The Bilingual Family Newsletter

MULTILINGUAL MATTERS

News and Views for Intercultural People

Editors: George Saunders & Marjukka Grover *1993 Volume 10, No.2*

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EDITORIAL

Most of us do not realise how deeply our own culture is rooted in us. When we live abroad we lose everyday touch with the old country and it takes time before the customs of the new country feel 'ours'. If we start to experience disorientation and loss - the 'culture shock' has hit us. If the cultures of the two countries are similar, for example north European ones, the 'culture shock' might be difficult to identify. Why do customs similar to our own create problems for us? Why does our own behaviour cause misunderstanding among our new friends?

In this issue we explore the 'culture shock' phenomena further by looking at the adjustment process we all go through when settling in a new country. We would welcome readers' own experiences (humorous too), and hints on how to ease the process.

Best wishes from a warm and summery Clevedon!

Marjukka Grover

SETTLING IN A FOREIGN LAND

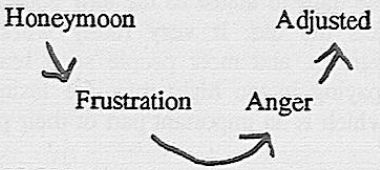
Marjukka Grover

Do you live abroad? Have you ever lived abroad? If so - how long did it take you to feel at home in your new country? Or are you still trying to adjust and feel happiest in the aeroplane between your two countries?

Instead of looking at adjustment as a task to be completed perhaps we should think of it *"as an on-going process of doing, learning and enjoying - like a hobby or a sport"* as suggested by Andrea Georgiou in her article "Adjustment and Failure" (BFN Vol.6, No.4, 1989).

However we feel, it is interesting to look at some research on adjustment issues and compare them to our own process of adjustment. Although I referred to several relevant books on this subject, I have based this article mainly on research done by Outi Tuomi-Nikula in 1989 among Finns living in Germany (most of them women married to Germans), as it was a comprehensive study based on over 600 questionnaires and approx 100 interviews. This research shows that the adjustment process to a foreign country develops through several stages depending the starting point of the individual; has the person moved to a country to marry and to stay there permanently, or study/work there only temporarily? It also depends whether the person has moved there on his or her own or, with their family. Whatever the starting point, most people experience the different stages of adjustment in some form or other, but the central issue is the period when an immigrant goes through an identity crisis. Whether he or she adjusts by assimilating or integrating into the major society, or by isolating him/herself and rejecting all that belongs to the new country, depends on how intensive and long the identity crisis stage was.

Kalervo Oberg, a psychologist (Meltzer & Grandjean, 1989) uses a U-shape adjustment curve which clearly shows the different stages a person goes through when adjusting into a new country.



The **HONEYMOON** stage is experienced at the beginning of life abroad, particularly when the move has been voluntary.

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Everything new is charming: people, culture, language, customs, landscape. Nothing feels difficult and the new things to be learned are exciting and challenging. If we are in a mixed-marriage, the partner's different ways are seen only as charming and romantic and we think that any difficulties can be easily overcome (Romano, 1988).

Unfortunately the honeymoon stage doesn't last for ever and sooner or later we find ourselves in the next adjustment stage feeling frustrated and angry.

FRUSTRATION is the beginning of the identity crisis. Everything we enjoyed at the honeymoon stage starts to annoy us. The houses are not as good and modern as in our home country, the climate is either too hot, too cold or too wet. The 'natives' are getting on our nerves; they are not as kind, sincere, charming, honest, or polite as the people from our own country. Our job may not be as good, valued or well paid as our last job and it may not use all the qualifications we gained at home. If we want to study, we have to do it in the language of our new country and sit exams to the same standards as the 'natives'. The language, however well we speak it, will not convey our deepest feelings, the fine nuances are lost. The humour might differ from the humour we are used to - we can't understand why the 'natives' are laughing. New friends, among whom we first felt like exotic birds, start demanding that we behave like they do and understand the unwritten rules of behaviour and communication, rules which they have learned from birth.

> "...the frustration stage is more difficult for those who have moved countries without fulfilling their hopes."

If we moved to a new country to marry, the honeymoon of marriage might also be coming to an end and we start to defend our own customs and behaviour as the only way of living and behaving (Romano, 1988). For those of us who are at home with small children, life can be very lonely without support from our own family or cultural group. Speaking our own language to children perhaps isolates us further from the locals, who may not be able to understand why it is so important to us. Tuomi-Nikula's research shows that the frustration stage is more difficult for those who have moved countries without fulfilling their hopes; they may have lower living standards, not been able to find work, friends or the marriage is not working out etc.

ANGER, according to Oberg's U-curve follows the frustration stage. It is on the upward curve and therefore an indication of a start to positive adjustment. Now we are not only passively frustrated but actively angry about our situation. We feel anger towards the new country, its people and way of life, criticising it openly. We compare it to our own country, which to us seems like a paradise, and we boast about it to our new friends.

Some might turn their anger towards the old country deliberately switching the ethnic loyalty to the new one. Tuomi-Nikula calls this phenomena *an active adjustment;* the immigrant tries so hard to adjust to the new country that he or she rather forgets the old. It very rarely works with first generation immigrants, and most people soon realise that the price they are paying is too high; they are losing their own ethnic-identity, which is an important part of their psychological well-being.

At some point, however, most of us do experience *rejection and deculturation* feelings for a time, as part of the normal adjustment process. It occurs when we have lost touch with the everyday life of our home country, but do not yet feel that the new country is our own. This is the stage when we are happiest in the aeroplane between the two countries. If at this stage we decide to move back to the old home country, we will most likely experience the adjustment process all over again.

CONTRIBUTIONS, CONTRIBUTIONS

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

If, however, we decide to stay in the new country the frustration/ anger (identity crises) stages will eventually turn into adjustment. Tuomi-Nikula describes the different ways of adjusting as follows: isolation/ assimilation/ integration.

ISOLATING onself from the host community means that people have deliberately decided to live life in the new country as they would have lived in the old one. These type of people are very ethnocentric, valuing only their own culture. Isolation doesn't work with mixed-marriages and it does need larger immigrant community to provide outside support: ethnic food, radio and TV programmes, literature, churches, temples, mosques, etc.

ASSIMILATED people, on the other hand, try to absorb themselves fully in the new country, often forgetting their own ethnic identity and home country. They learn to speak the language so well that nobody can detect their origins from their accent or behaviour. This is not easy for first-generation immigrants and according to Tuomi-Nikula there is often something they want to forget about their home country.

INTEGRATION is the best form of adjustment. Integrated people keep their ethnic identity, language and culture but have integrated into the local culture enjoying both countries. They have learned to live in balance with two cultures, taking the best parts from each into their personal lives learning to behave according to the situation, sometimes even thinking in two different ways. They experience the richness of bicultural/ bilingual living. In mixed-marriages both partners need positive and strong ethnic identities so that they don't feel their partner's different customs, language or culture are a threat or betrayal, but a richness. In Tuomi-Nikula's study the Finns who adjusted best were those who had a strong positive ethnic identity before moving and who had positive attitudes towards Germany and the German people. She argues that homes decorated in the Finnish style were not a mark of poorly adjusted Finns but a positive action by the German partners to emphasise the importance of Finnishness in their lives and therefore strengthen the minority culture.

> "We will see the old country as an important base for our ethnic and cultural roots, which we don't need to over-emphasise but not under-value either."

How do we know if and when we have adjusted to a new country, or do we think of adjustment as a hobby like Andrea Georgiou has suggested? According to Tuomi-Nikula objective adjustment has happened when the conflicts (frustration/ anger/identity-crises) turn into integration. It is a personal growth, sometimes after years of frustration and anger. She states that if we have learned to look objectively at ourselves and our surroundings and have learned that there is no point in making comparisons, we can start thinking that we are adjusted. We will see the old country as an important base for our ethnic

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THE ROLE OF LITERACY IN BILINGUAL DEVELOPMENT

Sue Wright

Sue Wright works at the Modern Langauges Department at Aston University, Birmingham, U.K. Her interests centre on multilingualism and education, with particular reference to the problems of migrants and language.

The French - English bilingual in Britain is always being told that he or she is very fortunate. Everyone seems to agree that fate has dealt you a very advantageous hand if you can acquire these two languages early in life. My own case bears this out: I acquired French as a small child at school in Montreal and my own children have accompanied me to France when I've worked there and have attended French schools. Almost unanimously other British people envy us our experiences.

However, there does not seem to be the same consensus of opinion amongst the educational establishment that Panjabi-English, Bengali-English or Urdu-English bilingualism is always an advantage. Indeed, working in Birmingham in a sixth form college where about 70% of the students came from home backgrounds where a South Asian language was spoken made me aware that the bilingualism of these college students was considered by most of the college staff to be a terrible disadvantage and that the educational solution to the "problem" of their bilingualism was perceived to be a shift to English and to eventual monolingualism. This view seemed to be shared by most educational agencies. The Department of Education and Science told the college quite clearly that fostering bilingualism "would hold these students back".

These two experiences led me to a research project which set out to look at some of the variables which cause bilingualism to be experienced as a positive asset or to be associated with disadvantage in educational terms.

Clearly some of the differences reside in matters which intrude upon the individual from the external world - principally questions of prestige - prestige deriving from political power, religious association, literary tradition, widespread use. These perceptions of prestige are, however, opinion and can only affect the bilingual speaker if he or she accepts them.

Other differences derive perhaps from economic causes. Educationalists have written at length on the advantages and disadvantages which derive from the home background: the child who is introduced at an early age to a wide and rich vocabulary, to a variety of positive and enriching experiences, who is spoken to, read to, sung to and listened to appears to be advantaged in educational terms compared to a child who has less of each of these things. This may be translated into economic terms - the family with greater resources of time, money and energy may be able to give more to their child than the family with many demands and economic constraints. Such differences amongst minority linguistic groups -with some groups being advantaged in material terms compared with others - might be sufficient to account for the different ways in which bilingualism is experienced.

However, from my work with the bilingual students at the sixth form college I felt neither of these explanations could explain the bilingual advantages and disadvantages which I witnessed. Some students with a mother tongue other than English were clearly doing splendidly in the British education system and others, although they seemed quite bright, were experiencing immense difficulty trying to achieve educational success in their second language.

The research project looked first of all at the way the students used their mother tongue. A questionnaire, interviews and diaries in which students recorded language use were used to find out who was talking what, to whom, when and where. Four hundred 16 - 19 year olds took part and from their answers it was clear that multilingualism is alive and well and thriving in Birmingham.

To test the effect of mother tongue use on the students' success in the education system, a scale was constructed so that students could be placed along it, depending on how much they reported using their first language. This scale was then compared to a scale showing how they were doing in educational terms. In these early comparisons having a mother tongue other than English appeared to be a disadvantage and a block to success in the British education system. Those who spoke their mother tongue in a wide variety of situations outside the classroom appeared to be less successful than the others in all kinds of ways: they were on lower courses, achieved lower public examination results, gained lower grades in internal college assessments. At this stage the study appeared to be lending support to the "experts" who had counselled a move away from the mother tongue to English to ensure educational success. However, as soon as we started making other comparisons, it was clear that the situation was far more complex than it had at first appeared. When we drew out the students who had learnt how to read and write in their first language, the correlations were turned on their head. Now the more a student used the mother tongue, the more likely he or she was to be on a high level course, to achieve high grades in examinations and to do well in the college profiling system.

> " there seems little doubt too that learning to read and write one's mother tongue is crucial for the bilingual student."

Could it be that the key variable which distinguishes bilingualism as an advantage from bilingualism as a disadvantage is mainly the acquisition of literacy. Where a student learns to read and write in both languages there is positive benefit and where the mother tongue just remains a speech act which is not reflected upon, there is perhaps disadvantage in educational terms. This is not really surprising. We can all speak our mother tongue, but this doesn't mean we are all going to succeed within the educational system because of this; we need to learn to read and write the language before we can turn our fluency to educational advantage.

So in the same way it seems that the mere fact of possessing two languages orally is not enough to ensure that bilingualism is an advantage to the individual, indeed it may be a distinct disadvantage according to this enquiry. However, once the

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RAISING CHILDREN IN YIDDISH: OUR EXPERIENCE

David and Simone Sherman

The comments below are couched as answers to the questions posed by the editors of the Yiddish magazine *Yugntruf*. We are grateful for the editor of *Yugntruf* for their permission to re-print this interesting and thought provoking article. Any comments from readers would be most wellome.

We live in Thornhill, Canada and have four children: Ariela 9 years old; Shoshana 7; Avraham 4 and Marnina just turned 2. We speak exclusively Yiddish to all of them.

1. 'What difficulties did you have to overcome in order to speak Yiddish with the children?'

The first difficulty was that I (David) did not speak Yiddish at all. My parents do not speak Yiddish and I learned it after I met Simone, who has always spoken it with her parents. Even then, when I was with Simone's family, I tended to take the standard younger-generation 'easy way out', speaking English to them in response to their Yiddish.

When our oldest child, Ariela, was a year old, we decided to speak only Yiddish with her. I discovered that speaking Yiddish to a baby is easy - one doesn't need a large vocabulary. My Yiddish has improved with each year and now I am completely fluent at the level of a 9-year-old.

We quickly decided that if we were to be successful speaking Yiddish to our children, we would have to speak Yiddish to them all the time. If speaking English is allowed at all, one will quickly lapse into it. We therefore made a set of rules for the home: we do not speak a word of English to the children; they are not permitted to speak a word of English to us; and they are not permitted to speak English among themselves. If we hear them speaking English when they are playing (which happens sometimes, particularly if they are playing role-playing games), we remind them that they must speak Yiddish. If they continue to speak English after that, we send one child out of the room temporarily.

As I noted earlier, if speaking English is allowed, one quickly lapses into it. Between ourselves, Simone and I speak almost only English. We quickly realised that we do not have the vocabulary to speak Yiddish on subjects such as business, income tax (the field in which we both work) and all the other matters that spouses need and want to speak about.

The result is that we speak exclusively Yiddish to the children and almost entirely English between ourselves. This adds an interesting level of contextual information to anything we say: if I hear Simone speaking English, I know she is speaking to me and not the children!

2. 'Are you in contact with other Yiddish-speaking parents and children? If not, do you create an environment which encourages speaking Yiddish?'

We do to the Yugntruf 'Yiddish' week camp (an immersion programme in New York State) every summer. Aside from that, we have very little contact with young Yiddish-speaking families. However, the children see a number of people in the synagogue on a regular basis with whom they can chat in Yiddish (mostly older people, some of our generation, but none under 30). They also speak Yiddish with their grandparents (Simone's parents), whom they see regularly. However, the strongest element in their fluency is that we do not allow them to speak English among themselves.

All four are now old enough to talk. We notice a significant difference in the early-age fluency of Avraham and Marnina compared to the older children. When Ariela and Shoshana were young (2-4 years old), speaking Yiddish after coming home from English-speaking day-care was more of an effort, and they tended to try to speak English more. For the younger children, because they have their older siblings as well as us, the Yiddish at home is relatively unaffected by the English they hear in day-care 3-4 days a week.

3. 'What original materials have you created in order to facilitate the process?'

Not many. We buy Yiddish children's books from the National Yiddish Book Center in Amherst, Massachusetts (books by Leon Elbe are particularly good for young children). We use an English/Yiddish dictionary when we don't know how to say a word in Yiddish. For all of us, our spoken Yiddish is significantly better than our written or our reading comprehension.

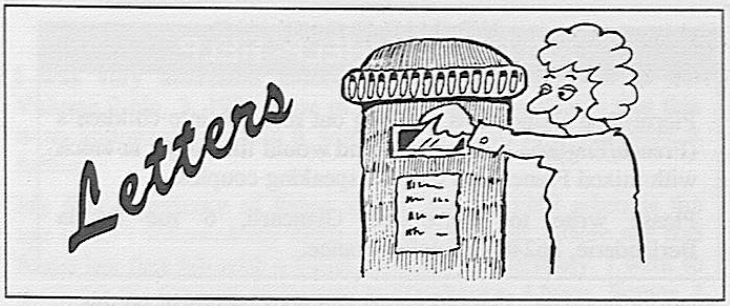
If there's a word we don't know, we often improvise translations. For example, our children eat '*heyse hintelekh*', a literal translation of 'hot dogs'. If a child isn't behaving and is sent to her room, we might say that she is '*in hintl-hoyz*', a literal translation of 'in the doghouse'. We have created a literal translation of 'family room' (a normal term in suburban North America for the room off the kitchen where the family can congregate but, to our knowledge, not a term that has existed in Yiddish before).

4. 'What advice can you give other parents who are just starting to speak Yiddish with their children/?'

First: Speak ONLY Yiddish to them, without exception. Even if you have to speak English between yourselves, as we do, do not speak any English at all to the children. Before long, it will become natural and automatic to speak only Yiddish to them. It's very easy when one starts with a baby, since the vocabulary requirements are small. When there's a word you don't know in Yiddish, look it up in the dictionary or dream up a word.

Second: If a child comes home from school or day-care and wants to speak English to you, don't hear her. Simply say *'Vos? Vos? Ikh farshtay nisht!'* (What? What? I don't understand!') until she speaks Yiddish to you. If the child wants something from you (such as dinner), she must ask you in Yiddish.

Third: Have a large family, so that the children will speak with each other and reinforce their language skills.



MAINTAINING DANISH LANGUAGE AND CULTURE IN THE USA

I am Danish and my husband is American. We have two children; Ditte Yael (4.10) and Micah Jonas (2.1).

We moved from Denmark to the United States in 1988 when Ditte was not even 3 months old. Another bilingual family gave me an issue of *The Bilingual Family Newsletter*, and I was very happy to learn that such a newsletter existed. I feel that the majority of families writing to the BFN have a combination of the major Western languages i.e. English, German, French or Spanish, and therefore, have an easier time exposing their children to the minority language. For example, English/Spanish speaking families living in the USA have no trouble finding playmates or Spanish TV programmes for their children. Families with one of the language combinations English/ German/French living in Europe, usually seem to be engaged in one type of minority language activity or another.

As a Dane in USA I have not been in such a fortunate situation. It has been quite a challenge to create a "Danish" learning environment without access to Danish speaking adults or children, but I am happy to say that I have been very successful thanks to my strong commitment, support from my husband and our frequent visits to my family in Denmark.

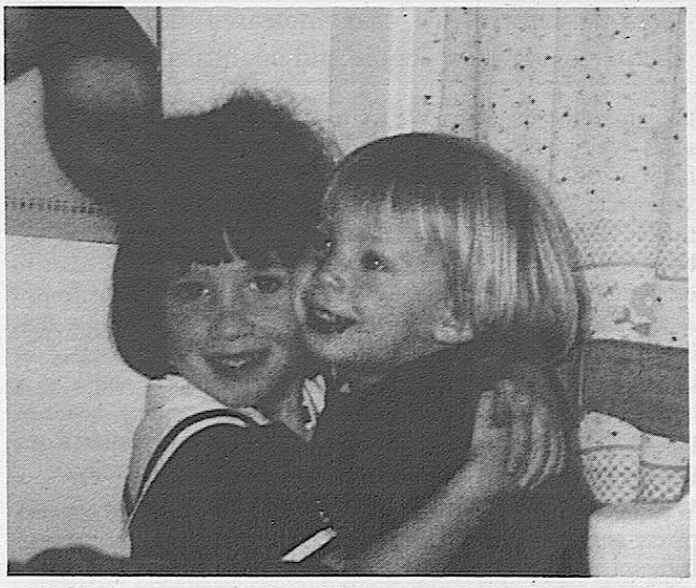
It came naturally to my husband and me to speak our native tongues to our first child, Ditte Yael. Only much later did we learn that our approach *'one parent-one language'* is the ethod recommended for bilingual children. During our first few months living in the USA, I felt impolite speaking to Ditte in Danish in the company of English speakers. However, I soon realised that if she was to learn Danish, I would have to speak exclusively Danish to her.

Ditte said her first words when she was about nine months old, mostly words which sound the same in English and Danish. She had little contact with other children until she started preschool at the age of fifteen months. By then she had a vocabulary of about seventeen words, most of them Danish, but even though I always referred to myself as *'mor'* (mother), she always called me 'mommy' and continued to do so on and off till she was almost three. It puzzled me a bit, but her father, teacher, friends etc. referred to me as 'mommy' so that was the word she chose. When she was just learning how to talk she was definitely not aware of speaking and hearing two languages. In her preschool she would use words from Danish or English indiscriminately, and she would be confused when her teacher or friends did not understand her. From age two onwards the number of Danish words would increase when she was speaking to me and the English words when she was talking to my husband. When she was two and a half she was definitely able to differentiate between the two languages, but she did a lot of word borrowing and code mixing and her English was substantially better than her Danish at that time.

My husband is fairly fluent in Danish, having lived in Copenhagen for four years. Since he did not speak Danish when we met, it feels more natural for us to communicate in English, our 'first' language. Therefore we continued to keep English as our medium of communication while following the one parent-one language rule with Ditte from birth. However, if Ditte wanted my husband to read a Danish book for her, he would read it to her in Danish, whereas I would translate an English children's book into Danish, an approach she never seemed to question. When she was three years old she knew exactly which language to use to be understood in different situations. Before I would read a story to Ditte and an English speaking friend, Ditte would remind me: 'Mommy, remember to read the story in English, because my friend does not understand Danish!'.

It was quite a task I had set myself to bring up Ditte bilingually, all her input in Danish coming from me. In spite of the strong 'competition' I've encountered from our English speaking surroundings, she is almost equally fluent in both languages, a fact I attribute to all the Danish tapes/books we always listen to and read. Most beneficial of all, we have been able to spend one month a year visiting Denmark. It was amazing how much her Danish would improve during our visits., but back in the USA she would repeatedly answer me in English till she was about three years old. There were times when I was considering if my husband should switch to the minority language. However, we decided against it because it seemed very odd for him to speak to her in Danish, and I was very critical of every little mistake he would make in Danish when speaking to her.

Ditte is now almost five years old and even though she has a slight accent in both languages, she is an absolute bilingual with



Sisterly hug from Ditte Yael to Micah Jonas

a slightly better proficiency in English. She speaks to me in Danish and switches easily from one language to the other. She does mix English and Danish a little, but only with us, and some of the word borrowing stems from the fact that she has a larger vocabulary in English. In her eagnerness to tell me something, it seems difficult for her to explain in complete Danish sentences an event that has just taken place in an English-speaking environment.

I think it can be frustrating and discouraging for a child to be interrupted. I try to wait till there is a natural break in Ditte's story before I correct her Danish. If she only uses one English word, I may ask her if she knows that word in Danish, but if she says a whole sentence in English, I will repeat the sentence in Danish. For example:

Ditte Yael: *'Filmen handlede om to hunde og en kat...they crossed the train tracks...er det ikke farligt?'* (The movie was

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about two dogs and a cat, they crossed the train tracks, isn't that dangerous?)

Me: '*Lob hundene og katten over togskinnerne?! Jo, det er meget farligt.*' (Did the dogs and the cat cross the train tracks? Yes, that's very dangerous).

The above strategy has been a very effective way of correcting her borrowing. She is very aware of the fact that that my husband and I understand both languages and therefore I don't use the 'pretend not to understand' strategy very often. Instead I will say: 'I understand what you just said, but your cousins in Denmark would not understand you, because you mix Danish and English and they don't speak English'.

She never shows reluctance or embarrassment to speak to me in Danish in the company of our English speaking family or friends. In fact she is very proud of the fact that she speaks two languages, and as is often the case with bilingual children, she really enjoys and has a talent for learning new languages.

Just to hear Ditte talk to my grandmother in Denmark who does not understand one word of English makes it worth the effort to bring her up bilingually. We try to teach our children that in the same way that they have two languages, they also have two families that love them and two countries they can call home. Therefore, I strongly disagree with your reader, Jacqueline Braun, Germany (BFN 2/1991), who recommends to all bicultural families: '*...one partner should concede to the other to encourage the children to feel as though they do really have a home somewhere in the world, just the one.*' I believe that having strong roots and attachment to more than one place in the world offers a wealth of bicultural experience, and it is a human enrichment that increases the understanding between people and countries. We try to make sure that our children are proud of their two backgrounds and their bicultural identity.

"I believe that having strong roots and attachment to more than one place in the world offers a wealth of bicultural experience, and it is a human enrichment that increases the understanding between people and countries."

With our son Micah Jonas (2.1), we have also followed the one parent-one language rule. From the start I have encouraged Ditte to speak to her little brother in Danish.. She does speak to him in Danish when I am around, but when they play by themselves she often switches to English. I would like the BFN to comment on how one can succeed in making siblings speak the minority language together.

Until Micah started preschool seven weeks ago, he knew as many words in Danish as in English. However, now that he has started to speak in short sentences, English has definitely become his majority language. For his age he has an impressive vocabulary in English, whereas his Danish seems to have almost stagnated. However, he still understands everything I say, and I know from experience that he easily will go from being a passive (receiving) bilingual to an active bilingual.

This summer we will be moving back to Denmark. It is going to be interesting to follow how the switch of countries will turn the present minority language into the majority language. Fortunately, in Denmark it will be easier to keep the children equally skilled in both languages, as the children will hear English not only from their father and our English speaking friends, but also from the English children's programmes on television. Furthermore, we are considering making English our 'home language' in order to increase the input of the minority language. I would appreciate your comment on this.

It is a commonly held view that bilingual children are delayed in their speech development; however, research indicates that if there is a delay it is only slight in comparison with monolingual children. It is therefore very unfortunate that families see speech delay as an impediment to bilingual upbringing. To grow up knowing two languages, without ever having to make a conscious effort to learn them , is a wonderful foundation to give one's child, and I feel confident that Ditte Yael and Micah Jonas will appreciate the gift of a second mother tongue. I therefore encourage all parents in mixed marriages to make the effort to bring up their child bilingually.

Bitten Hesse, Albuquerque, New Mexico, USA

It is a common finding of studies of bilingualism in families throughout the world that once children have become proficient in the majority language they will use this language to each other, even if they may well speak the minority language to their parent(s). This is particularly the case, as in your (and my own) situation, where one of the parents has the majority language as a native language and this language is the normal means of communication between the two spouses. In families where the minority language is used between both parents and by both parents to the children, the chances that the children will use it to each other are increased, but there is no guarantee. From talking to many young adults who have grown up bilingually in Australia, it seems that some parents try to insist that only the minority language be used in the home, even among the children, and that this works if the parents are very insistent (see the article by the Shermans in this issue). But most of the people I spoke to said they switched to English (the majority language) when their parents were not present or were not within earshot. Some of them continue this pattern even as adults, only speaking the minority language to their brothers and sisters in the presence of their parents or other older relatives, but at other times using the majority language to each other. (The only exception to this seemed to be for reasons of privacy: they would use the minority language to each other in certain situations to keep the contents of their conversation secret).

I would be interested in readers' experiences with this aspect of raising children bilingually and in your reactions to the technique used by the Sherman family to get their children to use Yiddish to each other.

George Saunders

HELP -HELP -HELP- HELP

Pierre-Don Giancarli is carrying out research into children's (French/English) bilingualism and would like to get in touch with mixed French and English speaking couples.

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ability to read and write has been acquired in both languages then statistically it seems that bilingualism may well turn out to be of positive benefit in educational terms.

It would be reassuring to think that the difference between the reactions to my French-English bilingualism and the reactions to my students' Bengali-English bilingualism is just to do with this question of biliteracy. This would be naive - of course there are differences caused by our Eurocentrism. However, there seems little doubt too that learning to read and write one's mother tongue is crucial for the bilingual student.

CULTURE SHOCK

I was very interested indeed to read your Editorial in the Volume 9 No. 3, 1992 issue of BFN. I agree with you that this is an important area and it would be a good idea to explore it further.

My first experience of living abroad was in 1968 when at the age of 23 I followed my sister to the 'continent' where she had found her first job with a ballet company in Germany. I went to work for the Council of Europe in Strasbourg, Alsace, France. I was young and unmarried and my parents were very enthusiastic about this wonderful opportunity. I quickly made friends among the other young British and Irish women working for the Council of Europe. It was my first experience of being away from 'home' but I loved it and soon adapted to my new way of life and surroundings. Working in an international organisation which had a sympathetic Social Assistant helped the transition, and having my sister close enough to visit softened the blow.

My parents were open and friendly people and both my sister and I were encouraged to study a language and to have friends from other countries. Our house was frequently full of guests from abroad.

In Strasbourg I did not try to pretend I was on an 'English island' as it would, at that time, have just been possible to do and I soon made friends of different nationalities and joined in the local activities - I loved it and felt at ease and at home.

Whilst in Strasbourg I did some part-time work helping an American Lay Minister from the World Council of Churches. It was in his home that I discovered the 'culture shock' syndrome and until that moment I had not realised that such a thing existed. A young American university student was spending some time visiting Strasbourg and after some weeks she developed symptoms of tiredness and generally not feeling well. She ended up in bed with a fever. I have never forgotten the doctor who examined her told us that she was suffering from 'culture shock'. What was it? - many of us wondered. For most of us there had been a slight feeling of homesickness that had lasted until those who had been there longer took the 'newcomers' under their wings, so we had no experience to draw on to help in this new situation.

That might have been the end of the story for shortly afterwards I went back to England where I stayed for 8 years - trying hard to settle back into a lifestyle very different. During my absence the United Kingdom had joined the Common Market, the money had changed and a lot else besides and I felt quite a stranger. In 1980 I found myself applying, again, to work abroad. I came to Luxembourg in 1981 and, although it is very different from the part of France I knew and loved so well, I felt I had adapted to the change. I had visited Luxembourg from Strasbourg and I had one or two English friends here, as well as some Luxembourgish friends from my Strasbourg days.

I remember when I first arrived French was more or less the accepted language spoken in Luxembourg and it was not until 4 years later that Luxembourgish became the first language, French the second and German the third. Working for a Community institution meant that I was encouraged to study Community languages (Luxembourgish is not one of them) and I learnt Italian, plus a little German. Still French remained I suppose you would say the vehicular language - being the one used for going shopping, to the doctor's and so on. I only gradually began to realise that there was another language in this country and another culture as well.

Then I met my husband, an Italian, with whom I converse in French which is our common language. My children were born here and they are proud of that.

It was not until two years ago that I suddenly began to feel isolated. I have a good and interesting job, wonderful husband, adorable children, nice home, even my fair share of very nice English friends, as well as lots of friends and colleagues of other nationalities, so why the problem? I couldn't put it into words - only that I felt 'shut in a cupboard', cut off and panicky. The 'culture shock' had finally caught up with me and I have only just realised it!

So where do we go from here? I think there is a lot to be done.

Deirde L. Condon, Steinsel, Luxembourg

Many thanks for your interesting letter on 'culture shock'.

For myself not being prepared for intercultural living, the cultural shock came when the children were small and I had to confront issues like do I want them to become bilingual, bicultural and how to go about it. Although not strong and not on the surface all the time, the identity conflict lasted a long time (nearly ten years). It is only the last three/four years that I can happily say that I am really pleased to have two cultures and two languages.

We are all different and our circumstances are different. At least you have been well prepared for international living with your earlier experience and therefore your ' culture shock' or 'identity crises' will probably not last for very long. But I do understand the feeling of panic and anxiety, as my identity crises surfaced the same way. I found the biggest help was to talk about it (even to a professional if necessary) although the problems came when I was too critical about England to my English friends and at the same time glorifying Finland. As there is not much you can do about the 'culture shock' except by trying to identify and understand it, plus be open about it, it is nice to know that eventually most of us do feel adjusted and balanced with our intercultural lives. Meanwhile - relaxation techniques like deep breathing, Yoga, etc, will help to resolve the feelings of panic.

One thing I am sure - you are not alone.

Marjukka Grover

CONTACTS

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

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

Please send your queries, answers and/or contributions to the Editors

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or Marjukka Grover at Multilingual Matters

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and cultural roots, which we don't need to over-emphasise but not undervalue either. The new country is the place where our life is to be lived now. We feel that life with two countries and cultures is an enriching experience.

" *I do not have to cross any bridges to belong, for I am the bridge, as are each and every one of you*" Georgia Koumandari, BFN Vol.6, No.4, 1989.

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