children, but she believes that the result is an enrichment of individual and family life.

Daniela hopes one day to have children of her own. When asked which language she will speak to them, she replied, *"Italian. I feel it's part of me, actually. If I gave that up, I'd feel like I was giving up half of me."* She is determined to do this even if the man she marries is an English speaker. She wishes her children to gain the same pleasures and benefits from bilingualism as she has.

Contact details removed

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

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You mention that your son has joined football club, the members of which are all monolingual German speakers. This is an ideal, reasonably stress-free way of mixing with German children and acquiring colloquial German in an informal way. He will also be in constant contact with German in other ways, e.g. television, radio, shops, etc., so that as time passes his German will improve and, in all probability, will eventually become his dominant language if you stay in Germany permanently.

However, your son's French will undoubtedly remain in a strong position, since it is also used for instruction at his school, it is the language predominantly spoken in your family, and he will continue to visit his French father regularly in France.

No doubt your son's teachers mean well by advising your husband to speak German to your son. To them this probably seems like a logical and simple thing to do. However, you must consider carefully whether this advice is appropriate for your family. Even if you as a family decided to do as the teachers suggest, it might prove very difficult psychologically for your husband and son to change their relationship to a German-speaking one, since French is the language in which they have got to know each other. It may seem unnatural to change this established pattern of communication, and if such a change is going to affect family harmony adversely, it is perhaps better to keep French as your family language.

Of course, your son does have an advantage over many immigrant children in that his stepfather is a native speaker of German whom he can ask for assistance, with German, help with his German homework, etc. Your husband might also like to set aside a short time each day when your son can practise his German informally with him. This will help your son to make progress in his German, but French can still remain the principal means of a communication between him and his stepfather.

CONTACTS

If you wish your name and address to be included in the Contacts section, please send us the following information:

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.

Contact details removed

Did you know that . . . .

there is a **Spanish-speaking children's group** in Edinburgh, Scotland.
More information from Nicky de la Pena,
14 Ryehill Grove, Edinburgh, EH6 8ET, Scotland.

PAL Children's Video Cassettes in French can be bought from The European Bookshop, 4 Regent Place, Warwich Street, London W1, United Kingdom.
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