The Bilingual Family Newsletter

MULTILINGUAL MATTERS

News and Views for Intercultural People

Editor: **Marjukka Grover** *Academic Editor:* **George Saunders** *1995 Vol. 12 No. 1*

In this issue

Academic Editor's Column

TWENTY-ONE YEARS OF FAMILY BILINGUALISM

by George Saunders

It is now eleven years since I began as Editor of the **BFN**. During this time I have often drawn on my personal experiences with raising my own three children bilingually when responding to various queries from readers. Some readers will also be familiar with my particular family situation from reading one or other of my two books: **Bilingual Children: Guidance for the Family** (1982) and **Bilingual Children: From Birth to Teens** (1988). The manuscript for the second book was finished not long after my oldest child had turned 13. Obviously, quite a bit of water has passed under the bridge since then, as that same child recently turned 21. In view of this, and because I receive quite a number of enquiries about whether my children are still bilingual, I decided to provide an updated report together with some reflections on my family's bilingualism.

I look back with a certain amount of satisfaction on the past 21 years of raising my children bilingually in English and German: Thomas (21), Frank (19), and Katrina (14), still communicate with me only in German and with their mother only in English. My wife, Wendy, and I almost always speak English to each other, as do the children to each other. Thus, we are still basically following the 'one person-one language' method documented and recommended by the French linguist Jules Ronjat in 1913 in his work **Le développement du langage observé chez un enfant bilingue** (The Language Development of a Bilingual Child).

The unusual aspect of the linguistic situation in my family is that both Wendy and I were born in Australia and come from monolingual English-speaking families. I learnt German at high school and then studied it further at university. Because of this, and thanks to a fourteen month stay in Germany, by the time our first child, Thomas, was born in 1973 I had attained an excellent command of German, and Wendy had also become reasonably fluent in the language. I spoke German to Thomas right from the start, more or less for fun, but also because I was fascinated by the linguistic expertise of several child bilinguals I had met and was consequently curious about the claims of various people had spoken to about the great difficulties involved in bringing up children bilingually in Australia. Much later I was also to read that some linguists referred to what I, as a non-native speaker, was attempting to do as 'artificial bilingualism' and considered it doomed to failure (e.g. Bernd Kielhöfer and Sylvie Jonekeit **Zweisprachige Kindererziehung** (1983, Bringing up children bilingually).

> *"This fascination with hearing a tiny child speak two languages is something which has not left me to this day".*

I still remember the thrill and sense of wonder when Thomas began to speak – in both English and German! This fascination with hearing a tiny child speak two languages is something which has not left me to this day. From the moment I heard Thomas utter his first German word, I was determined to persist in speaking only German to him. However, since I represented virtually the only source of German for Thomas, and subsequently also for Frank and Katrina,, it soon became obvious that English would become the children's dominant language and that some effort would be required on my part to ensure that the level of their German would not lag too far behind their English. Both Thomas and Frank (but not Katrina) went through periods (at ages 3;5 and 2;7 respectively) when they were reluctant to speak German and a majority of their utterances to me were in English. As any parent trying to bring up their children bilingually will know, this can be very discouraging. I think the secret to overcoming such periods of resistance is to persist in speaking the language to the children and to persist in encouraging them to speak the language to you. If I had begun responding in English when they used English to me, their bilingualism would undoubtedly have died at this early stage. As it was, about five months from both boys' initial resistance to speaking German to me over 95% of their utterances to me were German. Unbeknown to me, the way I intuitively spoke to my children was also no doubt of assistance, since it was one which the bilingualism researcher

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Saunders Family: Frank, Katrina, Thomas, Wendy and George

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Susanne Döpke in her book **One Parent One Language: An Interactional Approach** (1992) was later to call a 'child-centred mode of interaction' and showed to be the one that most favoured the bilingual upbringing of children It means that a parent actively works at sustaining a conversation with the children by being responsive to their contributions to the conversation, by working at maintaining a topic once it has been introduced, and by being more interested in conversing with the children than exerting control over them.

Within our immediate family, the use of both English and German has never presented any real communication problems since we all understand both languages. Only occasionally, as topics of conversation have increased in complexity, have German words or expressions with which Wendy is not familiar cropped up and she then simply asks for clarification (as do the children when they encounter something in German – or, more rarely, in English – which they do not understand.) In the presence of our extended family (none of whom has any more than a few words of German) and our monolingual English speaking friends, the children and I have always communicated with each other only in German. This, of course, has the potential for creating awkward situations where those who do not understand German could feel left out, although a little commonsense can usually avoid this happening. The amount of German used, for example, tends to be reduced when monolingual English speaking friends are present and directly involved in our conversation.

When I asked the children, during the preparation of this article, whether they considered our use of German in the presence of their friends to be in any way impolite, Katrina replied that she did not think so, since we spoke English to her friends and anything we said in German to each other which concerned the friends was explained by either her or me in English. Frank believed that the main thing was not to make the non-German speakers feel uncomfortable or excluded and to take particular care to give an English summary of sentences in which a friend's name was mentioned. Admittedly, we do sometimes forget that someone present cannot understand German, but usually one of us will realise quite quickly what we are doing (often alerted by the amused or puzzled looks of our friends or relatives) and take appropriate action. Frank also added that he sometimes found German useful to briefly discuss what he called *persönliche Sachen* (=personal matters) with me in the presence of his friends, such as a quick *'Kannst du mir ein bißchen Geld leihen?'* (= Can you lend me some money?) when heading off to the pub with some mates. Thomas mentioned another important advantage of not switching to English in the presence of non-German speakers: the fact that in the English speaking Australian environment our use of German would have been severely reduced.

A question sometimes put to me about my family situation is 'Since English is your first language and also the dominant language of your children, would it not be more logical and easier for you all to speak English to each other?' I put this same question separately to the children to see how they would react. Katrina's reaction sums up most emphatically the psychological aspect that such a language shift would entail: *'Nein, das find' ich gar nicht! Ich spreche mit dir Deutsch, und so war es immer, und ich kann es mir nicht vorstellen, daß ich mit dir Englisch sprechen könnte. Es wäre so komisch. Ich muß mit dir Deutsch sprechen, so ist es eben'*. (No, I don't think so at all! I speak German to you, and that's the way it's always been, and I can't imagine that I could speak English to you. It would be so strange. I have to speak German to you, that's just the way it is.) She also remarked that she could understand that other people might find the language situation in her family a bit odd, but for her it was perfectly normal.

The three children do agree that speaking English to me would perhaps be easier from a purely mechanical point of view, since they are aware that they make some grammatical errors in their German and sometimes have to rack their brains for words or expressions. However, as is evident from Katrina's comments above, the language has strong emotional connotations as a 'father tongue'. In addition, the children are aware of and value the usefulness of their German beyond its function as a family language. And whilst they all wish that their German were better, more nativelike, they are also happy that they can use the language so well and can communicate effectively in it. For example, when our virtually monolingual German friends visited us recently the children had no difficulty in acting as guides-cum-interpreters.

We have had the opportunity to expose all three children to life in Germany for six months in 1984 and 1988, Thomas for three weeks in 1991, and Katrina for three weeks in both 1989 and 1992 and for three months in 1993. These stays, particularly the longer ones when they attended a normal school (and coped well) and made friends with German children, undoubtedly improved their fluency in German, introduced them to the colloquial language of their peers, and extended their vocabulary and cultural knowledge.

However, from the language maintenance point of view, it is interesting also to consider some other factors which one would think would work against the children's retaining proficiency in German. Sadly, my father passed away in mid-1989, leaving my mother alone in a small costal town in Tasmania. Wendy, Frank (then 13) and Katrina (then 8) lived with my mother for six months, whilst Thomas (then 15) and I stayed in Sydney . Most days I spoke to Frank and Katrina on the telephone and wrote them a weekly letter in German, which proved sufficient to maintain their German until we were together again.

Subsequently, the two boys both spent their Higher School Certificate years (the last two years of high school) in Tasmania, living with their grandmother

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BILINGUALISM AND DIVORCE

How do Children Cope with their Two Languages after their Parents Separate?

Christine Hélot

I recently read a letter in the BFN which touched me deeply: a divorced father of a bilingual child was asking for advice on ways to keep speaking his own language with his daughter. While I don't have specific answers to give him, I though my own history of bringing up children bilingually and divorcing might give some support to other single parents of bilingual children.

One might wonder what bilingualism has to do with divorce, and feel that bilingualism would be the least worry of parents who separate, as far as their children's welfare is concerned. But bilingual families, unfortunately, are not safe from the difficulties of life today and if cultural differences can be very attractive at the beginning of a relationship, it can also cause difficulty of communication later on, particularly in situations of conflict.

What happens to children who have been brought up bilingually, particularly with the 'one language, one person' method, after their parents separate? It is a well know fact that in a great majority of cases of divorce, children lose regular contact with one of their parents, most often their father. A further problem can be that if the parents came from different countries divorce might make one of them, want to go back to her/his own country where she/he will have family support and chances to start a new life.

I do not wish to relate the terrible story of my separation but illustrate how my three bilingual children have coped with their languages through the trauma of their parents' separation. How they have settled in their mother's country, France, after having lived their first years in Ireland, their father's country, and how as a single parent I have continued to support their use of two languages and even encouraged their learning of a third, German.

My three children were 14, 9 and 8 when I decided to return to live in France, because of the lack of divorce legislation in Ireland. The three of them were bilingual in French and English, up to different degrees and with various attitudes towards the two languages. With the eldest we had used the strategy of place, where she heard all French at home and English outside. She was four when her sister was born and French was still our home language although, with pressure of work, and two young children, it was more difficult to consistently use only French at home.

A year after our eldest daughter started school (in English), our son was born, and we needed home help. We could not, at that stage, get a French speaker thus English came into our home but I remained speaking French to the children. When they were small French was definitely the main language used at home, it was our 'baby' language and the language used by the children when they talked to one another.

It changed when the three children were eventually in school. It then became more difficult for me to keep using French, competing with friends, neighbours and television in English. But I continued to use as much French as possible with them, reading books in French, having contact with other French mothers in Ireland, and of course going regularly to France to visit our monolingual French relatives. Before we left Ireland both girls spoke mostly French with me, but were dominant in English. Both learned to read in English at school and later on I discovered they could also read in French.

"...don't listen to all the negative comments made about children of broken homes, even less about bilingualism being a source of problems".

When the children were 9, 5 and 4, we spent a year in the south of France, living in a small village where they quickly picked up a provincial accent! During that year we tried to keep to our strategy of place (English then being our main home language) and slowly but surely the children became dominant in French. Our eldest daughter went to primary school and learned to write in French and after one term had mastered the basics of French spelling, conjugations and grammar. The two younger children went to the local nursery school and received no formal training.

When we returned to Ireland, our son joined a playgroup and for a week, didn't utter a word there, neither in English nor French. On his second Monday there, he spoke, in English, with a very strong mediterranean accent. Slowly, through the year, the sunny accent disappeared, and English became his dominant language again. French, once again, was the language of our home but used only with me and as a working mother I wasn't at home very much. I have to say at this point that our son was always more reluctant than his sisters to use both languages: while his sisters always switched easily according to whom they were speaking and gave the impression of being as confident in English as in French, he preferred to use English when we lived in Ireland, and French when in France. When his grandparents came to visit and he had to speak French he did complain on several occasions that the found it tiring; in the South of France after a few weeks there he had definitely preferred to speak French and up to today will speak his second language only when he has to.

Worth mentioning as well is the fact that as the conflicts became more and more frequent between myself and his father, he spoke less and less, neither in English nor in French. When I moved to France, he was a very quiet introverted boy, definitely dominant in English but with perfect understanding of French, and no trace of an English or Irish accent when he spoke French. This was to cause him some difficulty in the school in France as it made it more difficult for his teacher to accept that he was not French. He had known a very different school system and had been brought up in a very different culture but his teacher did not understand that, while he had mastered two of the competences of the language (speaking and understanding) he needed to accrue the other two, reading and writing. Being a monolingual teacher with no awareness whatsoever of what it might be like for a child to live in two languages and two cultures, she sat him at the end of the class with the other 'problem' children, who had no knowledge of French.

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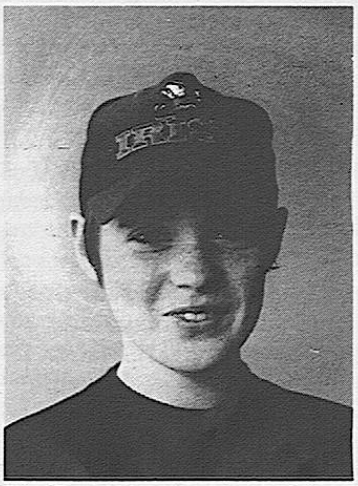
Furthermore, no recognition whatsoever was given to him for the fact that he could understand, read, write and speak English, a feat many French adults would like to have achieved. It was more difficult for him than for his sisters (probably because of his age), to adapt to the French educational system, mostly because of the rigidity of teaching methods and the negative attitudes of his teacher. He survived however, finished the school year with good marks and was able to go in the next form into a private school where it was easier to convince teachers of his special needs, not because he was a problem child but because the language of his education had changed. During his first year in France, he caught up with the level of reading and writing of his peers in France, adapted to a very long school day and totally different approaches to teaching. He started expressing himself again chatting happily or unhappily about his new life, and French became his dominant language.



French/Irish 12 year old Fabrice

When we first arrived to France the children needed so much support with homework, and thereore it was difficult to make English our main language at home. While I was aware that I would need to keep using English with the children so that they would not forget it, the priorities of finding a job, making ends meet, adapting to a different culture and recovering from the pain of separation put bilingualism very low on my list of priorities. Yet four years after our move, the three children are still 'functioning' in English and French. My eldest daughter passed the International Baccalaureate and is beginning her university studies in England, my second daughter is in her third year in the International School, and my son has just started secondary school in a trilingual class (4 hours of German and 4 hours of English per week).

I often talk with my children about their use of the two languages and ask them whether they feel more French or Irish or European. My eldest daughter considers English as her preferred language but cannot tell in which language she is dominant. She did choose herself to attend an English University, but not only for language reasons. The two younger children consider themselves more at ease with the French language, but both can switch to English without hesitation when necessary.

How have I managed to keep some English in our home, although I do not speak English with the children systematically? First of all I have been lucky that there is an International School in Strasbourg (6 hours per week of classes in English language, literature and history). The school also enables them to meet and make friends who are native speakers of English. We also receive cable television and the children can choose between several British or American channels. Strasbourg being a very cosmopolitan city, has the English Speaking Society and we enjoy celebrating Halloween, Thanksgiving and going to parties and speaking only English. Finally, because I need extra money, we decided to take in an American student to live with us and while I speak French with her she speaks English with the children.

Of course I am well aware that with such a widely spoken language as English, it is easier to keep it in our home than it might be for another language. Besides, I am a fluent speaker of English, (having lived in Ireland for 17 years and being a professor of English), but I still feel a second language can quickly disappear, particularly when a family has to go through the heartbreak of divorce and many practical problems have to be faced. Today my children rarely see their father, but I have tried also to help them keep their Irish sense of identity: we go and see Irish films, we listen to Irish music, we still have books in the Irish language and I have told them about the hopes for peace in Northern Ireland.

To conclude, I would like to give hope to single parents of bilingual or multilingual children: don't listen to all the negative comments made about children of broken homes, even less about bilingualism being a source of problems. Not only are my children well adjusted bilinguals, they are also good at German and very open to other languages – true Europeans or even citizens of the world.

READING AND BILINGUALISM

I just wish to agree with Milena Ruzkov, ('Delights of Learning to Read', Vol. 11, No. 3) with how easy it is to teach a child to read in a minority language, and encourage any parents motivated by her letter. I would add two provisos: firstly the child must be in an environment where he sees books and his parents reading, so that it is perfectly normal to him to read; secondly the child must be ready to read. This will manifest itself by an interest in letter and words and by recognition of logos i.e.: MacDonalds!

I also taught my daughter Elodie to read and, like Milena, have absolutely no experience, and yes it was easy. Elodie is now 6 years old and is a French/English speaker, English being her minority language. In France we are lucky that children are only taught to read when they enter *Cours Preparatoires* at about 6 years old. This meant that Elodie at 5 years old had the maturity, energy and desire to learn to read.

I cannot recommend enough the book **Teach Your Child To Read Properly** by Niels Madsen published by Paperfronts. This became my bible along with a **Ladybird Key Words Reading Scheme**. I also typed stories about Elodie and her friends which we illustrated together when she had understood the text. I can really say that we have had nothing but enormous fun embarking on this together, and what a feeling of pride for both of us when it all 'clicked'. There is no doubt that this experience has brought a new depth to my relationship with Elodie.

I have just one thing to add to Milena's experience: because unlike Czech and Cypriot, French and English use the same alphabet; one day Elodie just picked up a French book and started reading. She was able to transfer everything she had learnt with me in English to her French books with just a little tweek here and there from Papa.

A month ago Elodie started *Cours Preparatoires* and she is flying. No problems of adjustment to the new work load as reading is just a pleasure not a struggle. My worry that her teacher may

have been negative was unfounded as I have not encroached on her ground, Elodie has taught herself to read French. Elodie has her homework done in five minutes and with pleasure and often does more than required. Recently Elodie started writing her answers in English while doing her homework with me (not a surprise as we speak English between us) and it was then that I learnt that Elodie can write in English too. This was subject that I hadn't yet touched. In this case Elodie has applied quite naturally what she has learnt at school to her English.

To those parents inspired by Milena's letter I can only add my encouragement and say have a wonderful time sharing this very special moment with their child.

Christine Frati, Vienne France

DEBATE ON "One Parent - One Language"

I am a German national, living in England, married to a monolingual Englishman and working from home as a translator. My daughter, Maria, is now 4 months old and I am hoping to bring her up to be as bilingual as comfortably possible. Prior to Maria's birth I carried out some research into the best approaches of teaching children a foreign language. I am sure that the often preached 'one parent - one language' approach is indeed the best one for producing bilingual children. However, I am still not convinced it is the best approach for me.

My English is almost accent free and, unless the issue comes up in conversation, no-one ever notices that I'm not British. Speaking English to me is as natural as speaking German. My husband, on the other hand, has tried to learn the basics of German, but has failed miserably. It is often said that the monolingual parent will eventually pick up enough of the secondary language to support the bilingual parent's attempts to teach their child. However, as baby begins to sleep through the night the parent working outside the house often sees his child only at weekends. He is therefore not sufficiently exposed to the secondary language to learn much of it. I have also realised that a small baby puts enough strain on even a very stable marriage, which would only be exacerbated if one parent was deliberately excluded from participating in family life. We have therefore decided that English will be our family language, while I speak German to Maria during the day. That way we can sing the same songs and invent the same stories, while nothing stops me to introduce German nursery rhymes and books as well.

Maria will hear me speak German to my customers and friends, and she will have sufficient contact with her monolingual cousins in Germany to realise that it's not only Mum who speaks the foreign language. Of course she might later get to a stage where she refuses to speak German to me. I hope this problem will be overcome simply by setting off for a quick holiday in Germany.

Furthermore, I do not plan to be dogmatic about speaking only German to her outside the house. It is said that children begin to think of their second language as a secret language if it is only spoken indoors. Should this be true, I'm sure a strict 'one parent - one language' approach will not eradicate this feeling, as there too the language will still be the 'secret' one used only between mother and child and understood by no-one else.

It would interest me to hear how other parents overcome the problem of being the one responsible for teaching their child social graces. When asked by a kind lady *'And how old are you, Maria?'* am I to encourage her to: *'Sag three'*, and do I say *'Komm, Schatz, Thank You sagen nicht vergessen?'* When you're a bilingual parent in a monolingual environment there can be no really natural way of imparting your language to your child. In the end, what is best for the whole family is what feels most natural and right at any given time. For some of us this means feeling free to switch languages at times and to chose a certain language for certain circumstances.

If a child can understand the 'one parent - one language' approach, where she still must be aware that the bilingual parent speaks the dominant language to other people, and is therefore perfectly capable of doing so, then I'm sure she can also understand that German is spoken in Germany and with Mum during the day, but English is spoken with Dad, with the English family and other English people.

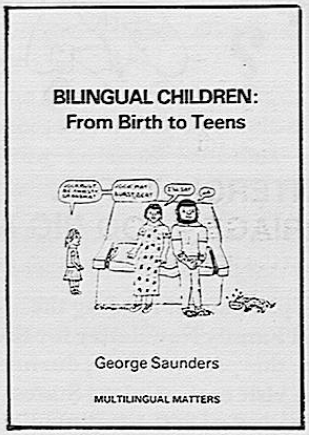
Admittedly, Maria will never become equilingual, but I hope she will be a well adjusted child who feels happy and secure in both languages and cultures. I did not started to learn English until I was 12 – surely, she has inherited some of my ability to learn other languages?

Finally, while it is always interesting to read about other people's views on this matter, it would be especially fascinating to hear from the children who were brought up by parents using a variety of approaches.

Erica Baker, Ightham, England.

BILINGUAL CHILDREN From Birth to Teens

George Saunders



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HUMOUR, HUMOUR, HUMOUR

BILINGUAL LOGIC

During a hospital visit in France, the doctor asked me how much my young son weighed, but Tony answered immediately:
'Quatre pierres et huit cailloux'
(= literally 'Four stones and eight pebbles').

Jacqueline Karp Gendre, France

INTERCULTURAL MARRIAGE – TOO BIG A RISK?

I had the pleasure of reading the Bilingual Family Newsletter for the first time this past summer, during my home visit to the United States. I was impressed with the testimonials to read in there about life in bilingual families. There are two reasons why I am interested in your publication:

1. As an instructor of ESL/EFL, I have done reading and research in the matter of second language acquisition. Children from bilingual families have an unequalled opportunity to acquire a second or even a third language the same way as a first language.

2. On a more personal level, I am pondering the advisability of marrying a woman of another nationality and language. Several well-intentioned persons are trying to dissuade me from entering such a union, warning me of the difficulties facing intercultural marriages. I know if I want children who would be truly bilingual, having parents each with different mother tongues would be the ideal. However, is that a high price to pay for such an experiment? After all, intimacy in a marriage (supposedly?) is hampered by the barrier posed when husband and wife must struggle with each other's native language. Moreover, some wonder if the children would be handicapped in mastering one language due to competition from another. Not only that, but some assert that children of a binational and bilingual marriage grow up with an identity crisis.

By reading your Newsletter, I am hoping to find that IT IS POSSIBLE to have a HAPPY MARRIAGE and HEALTHY CHILDREN in a home where two or more languages are spoken natively among the members of the family.

M.Taylor, United Arab Emirates

Thank you for your very interesting letter. With regards to your query about the happiness of an intercultural marriage, I personally think that, unless the cultural differences are enormous, changes for intercultural marriage to succeed is almost as good as monocultural marriage. It all depends on how the couple relate to each other (including to each other's language, culture and country), how they are able to adjust to life's events and changes, and how committed they are for the marriage to succeed.

Dugan Romano in her book **Intercultural Marriage: Promises and Pitfalls** lists the following factors for success:

1. Good motivation for the marriage
2. Common goals
3. Sensitivity to each other's needs
4. A liking for the other's culture
5. Flexibility
6. A solid, positive self-image
7. A spirit of adventure
8. Ability to communicate
9. Commitment to the relationship
10. A sense of humour

Having over twenty years' experience of my own intercultural marriage, and having read a lot on the subject, I would emphasise the importance of good communication, the liking of each other's culture and a sense of humour as being important factors in making an intercultural marriage work. I would not, however, advise anybody to 'experiment' in an intercultural marriage without true, strong feelings of love and commitment. The union of two people is always a challenge and, no doubt, partners having different culture and language backgrounds must be ready to adjust a little more than monolingual couples. If neither partner speaks the other's language well, or if they do not have a common third language in which they are both fluent, that will of course put an extra burden on the marriage.

With regard to bilingual children, research in the last twenty years has shown that bilingualism does not harm children and, provided the children grow up in a rich language environment, it can have a positive effect. How the same children, as teenages and young adults, see themselves in a view of their two cultures depends on how the parents have been able to maintain both cultures in their children's lives and the attitudes of the host country towards the minority culture. The letters and articles we have received for the BFN from young bicultural adults indicate that they feel very positive about their bicultural identity.

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whilst Wendy, Katrina and I lived in Sydney. And since Thomas and Frank have been 18, they have been away at university in Canberra. These absences from me have meant that their contact with German was (and is) significantly reduced. However, I have maintained regular contact by telephone (much to Telecom's delight!) And when the boys were in school in Tasmania, they were, for the first time, able to take German as a school subject. They have also both included German in their university courses (and have gained Distinction or High Distinction grades in it). These regular telephone conversations with me in German and formally studying the language has helped them to maintain their fluency in German, extend their vocabulary and improve their grammatical accuracy. At university they speak naturally German to their German lecturers and have a number of bilingual German/English friends.

Katrina is at present in Grade 9 at a school which unfortunately has no German in the curriculum, so that all her German (including reading and writing practice) has to come from me. All three children's German is fluent and quite accurate, although not as accurate as their English (which is of a very high standard). In German they may make from 1 - 3 errors per 100 words. I do correct their errors, but as diplomatically as possible, since constant correction would be irritating and probably discourage them from speaking to me as much as they do; it is thus necessary to accept a certain amount of grammatical inaccuracy in the interests of spontaneous, fluent interactions. However, they have also made it clear that they do not like no correction at all, and can become annoyed if they discover that they have been saying something wrongly and I have never pointed this out to them!

When I asked the children whether they thought their knowledge of German had been a disadvantage or had had a negative influence on their English, they were firmly convinced that this was not the case. They believed that as far as English was concerned they were indistinguishable from monolingual speakers of Australian English and that their good knowledge of German was therefore a valuable bonus. It seems clear that they will always use German with me. What use they make of it beyond that will be up to them. It will be interesting to see when they have children of their own whether they will be tempted to embark on the same bilingual adventure that I did 21 years ago!

WHEN DO CHILDREN START TO SEPERATE LANGUAGES?

Vol. 11, No. 3 addressed a great concern of mine, which is speaking English to my daughter in front of non-English speaking people. We live in Austria and she will most likely grow up here. I speak English to her and to my husband at home. He, in turn, speaks German to her and to me. Both of us are fluent in English and German. Even though my daughter is only seven months old, I want to establish consistency in speaking English to her. I sometimes feel 'forced' to speak German to her for the benefit of other people. For example, if I'm speaking to someone and then wish to leave, I say to my daughter, 'So, sweetheart, we've got to get going now!' in German. But that's not really directed at her, but to the German-speaking person. After reading the editorial and the comments by Ms. Westmiller on the subject, I feel I will now make a concerted effort to speak English to Jessica at all times outside of the home. I do not wish to in any way establish a situation in which Jessica would regard English as unnatural or as a 'secret language' used only at home. I realise through Ms. Westmiller's comments that this is a discomfort on my part and I will make every effort to overcome it.

At what age do children usually begin to differentiate between languages? If my daughter begins to speak to me in German when she's first learning to communicate should I (a) insist she speak English or (b) react to whatever she's said in German and repeat what's she said back to her in English? A friend once told me that children are just learning to communicate at the beginning and naturally do not differentiate languages. If I choose to react to what she has said in German in the beginning, at what age should I begin to insist she speak English to me? I am afraid of demanding too much at an early age which may result in refusal to speak English. Is there a danger of that happening? What could I do to prevent her from feeling English is being forced upon her? I have many cartoon movies in English, plus a large selection of children's books. I read to her often and she seems to love it even at this early age! Am I perhaps being a little too uptight about raising her bilingually?

Nadine Lichtenberger, Linz, Austria

I am pleased that the BFN has been able to be of some assistance to you in overcoming the problems of whether to address your daughter in English in the presence of German speakers. I am sure that most people close to you will very quickly accept the fact that you wish to speak English to Jessica whenever possible, particularly if you explain to them why you are doing it.

With regard to your question about when children separate the two languages, your friend is right in saying that right at the beginning of speech (which usually starts around the first birthday) children do not distinguish between the two languages. That is, they will respond to either language, but their active vocabulary will initially be very small and usually they will give a name for something in one or other of their two languages, but not both. When my son, Frank, was 1 year and 4 months old for instance, he understood and responded to both German 'Pferd' and English 'horse', but the only one that he said at that stage was 'Pferd'. For other things he initially said only the English word. Jessica's speech will most probably follow a similar pattern: when she starts to speak, she will at first have only a small vocabulary consisting of some German words and some English words, with no or very few things being called by both an English and a German word. At this stage, therefore, there is little point in trying to insist that she say an English word for something she says in German, or vice versa. Just praise her every effort in whatever language it is! Tell people who will undoubtedly question your wisdom in 'confusing' your child that this is a perfectly normal phase of development for bilingual children and nothing to worry about (even monolingual children are exposed to more than one word for various things, e.g. Hund/Wauwau, dog/bow-wow, but at the beginning of speech only say one of them.)

Until the age of 18 months Jessica's utterances will mostly be single-element ones ('dog' or 'Hund') and then two-element ones ('Dog gone' or 'Hund weg'). Gradually, and particularly around her second birthday, Jessica use both German words and English words for various concepts and also work out which people she should use which words to. However, do not be too upset if she does not consistently speak English to you. If she says something in German to you, indicate that you have understood, but add something like: 'Yes, Daddy says 'Brot', but Mummy says 'bread'.' You can even make this into a game which will help her separate her two languages and also extend her vocabulary.

But, please, don't be too uptight about it all. You already read a lot to Jessica and have English movies for her to watch and are obviously very keen for her to acquire your mother tongue. Living in a German-speaking environment, Jessica's dominant language will be German, but with your help she can also become a proficient user of English. There may be times when she will be reluctant to speak English to you, but your persistence and encouragement of your daughter will eventually pay off.

George Saunders

The editors, with the help of the new International Editorial Board, are happy to answer any queries you may have on bilingualism/-culturalism. Letters and contributions to the Newsletter should be sent to:

Editor: Marjukka Grover
at Multilingual Matters

If you want to get in touch with any member of the board please send your letter to c/o Multilingual Matters and we will forward it to him/her.

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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.

The following people would like to get in touch with either same combination language families or other bilingual families in their area.

Contact details removed

GLOSSARY

Subtractive bilingualism: The second language replaces the first language.

INTERCULTURAL MARRIAGE *Continued from page six*

In Vol.10:1, 1993 Alice Byram (English/French) writes:

"Although I will never be able to feel a true Geordie and even less a true Mayennais, because of never being able to integrate completely into one culture at what would be the expense of the other, I do feel most strongly that I have two homes, England and France."

I have just had a very interesting discussion with my eighteen year old son, Tommi. He has been brought up speaking Finnish and English and, although he has spent his whole life in the same town in England (even in the same house) and most of his holidays in Finland, Tommi said he does not feel either English or Finnish. He emphasises, however, that he has no identity crisis - it is just how he feels – international – and there is no way he would change his bilingual/-cultural upbringing to monolingual.

I hope this letter gives you some insight into intercultural marriage and family life and if you decide to go ahead with your plans, I wish you and your partner every happiness and a long, successful marriage!

Marjukka Grove

PS If readers know of any research on identity and culture please let us know. Letters and comments from readers describing their personal experience on this important topic are most welcomed.