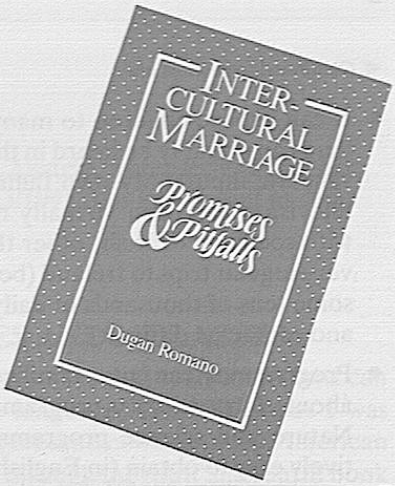
The Bilingual Family Newsletter

MULTILINGUAL MATTERS

Editor:
George Saunders

1992 VOLUME 9 No. 1



EDITORIAL

In December last year I had the good fortune to be a speaker at an international conference on Bilingualism and National Development which was excellently organised by the English Department of the Universiti Brunei Darassalam. The Universiti Brunei Darussalam is situated near Bandar Seri Begawan, the capital of Brunei.

For anyone interested in bilingualism, Brunei is a fascinating place. Here, as in the rest of South-East Asia, bilingualism, or indeed multilingualism, is more common than monolingualism.

Wedged between Sarawak and Sabah on the island of Borneo, Brunei is quite a small country, having a population of only 257,000. Two thirds of these are Malay, the remainder including other indigenous peoples and Chinese, as well as expatriates.

Malay (*Bahasa Melayu*) is the official language, as it is also of its neighbours Malaysia (where it is known as *Bahasa Malaysia*) and Indonesia (where it is called *Bahasa Indonesia*), a total of close to 200 million speakers. However, English is also widely used in Brunei, and the country has an official policy of bilingualism (*dwibahasa*), the aim of which is to have a population which can function effectively in both English and Malay. Malay is to be the language of everyday life and culture, the language of the soul, whilst English will have a purely functional value, acting as a medium of instruction and as a means of communication with non-Malay-speaking countries. For a not insignificant proportion of Brunei's population (e.g. the speaker's of various varieties of Chinese and speakers of various indigenous languages), Malay and English are second and third languages.

A common concern expressed at the conference was whether increasing use of English in Brunei and increased world contact will mean a decrease in the use of Malay. However, it would seem that the Malay language is so firmly established in the country and such an integral part of its culture that its position would not appear to be in danger because of the policy of bilingualism.

In future issues we hope to publish some reports from this fascinating region.

George Saunders

IN PRAISE OF TELEVISION

Ciarán O'Hagan

Let me be clear: television is perhaps the greatest invention ever for children! It gives them many hours of enjoyment, broadens their horizons and occasionally gives precious relief to tired parents. For bilingual children, it is an opportunity to use and reinforce the minority language.

Lest you should believe that I exaggerate, allow me to add three of the more important qualifiers:

- Parents need to be able to choose what the children see and when. The only means of achieving control is to buy a video-cassette player or recorder. And for bilingual families, this is doubly important. Unless parents have access to satellite channels or receive foreign direct broadcasts, it is the only means of reinforcing the home language(s).
- I believe that television can be put to best use if, paradoxically, exposure to it is limited (say, not more than a few hours a week). There are, after all, other interesting activities for kids!
- Parents need time. Time to listen with the children and explain the programmes, time to choose the programmes and possibly edit them if they are too long, too violent, etc. While a television set can be a wonderfully efficient machine for getting squealing kids off the backs of exasperated parents, our ideal bilingual family instead enjoys the shared delights of video viewing.

How television is used depends greatly on personal circumstances. I am Irish, my wife is French and our three children (aged 5;2, 3;8 and 1;5 at the time of writing) have always lived in or near Paris. My spouse always speaks English to the children unless she is with French speakers. I speak English to the children (even in the company of French speakers!) and when I am alone with them, I speak Irish (Gaelic). The children attend a French school or stay with a French babyminder. Our use of television follows our use of language. The children almost exclusively watch programmes in English, or videos in Irish when I am alone with them.

What are the particular advantages of television for bilingual families?

- It can be a means of increasing exposure to the home language(s). More particularly, it gives the home language(s) an additional use and importance in the eyes of the child.

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- It can expose children to many more varieties of speech than can possibly be heard in the home (as long as parents vary the input!) My own family is an extreme example: television has been virtually my childrens' only contact with speakers of Irish, other than myself. This is despite very regular trips to Ireland (because even in Ireland, only some tens of thousands of daily speakers of Irish remain, and contact is difficult).
- Programmes can give families something more to talk about. I try to vary programmes as much as possible. Nature and science programmes for children are relatively easy to obtain (in English, of course) but now as the children get older, I have tried introducing news, history and comedy. For minority languages in the home, it is particularly helpful to have an additional subject to inspire and broaden conversation, and to leave aside our purely family concerns for a time.
- A further advantage of television is that it allows second language speakers to improve their comprehension, English in the case of my wife, Irish in my case.

While raising children bilingually does not necessarily cost money, the same cannot unfortunately be said about video. Our equipment consists of a multistandard TV, two multistandard video recorders and a video camera. My configuration costs the grand total of almost US$4,000 (although admittedly one could mangage with fewer options and poor quality). The purchase or the borrowing of video tapes could also easily amount to an additional several hundred dollars a year. Between television, travel, books and the provision of activities in the minority languages, raising bilingual children is certainly easier for the rich!

> "... raising bilingual children is certainly easier for the rich!"

This video equipment permits me to edit programmes (mostly because they are too long or boring, sometimes because there are scenes I do not like). Even purchased video cassettes sometimes need to be edited.

I find that the quality in commercial video outlets, like a good deal of even the best television stations, appalling. Until a few months ago, I obtained our videos on trips abroad. I had never even suspected that some of the best programming was to be found on my own doorstop at the British Council in Paris. Their video library contains quality programmes for children that I had rarely seen on sale or on loan in English-speaking countries.

Until recently, our total library in English viewing amounted to some 20 hours. My children are still young, but have not yet rebelled at seeing the same programmes time after time, except programmes that the two eldest children perceive now to be too "babyish". They know of programmes in French through their schoolfriends, and the adventures of these heros (for example, the Ninja Turtles or Batman) is a favourite conversation topic at school. These series are among those that they would most like me to obtain for them, on account of the heros rather than the language. If a programme exists in both languages, the language in which they view it appears to be irrelevant to the children.

Children may also want to watch the dominant community language on TV if they see their parents doing likewise. A certain amount of consistency on our part as parents is an important principle for us. It is hardly realistic or wise to deprive children of programmes if parents do not more or less follow the same language pattern in their own use of TV.

How can parents avail of television if there are very few programmes available in their home language? Irish is an example. Irish state television has broadcasted only about 25 hours of programmes (of varying quality) for children over the past four years. No video cassettes for children can be bought (although I can make copies for any interested readers!). For energetic parents with a television and without programmes, I can suggest two solutions:

1. The most obvious remedy is to make childrens' programmes yourself. It is not technically difficult and the results will be as good as the amount of time put into the project. One way of doing it is to obtain a video player and a video recorder, with connections between the two machines which separate the video and audio inputs. Sound can then be put onto a video tape by speaking through a microphone or playing an audio tape. The trick, with such simple technology, is to get the synchronisation between the voice and the action right. Some video recorders now allow a new soundtrack to be put on tapes but the picture cannot be edited without a second recorder.
2. The other solution is to use programmes without any dialogue. Music programmes are the most obvious candidates, but "The Pink Panther" and "Tom and Jerry" are more likely to appeal to children, and most of these cartoons are word-free. I have even found documentaries without any dialogue. And if you have programmes with very interesting pictures, even with words, music could instead be dubbed on allowing you to comment freely as you watch them.

To what extent does the image dominate, and do children really retain what they see and hear? I have three pieces of evidence. On the negative side, I once showed the children (aged 3;4 and 4;8) a cartoon in German which they had already seen several times in Irish. There was initial protest of surprise from the eldest child, but both children quickly fell silent and were apparently engrossed in the story for 20 minutes. On the more positive side, the children have occasionally used words and styles of language that could only have been learned from the television, although I have not tried to quantify the effect. Furthermore, the eldest child is now able to give coherent and detailed accounts of Cinderella-style stories in English immediately after a programme that he has seen for the first time on television. He appears to use a certain amount of vocabulary and syntax heard on the television, but at a later retelling of the story, reverts to a simpler language. (Obviously this is a testable proposition, and readers may already know of research undertaken in this area.) In contrast, his knowledge of Irish is passive (he only very occasionally uses Irish words when in an Irish-speaking context): when he retells a story seen in Irish, his English vocabulary and syntax appears much weaker and his speech seems to be sprinkled with more Irish words than I would normally expect to hear.

When children hear themselves on television, do they notice and correct their speech? I have no answer to this question but my feeling is yes. My children enjoy watching themselves on TV. Indeed, their own antics are among their favourite programmes!

Of course, the main reason why we watch television is that we all greatly enjoy it – and I didn't realise how enjoyable an activity it could be until I first bought one three years ago!

Contact details removed

Ciarán O'Hagan is happy to give readers more specific advice concerning television in general.

BILINGUAL HUMOUR

In *BFN* 4/1991 we asked for more contributions from readers. Connie Bruckner of Vienna, Austria, whose letter about her German-English bilingual daughter, Margaret (born December 1986), appeared in *BFN* 3/1991, has kindly sent us some amusing family anecdotes:

HELL!

While travelling with friends, Margaret said to her little friend (also aged five): "Ich kann nichts sehen! Es ist zu *breit!*" (I can't see anything! It's too *breit!*) (German *breit* sounds like English "bright", but it means "wide, broad".)

I corrected her: "You mean 'hell'."

Margaret: "I don't say such naughty words!"

The little playmate asked for a translation. Margaret said: "Ich kann es dir nicht sagen, sonst sag ich was Schlimmes auf englisch." (I can't tell you, otherwise I'll be saying something bad in English.)

She whispered "hell" into his ear, and from then on they chanted the word all the way to the playground!

Margaret Bruckner

BRAV(E)?

There seemed to be some confusion for Margaret whenever the words *brav* (German for "good", "well behaved") and "brave" were used. I asked her on 6th December if Nikolaus had given all the children the same kinds of sweets and treats. She said Martin didn't get as many because he wasn't brave (mistaking it for *brav*).

A week later, after being at the doctors, I praised her for being so brave. She said: "That's why the doctor give me a sticker." (Only good children get them, right?)

Then the very next day: "I'm pretending to be a brave princess-fairy."

I corrected her: "You mean 'good' fairy."

She replied: "Not mean! A brave one! Valerie is the mean fairy!"

All I could do was sigh and make a note of this . . .

MORE LASSES AND MOLASSES

Another incident made me realise that such confusions can also occur within the *one* language. Last Christmas I was looking up recipes for gingerbread cookies in my American cookbooks. After looking through the third and fourth book I said in despair: "All these recipes call for malasses."

Margaret said: "Well, why don't we go to the store and get some more lasses?"

Then, a minute later, she was singing: "Did you ever see a lassie go this way and that . . ." She stopped and asked: "Mami, what is a 'lassie'?" I explained; she had a look of consternation: "How can we cook a lassie?"

NO CAR BUT TWO LANGUAGES

In December, as we were walking home from kindergarten with two of her classmates, one of them asked Margaret (all in German): "What kind of car do you have?"

I interjected to say that we are a very unusual family – we don't own a car.

Margaret piped up: "But we speak *two* languages!"

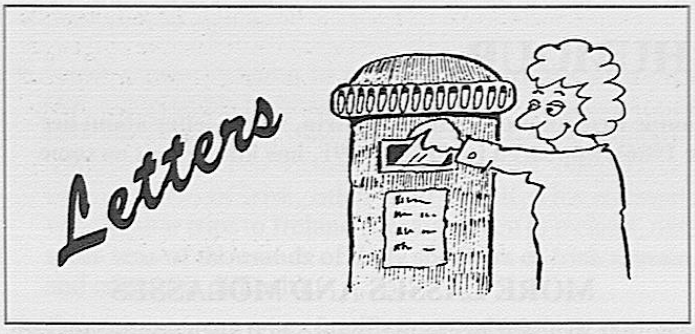
CHILD'S PLAY

While travelling in America and visiting with friends, Margaret (4;6) took it upon herself to test everybody's knowledge of German (or to show off a bit). After asking our friend Robert several questions, e.g. "What's 'cheese' in German? What is 'chair'?" etc. and then telling him, she said in exasperation: "You know, this should be easy for a grown-up!"

DID YOU KNOW THAT . . .

National Association for Teaching English and Other Community Languages to Adults is holding a conference in Selwyn College, Cambridge, England on 3rd to 5th July 1992.
"Education and Training for Multilingual Adults".
Details available from Kathleen Jenkins, NATECLA National Centre, Hall Green College, 520–524 Stratford Road, Birmingham B11 4AJ. Tel. 021 766 6327.

Institut Francais, London has got a *Children's Library* and welcomes children of all ages (learning French or already speaking it) and adult beginners. You will find the Library at 32 Harrington Road, London SW7. Tel. 071 589 6211.
They also have a *Video Club* for the members of the French Institute. More details available from Membership Secretary, Institut Français, 17 Queensberry Place, London SW7 2DT. Tel. 071 589 6211.



SPEAKING A NON-NATIVE LANGUAGE TO ONE'S CHILD – WILL IT WORK?

Last fall I read your book, ***Bilingual Children: From Birth to Teens***[1] and want you to know that I was inspired by your skillful account of your personal experience bringing up your children to be bilingual in a second language that is not your mother tongue. I would like to share my situation with you.

I am an American woman, 36, with an 18-month-old daughter to whom I have spoken Danish since March 1991 (at which time she was approximately seven months old). I learned Danish as an AFS foreign exchange student to Denmark in 1973–74, when I attended the second year of a Danish gymnasium school and lived with a host family who spoke no English to me. I had no prior knowledge of the Danish language and have never received any formal training in it other than the three to four week language camp I attended at the beginning of my year in Denmark. I have always considered my experience to be the most difficult but fastest way to learn a language.

Over the years since living in Denmark, I have made a conscious effort to keep up with the language by reading Danish magazines, books, etc., corresponding in Danish with Danes, and having Danish visitors in our home. I have also been able to return to Denmark twice for visits. Although my proficiency in Danish has grown slowly over the years, I am not perfectly fluent by any means.

> "Would I be able to communicate my 'heart and soul' to Erika in Danish? Am I doing a terrible thing by establishing our emotional relationship in a language in which I am not entirely proficient?"

When my daughter Erika was born in August 1990 I had fleeting thoughts of how wonderful it would be if she could learn the Danish language as a child, but my idea of how this could be accomplished never included myself as the teacher. I assumed she would have to be taught by a native – that we would either have to hire a Danish au-pair girl, for instance, or move to Denmark for a year or two so that Erika could attend school there (an unlikely possibility). In February of last year, however, I talked with a Danish girlfriend who is married to an American and in the process of bringing her two boys up to be bilingual. Much to my surprise, she encouraged me to consider doing the same with Erika. She said she had done some reading on the subject and that it certainly was not a prerequisite for a person to be a native speaker of the second language. She told of an American woman about whom she had read that didn't know a word of French but decided to learn it along with her baby. According to my friend, the woman was successful in bringing her child up to be bilingual in English and French. This made an impression on me. If such an unlikely situation could bring success, and if my Danish girlfriend thought I could do it (knowing what my proficiency in Danish is) then why shouldn't I consider doing it?

Well, having virtually no information about what I was doing, I decided to give it a try. My friend had advised one thing – that if I was serious about doing it, then I should speak only Danish to Erika. No English at all. I followed her advice with a "I'll see how it goes, but no commitment" attitude. Well, I surprised myself with how easily I adapted to the new way of communicating with Erika. Off and on I worried about the mistakes I would be teaching Erika because of my less than perfect Danish, but I decided that if I was going to continue with my "project" I should simply accept that fact. I reasoned that Erika will have gained, not lost, in the long run from what I am able to teach her.

> "I truly hope that I am able to grow in the language at a pace that will allow me to remain one step ahead of Erika."

Last fall I finally decided to research the topic and learn what I could about what I was doing. I loaned three books from a university library. The first I read was ***The Bilingual Family – A Handbook for Parents***[2] by Edith Harding and Philip Riley. It was helpful and encouraging. I must admit that the next book, ***Raising Children Bilingually: The Pre-School Years***[3] by Lenore Arnberg, put a definite damper on my enthusiasm and raised serious doubts in my mind. Was I doing the right thing? Would I be able to communicate my "heart and soul" to Erika in Danish? Am I doing a terrible thing by establishing our emotional relationship in a language in which I am not entirely proficient, or in which I might not want to communicate with her forever? As you probably know, these are things Lenore Arnberg casts doubts about in her book. Lastly, I happened to read your book. It helped me to gain a more realistic view of my "dilemma", and after much thought, I decided to continue speaking Danish with Erika. I don't know if it's the right thing to do or not, but it feels right now, and I do believe I am giving her a gift, imperfect as it may be. I hope that in some way, some day, the knowledge of Danish will bring her happiness as it has me, and if it does, then it will all be worth it.

Speaking Danish to Erika has been surprisingly easy for me. After all, she was a baby, now a toddler, and it is I who have been the director of our "conversations" up to this point. I have benefited by the experience more than I expected. My vocabulary is growing as I strive to explain the world to Erika. My pronunciation is slowly becoming, I believe (and hope), more refined the more I speak and practise the sounds. Expressing myself in Danish to Erika comes automatically now. I truly hope that I am able to grow in the language at a pace that will allow me to remain one step ahead of Erika. I have a lurking fear in the back of my mind concerning my capabilities when Erika begins conversing, asking questions, and demanding what any child does from communication. Will I be able to communicate efficiently enough? I don't know.

My reason for writing to you is not for you to answer these questions I have concerning my abilities. That, of course, would be impossible for you to do. I am interested in any thoughts you might have, however, regarding my situation. From what I've read it seems that my situation is a bit unique. Although I am basically attempting that which you have succeeded at, I am most surely not as proficient in the second language as you were when you began teaching your children.

Before I close, you might be interested in knowing how Erika's language development is progressing. About a month

ago, at 16½ months, Erika began saying words in earnest (up until then she had a vocabulary of only a handful of words). At that time I made a list and came up with about 35 English words and 40 Danish words that she had said (some only once, others many times, but most of which would require "translation" for outsiders). Since then Erika's vocabulary has continued to grow steadily. I should add that my husband understands Danish at a very basic level, which he picked up during a four-month visit to Denmark with me. Although he has stated that he is willing to learn more, I can't say he is making an active attempt to do so. From what I've read, problems can occur if the spouse does not have an adequate understanding of the second language. As far as being able to expose Erika to native spoken Danish, there are unfortunately no Danes nearby.

Kristine Halls Reid, Floyd, USA

1. Arnberg, L. (1987) *Raising Children Bilingually: The Pre-School Years.* Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
2. Harding, E. and Riley, P. (1986) *The Bilingual Family: A Handbook for Parents.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
3. Saunders, G. (1988) *Bilingual Children: From Birth to Teens.* Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Thank you very much for your interesting account of your experiences. I do not see any harm in your wishing to pass on your love of, and proficiency in, Danish to your daughter. You will, however, undoubtedly encounter various people who doubt whether it is advisable, or indeed possible, for a non-native speaker to pass a language on to her children. But if you yourself are fairly confident that you can continue to improve your own Danish and communicate effectively with your daughter in that language, then Danish will become "your language". Of course you will have doubts from time to time about your ability to express more complex matters in Danish or converse with the same ease that you can in English, but don't lose heart – accept it rather as a challenge to improve your fluency. Whilst you do not have Danish speakers in the immediate vicinity, you do mention that you have contacts with Danish speakers elsewhere. You could enlist their aid to obtain various materials in Danish (video- and audio cassettes, books, etc.) for both your own and Erika's Danish.

It is very unlikely that your daughter will suffer from your "project". My own experiences in similar circumstances would rather suggest the contrary, since I think I probably spent more time with my children when they were young (to ensure sufficient exposure to German) than if I had spoken my native language, English, to them. My three children, now aged 18, 16 and 11, and I still speak only German to each other, even though for all of us English is our stronger language. However, since German is the language we have always used to each other, it seems perfectly natural.

Erika will certainly acquire your own native English with native speaker proficiency, as it will be the language almost everyone apart from you speaks to her. Whatever Danish she acquires from you will thus be a definite bonus.

You mention that your husband has only a rudimentary knowledge of Danish. Perhaps he will be inspired to learn more, at least at the receptive level, when he sees Erika progressing in the language. This would prevent him from feeling excluded from conversations between you and Erika. However, I personally do know two families where the fathers have hardly any knowledge of Finnish and Estonian, the languages used between their wives and their children, yet do not appear troubled by this and in fact actively encourage their wives' efforts to pass on their own language to the children.

Editor

CONTRIBUTIONS

Please continue to send us your "stories", anecdotes, jokes, useful hints or any other contributions you think might interest our readers.

Remember, this Newsletter is for you, but above all, by you.

JUGGLING TWO LANGUAGES IN THE FAMILY

As a keen reader of the *BFN*, I promised to keep the magazine informed of my son's progress in bilingualism. Since I haven't collected any serious scientific data, being very much an armchair linguist rather than an academic one, what I have to report is quite subjective. In fact you could regard what follows as background information to a specific question on Leena Huss' article, reproduced in Vol. 8, No. 3, 1991, which I feel is one that many readers must be asking themselves.

I am English, with an MA in German Studies. My wife, Gabi, is German, but spent several years living in England with me, so her English is excellent. Since 1977 we have lived in Wiesbaden, near Frankfurt in Germany. Our son, Robin, was born in November 1988.

We have adopted, and adhered consistently to, the one-parent, one-language strategy, but decided after about six months (when Robin started going to a German childminder) to change our "family language" to English in order to increase his input of the minority language. I am more fortunate than many fathers in being able to spend a lot of time with Robin during weekdays. In the early days, Gabi and I were still part of a professional juggling troupe, and even now that we have "settled down" – Gabi now edits a magazine for jugglers, while I am a freelance translator – we are still free to choose our own hours, which means that we have always been able to take it in turns to look after Robin on the afternoons when he came home from his childminder or, since September, from German kindergarten.

Through an advertisement in the contact section of the *BFN* we were pleasantly surprised to receive a response from an English woman also living in Wiesbaden.

The result of this contact was not only a lasting friendship, but an introduction to the "British community" in Wiesbaden, of which I had been utterly unaware until that point, and in particular to a weekly playgroup run by English mums (and the occasional dad). This playgroup has been particularly valuable over the years in conveying to Robin the idea that English is not a personal quirk of mine, but is in fact a language spoken by a "large" (from his point of view) number of adults and children living in Germany. It has also provided an opportunity to gain at least a hint of what it might be like to be part of the pre-school culture of Britain – rhymes, stories, action games, special parties at Halloween and Christmas, as well as English video-swaps.

Discussing the potential and the problems of a playgroup like this would be enough to fill several *BFN* articles. Suffice it to say that the direct linguistic advantages are confined to activities organised by adults (the parents take it in turn to "lead" the activity each week). Left to their own devices, the children tend to slip into German. From three years on, when they start kindergarten, even those from monolingual families prefer to speak German to one another, presumably regarding it as the more natural language of children. Nonetheless, I am convinced that the indirect advantages of having the playgroup as an English cultural focus are extremely valuable, though of course very hard to measure.

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Our other main contact with English has come through my mother. Although she is too old to travel herself, we make sure to get over to England so that Robin sees her at least five times a year, even if only for a few days at a stretch. On the rare occasions when I ask myself "is this bilingual childrearing really worth the bother?", all I have to do is picture the two of them together, now able to hold a mutually rewarding conversation, to convince myself that it certainly is!

Admittedly, one such moment of doubt occurred at the end of a visit to granny when Robin suddenly started stuttering. It was hard to resist drawing the conclusion that this was due to linguistic confusion, as a number of well-meaning but critical acquaintances did. We persevered nonetheless, convinced that it had more to do with general excitement and insecurity in challenging situations than specifically with the challenge of the two languages, and subsequent improvements (interspersed with bouts of stuttering under stress) seem to have confirmed this interpretation. The only change of tactic was to drop a game Robin used to enjoy playing – I would use the German word for something and then correct myself: "This is a *Zahnbür* . . . er, I mean, this is a toothbrush!" Robin used to think it was hilarious, but after he started stuttering, impersonating disfluent speech never seemed very funny any more.

> "The last thing he would need in moments of stress is a pedantic parent placing even more demands on him."

Apart from this occasional difficulty, I would say that Robin's spoken German is average for his age, and certainly his eagerness to communicate is above average. There seems to be no difference in his ability to understand either English or German, and there is no doubt that he has a high degree of metalinguistic awareness as defined in Leena Huss' article on the subject in the last *BFN*. For example, it was clear that before the age of two he was able to understand a categorisation of words into either English or German (we never went through an intermediary stage of talking about a "mummy language" versus "daddy language"), and he clearly identifies himself as an English speaker. As an amusing aside: on one of our videos from England, before "Playbus" starts, there is the tail-end of the weather forecast. Robin noticed that the map was not the same as at the end of the German news, and asked why. I remarked that it was the weather forecast for English people, from which he concluded (though not in these exact words), "Then it's for me – I can speak English," and proceeded to find out what the weather would be like the next day – which had of course passed many months before!

Yet despite all this obvious latent ability, his spoken English is very much interspersed with German. Although some sentences come out perfectly in English, the next one is just as likely to be entirely German. I sometimes find this frustrating, but have been reluctant to be over-critical of his speech, especially since the latent stuttering emerged. Surely the last thing he would need in moments of stress is a pedantic parent placing even more demands on him?

Which brings me, at last, to that specific question arising out of the article in Vol. 8, No. 3, 1991. At the end of her article, "Se on semmone, semmone, isä sanoo uggla", on metalinguistic awareness, Leena Huss lists the different strategies adopted by parents in response to their children's code mixing. Unfortunately (from the point of view of a parent looking for advice), she declines to comment on the effectiveness or desirability of each of these strategies.

So here are my own subjective, non-scientific comments, coupled with a plea for further comment and advice.

Taking the strategies one by one:

1. *The parent uses a mixed-language sentence to reinforce a word used semantically correctly, but in the wrong language, by the child,* i.e. "Yes, they are playing with the '*pallo*'." I have always instinctively avoided this kind of "reinforcement", as it seems to give the child the impression that code mixing is acceptable adult speech. Indeed, as Reinhold Trott mentions (*BFN*, Vol. 8, No. 1), English speakers living abroad tend to be sloppy in their speech habits, "producing hybrid sentences which would never be used or understood by English speakers in a monolingual setting", and I agree with him that this provides an extremely unhelpful model to a child learning to distinguish between two languages and should be avoided wherever possible.
2. *Parent does not correct but strengthens the sentence with the correct language,* i.e. "Yes, they are playing with a *ball*. What colour is the *ball*?" This is the strategy I have adopted with the effects that I shall describe later.
3. *Parent pretends not to understand.* Somehow it seems to me more important in almost all situations to keep a continuous flow of communication going. It must be very frustrating for a child to have to wait for a response to the *content* of his or her utterance while the parent is preoccupied with the *form*, and I feel sure this frustration cannot be conducive to learning. The negative feelings must surely be particularly acute when the child realises that the parent knows full well what has been said and is just being bloody minded about it.
4. *Parent answers with a straight metalinguistic question,* i.e. "Do you remember what we call that in English?" Again because of the undesirability of keeping a child waiting for a "straight" answer, it seems to me that the number of contexts in which this strategy is appropriate is rather limited. However, I have used it on occasions when it is more or less clear that a sort of language game, rather than a "serious" conversation, is going on, such as looking at a picture book and identifying the objects.

On paper, it looked to me as though my chosen tactics were a foolproof and painless method of ensuring that Robin grows up in Germany with a good command of English. However, I read with envy Reinhold Trott's claim that "soon after Richard's third birthday, he consistently used the proper language depending on the person he was addressing". If this is taken to mean that Richard hardly ever switched codes, then Robin's speech is generally quite the opposite. Although his German is fairly "pure", he still has no qualms about throwing in an English word when he doesn't know the German. And when talking to me, he hardly ever uses a "purely" English sentence. All the classical symptoms of mixing are present: not only borrowed words, but also German syntax, German inflections, sometimes (though less frequently) German pronunciation.

Bilingual Humour

AN ANECDOTE FOR OUR TIMES

An Australian of Italian parentage on his first trip to Italy entered a small shop and tried out the dialect he had always spoken at home. The shopkeeper seemed puzzled, then curious, then just plain interested, and after a prolonged silence said: "You speak exactly like I used to speak . . . forty years ago."

Mick Barrow, Fukui, Japan

Part of the problem, I feel, is that in a sense Robin is not speaking inappropriately to me when he mixes English and German. He knows that I understand everything he says, no matter what language it is said in a knowledge which is reinforced by Huss' strategy No. 2. Interestingly enough, on our last visit to England, I noticed a distinct difference between his speech to me on the one hand, and to his granny and other people he met there on the other. He obviously has sufficient "metalinguistic awareness" to realise that using German words in England is not going to be effective, just as he is learning the hard way that using English in his German kindergarten is also counterproductive. In other words, he has – to his credit, one might say – made a more differentiated distinction than the simple categories of "English-speaking" and "German-speaking" people. There is also in his mind – and, of course, in the real world – a large, and emotionally very important, contingent of people who speak and understand both languages.

So the question is: how do I get across the idea that, even in dealings with bilinguals, it is more acceptable to choose a code and stick to it, at least for the duration of a conversation? Is success likely to come from simply providing a good example and hoping that Robin will – some day – follow? How long can I expect to wait?

Paul Keast, Wiesbaden, Germany

With regard to Leena Huss' four strategies, I would like to make the following comments:

1. *I, too, have tended to avoid this, basically for the same reasons that you give (at least once the child has been aware that there are two languages).*
2. *This would also be my most common strategy, and it is, I think, very effective. My children also make use of this strategy themselves to elicit German vocabulary which they do not know or have forgotten, i.e. they will use the English word in a German sentence, knowing that in my response I will usually incorporate the sought after word or expression. If I fail to do this, the sought after word or expression will often interrupt to ask directly (a variation of strategy 4), i.e. they want to know how to say the particular thing in German, so that it can be stored in memory for future use. They also readily accept that I may not know a particular term and have to search for it (usually something pretty technical). Katrina (11) at this stage does not show the same strong desire to fill gaps in her vocabulary and will happily continue with the conversation without having heard from me the German for an English word she has used in her German.*
3. *Pretending not to understand is a strategy that does cause many parents to have the same unease that you do, but I think it depends a lot on how this strategy is used. Obviously this strategy is* ***not*** *advisable if the child is resorting to language because s/he (as yet) lacks the linguistic resources to express something in language B (and usually, as a parent, one has a fair idea whether this is the case). It is also not advisable to use this strategy if the child is tired or upset or excitedly and enthusiastically telling you about something that has happened at a party, at school, etc. and in the process mixes the two languages.*

   Such a strategy is also obviously out of place with older children. To take a recent example: when Thomas (18) used the English term "environmental impact study" to me in a conversation, it would have been ludicrous for me to pretend not to understand; he would justifiably have thought I did not know what it meant and probably would have then set about explaining it to me in German. But he was assuming (as in strategy 2) that I would know what the English term meant and undoubtedly also hoping that I could provide him with the German equivalent in my response to his comments (fortunately I was able to do so in this case – Umweltverträgliohkeitsuntersuchung!).

   But I have found the not understanding strategy to be of use in certain situations where I have felt that the children (particularly in the preschool and early school years) were quite capable of expressing something in German but used English words instead. Of course they usually knew that when I pretended not to understand, I ***did*** *in fact understand but was trying to wheedle the German from them. Provided I did not do this excessively, they responded positively. At times they have even made a kind of game out of it by* ***deliberately*** *using English words to provoke a reaction from me!*
4. *I have also used this strategy in much the way you describe, i.e. without interrupting the flow of a conversation too much. Rather than using Huss's strategy 1, I have almost invariably added some metalinguistic comment, e.g.:*

   Katrina (then 1;6): Car! Car!
   Me: Ja, Mami sagt "car", aber ich sage "Auto".
   (Yes, Mummy says "car" but I say "auto".)

Regarding your final question: Robin is still only three, and you have already observed that already he makes a distinction between monolingual speakers of English and German and others who are bilingual. From observation of my own children and reading the literature on bilingualism, it would seem that communication between bilingual speakers is rarely ***completely*** *in one language or the other. This is not a problem if they can accommodate monolingual speakers when the occasion calls for it. However, it is also very probably that as Robin gets older he will try to make his speech conform more and more to the model he is receiving from you. The regular visits to his grandmother in England will help considerably. My son Thomas's speech at age three was not dissimilar to Robin's at the same age. Thomas is now away from home attending a university here in Australia; in a 15-minute telephone conversation with me he would not use more than one or two words of English – and usually something fairly technical and done in the manner of Huss' strategy 2.*

Editor

CONTACTS

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Vol. 9, No. 1, 1992

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Published by Multilingual Matters Ltd, Bank House, 8a Hill Rd, Clevedon, Avon, England, BS21 7HH.
Typeset by Wayside Books, Clevedon, England. Printed by Severn Graphics, Clevedon, England