

# The Bilingual Family Newsletter



News and Views for Intercultural People

Editor: Marjukka Grover

2001, Vol 18 No.1

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## EDITORIAL

Spring is coming to the Northern Hemisphere! This morning I noticed a beautiful iris peeping from the window box – yet I didn't see it there yesterday. The first snowdrops and crocuses get me as excited in England as the bright spring sunshine glittering on pure white snow back at home in Finland.

Bringing up children – giving them skills – reminds me of a gardener who has planted bulbs and is waiting for them to flower. Some flower early, others take time to get through, but in the end a beautiful flower emerges. In this issue two mothers describe how frustrated they were when their first born children did not seem to master either language and for a long time were speaking only 'gobbledegook' which nobody understood. In both cases a long visit to the mother's homeland did the trick and it seemed like the children's languages 'burst into a flower' overnight – just like the iris in my window box. Some children need more time to absorb skills and do not like to 'practice' until they have internally mastered the task.

It seems easier for a minority-language mother, rather than the father, to succeed bringing up her child bilingually – simply because mothers tend to spend more time with their children. Jenny Li in this issue's leading article describes how she is supporting her Chinese speaking husband by making Cantonese their home language and learning it together with her daughter. Food for thought for other majority-language mothers!

I am always looking for new, interesting material for the Newsletter. Articles, letters, interviews, anecdotes and questions related to multilingualism and multiculturalism are gratefully received.

Marjukka Grover

## FUN WITH FOUR LANGUAGES

### English, Cantonese, Mandarin and sign language

Jenny Li

I am English, my husband comes from Hong Kong, we have a three-year-old daughter, Anna. Although we live in England, the language we speak as a family at home is mainly Cantonese. My husband is sometimes away for weeks at a time so the *one parent – one language* approach was out of the question as it fell to me to make sure Anna had regular input in Chinese.



*Anna eating with chop sticks*

To begin with my Cantonese wasn't fluent and lacked a lot of vocabulary so when Anna was a year old I paid a Hong Kong lady to come round for two hours a day Monday to Friday to speak Cantonese with her, playing games or going to the park. I was involved in these sessions and my Cantonese improved rapidly. She only came for three months but by that time I was confident enough to use it as my main language with Anna. I'd talk

about everything we were doing – like a running commentary – partly for her to hear, partly for me to practise! I'd write down the words or phrases I wasn't sure of then ask a friend how to say it. I had lists and lists of words to learn while Anna was sleeping! Sometimes my husband would overhear me saying something incorrectly and I'd realise I'd been saying it wrong for weeks – either using the wrong tone, or a completely wrong word – and I'd have to re-teach her. Despite this, however, Anna does have a proper Cantonese accent and speaks very well for her age. She realises that my Chinese isn't perfect and she's quite used to me saying 'Let's look it up in the dictionary' or 'Ask Daddy how to write that.'

I was, and still am, conscious not to necessarily slip into English just because we are in an English environment, like a parent-toddler group. However if we are out together with English family or friends, we do of course speak English. When I take her to the toilet, though, we tend to lapse back into Cantonese. I always made a special effort to speak mostly English with Anna at my parents' house as my mother felt left out if I spoke Chinese in her presence and she thought it was rude. However, right from early on, Anna showed a real preference for Cantonese (at 19 months she spoke 80 words in Cantonese, 25 in English) and having put so much effort into instilling Chinese as her main language, I didn't like to discourage her. I'm afraid it did cause a lot of arguments for several

*Continued on page two*



## FUN WITH FOUR...from page one

months, although the tension has eased now since Anna is not so resistant to speaking English any more.

I introduced sign language at 18 months (an interest of mine). Single words at first: animals, foods, things around the house, etc. She looked on it as a game and even practised by herself. After ten weeks of just a few minutes a day, she could understand and attempt over 80 signs. It helped me when she was at the one or two word stage, to distinguish whether she was saying 'door', 'dog' or 'doll' or a similar sounding word in Chinese, hence reducing frustration. At times it's also nice to be able to cue her without actually telling her the word.

Signing comes into its own: in a noisy place; in a quiet place (e.g. Church); when she's a long way away (so long as she's looking in your direction!); if you're on the phone and she wants something; to tell or ask her something discretely if your mouth's full and of course if you lose your voice! I take her to deaf club once a week so she sees sign being used by everyone there. To begin with, she thought if we were signing that meant we were deaf! I explained that deaf people had a problem with their ears and couldn't hear. She was very concerned and wanted to rub cream on to make them better, or maybe the doctor could give them some Calpol!

I tentatively introduced Mandarin just before her second birthday. One hour a day. I started by clapping my hands saying 現在講國語 = *Now we speak Mandarin*. From that moment, for one hour, everything was spoken in Mandarin, with no exception. I began by offering her a chocolate. Blank expression. So I asked again, this time signing at the same time. Her face lit up so I fetched some smarties and a banana. 'Do you want a

chocolate or a banana?' Points to the chocolates. 'Really?' (signing at the same time). Nods. 'So you don't want the apple.' Shakes her head. 'You want chocolate?' Nods again. 'Yes?' and then she says her first word in Mandarin:

要! = *yes I want*. So I give her a chocolate, but not before ascertaining whether she wants a red or a yellow one ... and so we continued with lots of repetition of simple sentence structure, making sure it was always fun, with lots of treats that I subtly made her work for.

*"I never 'insist' that Anna speaks a certain language. If she's come out with an 'alien' sentence when we're speaking Mandarin, it's usually because she didn't know the word so I've just told her and we've carried on."*

To my intense relief she didn't object to this new language, in fact she seemed to really enjoy it. She was quick to pick up on what I was saying and I reserved the signing for new words or expressions. She never spoke English during these sessions, she answered me almost entirely in Cantonese, except for a handful of simple words in Mandarin. After six or eight weeks she could understand basic Mandarin but I was mentally exhausted so I paid a Chinese student to spend three hours with her three times a week, covering all range of activities – painting, watering the garden, making biscuits, watching Tom and Jerry... anything that's fun and interactive. It took a total of ten months before Anna really began to speak Mandarin without bits of Cantonese entwined. Learning from a native speaker, however means that she speaks correctly and with a good accent. I have the choice to either join in with them, do the housework, or have a rest. When Anna's a bit older, they could discuss topical debates, or Chinese history, cook regional dishes...the scope is enormous. I don't want it to turn in to a formal dull grammar-learning class. I believe any reading and writing should have a purpose – a letter to her cousin in Hong Kong, a shopping list to take with us to Sainsburys, or reading an enjoyable book.

I never 'insist' that Anna speaks a certain language. If she's come out with an 'alien' sentence when we're speaking Mandarin, it's usually because she didn't know the word so I've just told her and we've carried on. Sometimes we've been on our own together and she's said: 'I

want to speak English'. 'Go on then', has been my dead-end reply.

She's very flexible and slips easily from one language to another. She'll use any language with me, but gets upset if I speak English with someone I usually only speak to in Chinese. She loves playing ABC. She understood which letters words began with shortly after her third birthday: 'b' for baby, 'ch' for church, 'sl' for slug, 'tra' for tractor.

We have a poster on the kitchen wall of ㄅ ㄆ ㄇ (Chinese phonetics system used in Taiwan for teaching pronunciation comprising 37 symbols). She now knows that if it's an English word we use ABC and for Mandarin pronunciation we use ㄅ ㄆ ㄇ. A few of the symbols, however, resemble letters from the alphabet so causing slight confusion.

My husband reads to Anna in Cantonese and I generally read Chinese books to her in Mandarin, though if she asks for Cantonese, I'll sometimes just tell her the story as we look at the pictures.

Up until age two-and-a-half, if Anna was speaking:

*Cantonese*: it was mostly all in Cantonese;

*Mandarin*: the words she didn't know were said in Cantonese;

*English*: she would throw in odd words in Cantonese, though occasionally sentences were a mixture of all four languages!

One of her favourite topics of conversation over the last eight months has been about who spoke which languages, what country they lived in and what nationality they were. I put a fun map of the world on the bathroom wall and she was soon able to pick out the main countries. She understands that at night time it's dark because the sun is in America and says solemnly 'American people can get up but English people can't!'

The word she's had most difficulty to comprehend is 'Chinese'. She understood quite early what was English, Cantonese and Mandarin but the word 'Chinese' really threw her. Chinese books can be read in Cantonese or Mandarin but the script is called Chinese. People are Chinese whether they come from Hong Kong, China or Taiwan, they speak Chinese, and then there's Chinese food. When Anna was about two and a half, I asked my husband if he wanted Chinese tea or English tea? Anna piped up '或者國語' (or Mandarin) !!

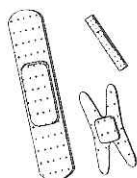
What she has spoken in both Chinese languages has always been fairly accurate but the English grammar hasn't come

## HUMOUR, HUMOUR

One day I asked Anna to go downstairs and ask Daddy for some Calpol. I said '叫爸爸比 Calpol 妳'.

She came back with a handful of plasters. So I told her again. Again she returned with even more plasters.

After the third time, my husband came running up the stairs, concerned why I needed so many plasters...the Cantonese for plaster is GAO BO !!



Jenny Li,  
Bournemouth, UK

*Continued on page eight*



## SPOTLIGHT ON THE EDITORIAL BOARD

### Suzanne Barron-Hauwaert



**Name of husband:** Jacques Hauwaert

**Children:** Marc, 3 years and Nina, 18 months

**Country:** Zurich, Switzerland

**Home Country:** For me, England, for Jacques, France.

**Languages:** English, French and German mainly, and some Japanese, Polish, Hungarian and Arabic picked up from living abroad for the last six years...

**What do you like about Switzerland?** We came to live in Zurich after a year in Cairo, and our first impressions were how clean, safe and organised everything is in Switzerland. No strikes, no delays and a public transport system which runs like clockwork! I particularly like Zurich lake – ideal for a walk with the children and so clear you can see the ducks' legs!

**What do you dislike about Switzerland?** The Swiss obsession with rules and regulations. In our apartment, like many others, there is a shared washing room in the basement. This is organised on a daily usage basis, so hard luck if you need to wash on Monday when your allocated day is Wednesday ... and no washing on Sundays or after 10pm...

**How does Switzerland differ from England or France?** Switzerland is officially quadrilingual (French, German, Italian and Romansch), and many Swiss speak English and Japanese for the tourism industry. Public documents and food labeling is done in at least three languages. However, each canton is fiercely monolingual, only speaking other languages if they have to and I hear more language mixing in London or Paris.

**How does the upbringing of children differ?** At school the intensive reading and writing skills are delayed until the children are at least six years old. Despite this Swiss children usually learn two or three languages and are competent before they start secondary school. As a country with several linguistic borders and multilingual media the children quickly understand the usefulness of speaking another language.

**How do you feel about being a foreigner?** We don't look obviously foreign until we begin to talk... then we are treated as tourists and some locals find it hard to understand that we live in Zurich! They try to guide us to tourist sights and recommend fondue!

**How do Swiss people treat foreigners?** Our babysitter is a French-speaking Algerian refugee, aided by the local government. She feels alienated and cannot work legally until she has a special Permit, which is unlikely for a refugee. Other Kosovan and Turkish people I met are frustrated at being poor in an expensive country and wish they had chosen France or Italy.

**How does everyday life differ from life in your country?** Recycling is very important here too as we pay per binbag (about one English pound), so I am careful to recycle as much as possible.

**What do you take back when you go back to your home country?** Chocolate and more chocolate...I never have enough to satisfy Lindt and Sprungli fans!

**What do you take back when you return to Switzerland?** I take English marmalade, HP Sauce to go with the frankfurters and Angel Delight for the kids. Jacques takes steaks, as beef is extremely expensive in Switzerland.

**How do your children feel about their identity?** Marc is rather confused – in England he is called 'the little French boy', in France 'le petit anglais', and he is not sure what to answer. He has grasped the idea that he has parents who are from different cultures, but he is too young to be bicultural himself. In Zurich he mostly socialises with English expatriate children. We have Swiss friends too in our village and go to weekly playgroups. He often plays with younger Swiss children there as he is still at a lower language level in German.

**What is your children's preferred language?** English with me, my family and playing with friends. French for Papa, our babysitter and with French cousins and family. German in the park, and around Zurich. They enjoy both English and French books and nursery rhymes, although I find it hard to sing along to French songs or read French books and vice versa for Jacques. The grandparents help out a lot in this area with intensive reading and singing sessions when we go back to visit. In our local library we look at German books too.

**Have your children got bi-nationality and if not why not?** Marc was born in Budapest and Nina in Zurich. They were both registered British at birth as they always travel with me, although due to recent changes in the law Nina had her own British passport at age three months! When they are old enough to fly alone our little frequent flyers will have French passports too.

**What are your future plans?** As Jacques' work takes us around the world on international postings every two years we are getting ready for our next move – maybe to Asia. We often feel like nomads, carrying all our possessions (and favourite toys!) around with us. However, we own a sixteenth century manor house in rural France that is currently being renovated, and we will settle there in five or six years.

# Letters



## DON'T GIVE UP

It was with great interest that I read V. Gasseau-Dryer's letter in Vol.17, No.3 of the BFN. For us the waiting game has finally paid off and I would like to encourage Mrs. Gasseau-Dryer not to give up hope!

I am a native English speaker and my husband a native German speaker. Our common language at home is German (well Austrian dialect!) as this was the language we used when we first met (I was studying in Salzburg as part of my German degree).

I was beginning to think that Katharina (now aged three) would never be able to speak both languages and we were

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*"I would never see language development on its own without taking the child's overall development into consideration."*

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constantly confronted with a mixture of German and English within one sentence including using the English verb endings with German verbs. We have always followed the principle of 'one parent – one language' and Katharina has no further access to English apart from cassettes, videos and phone calls with her grandparents. Furthermore, I worked full time for six months from when she was two years old and so she heard hardly any English then.

The first thing which made me smile on our last holiday to England was when Katharina suddenly realised that other people speak English and that she could understand them. We spent five weeks in England and by the end of the holiday she was speaking perfect English – and she had suddenly realised that she has to speak German to Papi and English to Mami. She also speaks to her little sister, Anna Sophie (six months), only in English so during the day all we speak is English at home.

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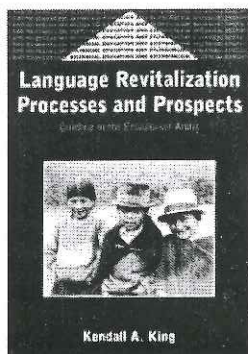
## DON'T GIVE UP ...from page three

I would never see language development on its own without taking the child's overall development into consideration. Katharina is a child who needs plenty of time to do things and she will only do something when she can do it – you never see her practising! When she started walking she was almost 15 months but she just got up and walked. With regards to her language development, she never really formed any typical children's sounds but my doctor reassured me that as she could hear she would eventually start speaking.

Katharina also mixes up some consonants. She says 'Wolster' instead of 'Polster' but she says 'pillow' correctly. I find it important for her to watch how we are pronouncing words – at her height! We have also seen a speech therapist who has told us that it has nothing to do with her being bilingual but the fact that she is quite lazy when using her mouth and there are ways to overcome this and most of all not to worry.

I would certainly recommend as many visits as possible to the country where the weaker language is spoken. Also do not worry too much as this can have a negative effect on a sensitive child. Give the child as much time as needed and try not to compare your child with others. Unfortunately I find that even if you don't do this then others do it for you – just think of that awful word 'yet!' *'Is Anna Sophie sitting up yet?'* my mother asked last week! I'm sure that in the not too distant future you will be as proud as I am to be able to say that my daughter's mother tongue is English and her father tongue is German. When Katharina is speaking English you would think that she's a little girl from Lincolnshire and when she's speaking German you would never believe that she can speak English just as well and just as easily.

Greetings and kind regards from Austria  
Nicola Nightingale (and family)



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## NEWS FROM THE USA:

### One More English-Only Mandate

By James Crawford

Bilingual education suffered another setback on November 7, as Arizona voters approved an English-only schools initiative known as Proposition 203. The lopsided victory – 63 to 37% – bodes ill for the program's future in numerous other states as well.

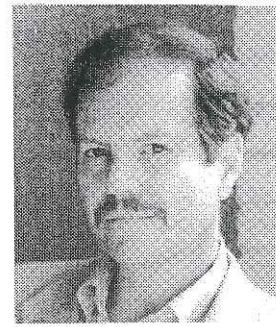
The campaign was sponsored and financed by Ron Unz, a computer software magnate who in 1998 pushed through a similar measure in California. That law, though designed to outlaw most native-language instruction, has thus far failed to do so. About 170,000 students, or 12 % of the state's English learners, remain in bilingual education programs at parents' request.

As a result, Unz drafted a significantly more restrictive version for Arizona. Proposition 203 appears to allow far less flexibility. To be eligible for 'waivers' of the English-only rule, a child under age ten must have 'physical or psychological handicaps.' Limited English proficiency would not qualify as a 'special need' justifying assistance in the native language. Even if the student met these strict criteria, a parent's waiver request could be denied 'without explanation or legal consequence.'

Numerous questions remain about how the law will affect Arizona's language-minority students. *'The battle now shifts into the hands of parents and local leaders in individual districts'*, said Sal Gabaldon, a school administrator in Tucson.

State officials have advised that the new restrictions will not take effect until the next school year begins on August 2001. No official interpretation has been forthcoming yet on several other issues, such as:

Will Proposition 203 shut down bilingual programs for Native American children? In the words of one educator, a strict interpretation of the law could mean 'the death of Arizona Indian languages,' which are already endangered. Will the prohibition on any instruction or school materials in the home language of English learners – along with threats to fine educators who resist – be strictly observed? Will 'dual immersion' programs, which offer language-learning opportunities to English-background as well as language-minority children, find loopholes in the law allowing them to survive? Will federal or state courts rule that the initiative – by arbitrarily assigning all English learners to an unproven 'structured



immersion' curriculum, against the advice of educators – violate these students' right to an equal educational opportunity?

Arizona educators, civil rights advocates, and Indian tribes worked actively to defeat Proposition 203 in the final weeks before the vote. But efforts to mount a unified opposition were frustrated by sectional and organizational rivalries. Three major campaign groups competed for scarce resources; none had sufficient funding to do substantial TV advertising to educate the electorate.

Meanwhile, traditional allies – including most leaders of Arizona's Hispanic community – played a limited role in the campaign. *'We saw a remarkable political cowardice from all sides,'* said Jeff MacSwan of the Arizona State University College of Education, *'from both parties and especially from former supporters like Senator John McCain, who were completely silent.'*

The initiative passed easily in most parts of the state. The only exceptions were in northern counties where Navajo, Hopi, and Apache voters are concentrated.

Following the Arizona vote, Ron Unz reiterated plans to take his campaign to 'eliminate bilingual education' to other states through additional ballot initiatives and legislative lobbying.

Thus far, however, advocates for language-minority students have been slow to get organized and learn how to participate effectively in the political process. Unless that changes, and soon, bilingual education could ultimately be lost to all but a few English learners in the United States.

James Crawford's latest book is *At War with Diversity: U.S. Language Policy in an Age of Anxiety* (Multilingual Matters, 2000).

For further information on bilingual education in the United States and related issues, visit his web site at: <http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/jwcrawford/>.

## DID YOU KNOW THAT...

*"It is generally agreed that of the estimated 6,000 languages on the planet, roughly half are either currently endangered or near extinction (Krauss, 1992a; Wurm, 1998). Within the United States and Canada, for instance, of the 210 indigenous languages still extant, about eighty per cent are moribund, that is, no longer spoken by children (Krauss, 1998b). Furthermore, predictive calculations based on the number of 'safe' languages – those which enjoy official state support and relatively large numbers of speakers – suggest that by the year 2100, as many as ninety per cent of the world's languages could be either extinct or moribund (Krauss, 1992a)..."*

from the book *Language Revitalization Processes and Prospects: Quichua in the Ecuadorian Andes* by Kendall King, published by Multilingual Matters in January 2001.



## TRILINGUAL NOMAD – AGED THREE

Michael R. Preston

I was interested in the article by Jean-Marc DeWaele **Three years old and three first languages** (BFN Vol. 17:2, 2000) as his observations as a professional linguist paralleled my own.

Our son Mark was born in Barcelona in June 1995. His mother is Catalan and this was the first language to which he was exposed. The uncles and aunts, nieces, nephews crowded round to admire the newborn whilst we vainly attempted to keep them from breathing the toxic fumes of the Ducados (black tobacco) so beloved by Spaniards. Catalan is still his



Mark with his mum in Johannesburg

strongest language. I am English but spent most of my adult life in Southern Africa, and from the beginning only spoke to him in English, although he became quite used to hearing me speaking (Castilian) Spanish when we were in Spain.

We work in France for a multinational company, where the common and official language is English, thus most of our friends spoke English, even if as non-native speakers. A number also spoke (Castilian) Spanish. Mark has yet to appreciate the differences between Spanish and Catalan but will happily and unconsciously respond in Catalan when addressed in Spanish.

His first words were Catalan but English followed quickly and he soon learned to distinguish which language to use, and would switch from 'water' when speaking to me to 'aigua' when speaking to his mother quite automatically. Even now, if one of us speaks to him in the 'wrong' language, he answers in that parent's 'correct' language and no longer even looks surprised!

During the day when we were at work he went to a French day mother, and started to become familiar with that language. This continued when he went to the nursery school which, although nominally international, is predominantly French speaking. Probably as a result of this he now automatically assumes, until proved wrong, that children of his own age speak French!

In our home and social environment, we maintained from the beginning a strict separation of languages with the *one parent – one language* approach. In order to reinforce that French is not part of his, or our, culture, we have no French radio or TV (not that this is any hardship – the TV especially is abysmal). As we have few French friends he hardly ever hears the language at home but he chats and jokes to our French neighbours for hours when given free reign.

He is equally at home in Catalan, English, and French. Sometimes when he does not know a word in one language he will use that language to explain what he is trying to say, rather than switch into another language. Sometime he acts as if unaware that we both understand all three languages, and will translate for one

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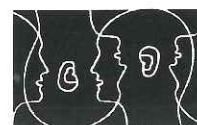
*"Sometime he acts as if unaware that we both understand all three languages, and will translate for one parent what the other has said."*

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parent what the other has said.

He has travelled a lot with us and in his first three years – probably more widely than either of us in our first 20! He is as much at home in South Africa (where he settled into a pre-school group for a few weeks picking up a 'lekker' Johannesburg accent) as in Spain, England, or France, and is so blasé about travelling that when I took him to the Scilly Isles by helicopter he read the safety instruction leaflet rather than look out of the window!

We don't know where our next stop will be. It looked at one stage as if it would be Zurich, and we were worried about the challenges of learning Swiss German, although we were sure that Mark would have accomplished the feat long before we even learn to pronounce 'Gruezi miteinand' properly!



European Year of Languages 2001

"Moving away from a monolingual habitus"

The aims are:

- To increase awareness and appreciation among young people and adults, including parents, policy deciders and those responsible for language teaching, of the richness of Europe's linguistic heritage.
- To celebrate linguistic diversity and to promote it by motivating European citizens to develop plurilingualism, that is, to diversify their learning of languages including less widely used and taught languages, whilst also protecting and encouraging multilingualism in European societies.
- To encourage language learning on a lifelong basis, not only by creating awareness of its necessity, but also by providing sufficient information concerning ways and possibilities of learning, depending on regional and national situations and possibilities.

European Cultural Foundations

Contact details removed

## Bilingual dreaming

My brother Erik and my sister-in-law Sanna each speak their mother tongue (Finnish and Finland Swedish, respectively) with their daughter Tamara, two years two months old. The family lives in France. One night Tamara came to their bed and fell asleep between her parents. Suddenly, fast asleep, hugging her mother, she said in her dream:

'Tamára faller' ('Tamara is falling', in Swedish, and with the accent in her name on the second syllable). Then she turned 180 degrees, to hug her father, still fully asleep, and said: 'Tamara kaatuu' ('Tamara is falling', in Finnish, and with the accent in her name on the first syllable. Accent in Finnish is always in the first syllable).



Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, Denmark





## We need a 'label' for our daughter's language disorder

I am Swedish and I live with my British husband and our two children in England. Our son, aged eleven, speaks Swedish very well. Our daughter Helen, nearly eight, is beginning to use full sentences in Swedish. I speak Swedish to them all the time, except that with Helen I also repeat key words or phrases in English to emphasise what I am talking about. After years of knowing there's something 'not quite right' with Helen's general language development, I am now convinced she has a semantic/pragmatic language disorder.

The speech therapists we've seen have all been monolingual, except for one at Helen's playgroup who said I mustn't give up the Swedish. They have not blamed her problems on bilingualism, because it seems to have completely passed them by, and they were all surprised – the last one possibly embarrassed – when they finally realised. They have all done silly little tests and handed out silly tasks in English for us to do. Having finally decided what I think her problem is – roughly, anyway – we have discharged ourselves from speech therapy, with their blessing.

But where do we go from here? There may well not be a cure and possibly not very much we can do to help Helen, but I feel she needs a diagnosis, one that teachers and others will take seriously. Helen almost sounds average for her age and she seems intelligent – well, I would say that, wouldn't I! There just appears to be a small gap between her hearing/speaking and her brain. If the message gets across she's fine. It's when it doesn't that she risks people/teachers thinking she is stupid/rude/lazy/unwilling/inattentive etc. Helen also seems to have (slight) social problems in not understanding the correct codes.

I don't think her 'disorder' has anything to do with being bilingual, but at the same time it has to be mentioned, since English language

exercises are less appropriate for me to do with her. I need tips on what to do, in a way that can be done in any language.

Each school year I go in to see the new teacher to explain all this, but without a professionally issued 'label' I feel I'm not being taken seriously. Considering all this, I'm very proud of Helen's recent improvement in Swedish. She's trying – without being pushed – and she's got a good accent. There's just this little "gap" that is neither monolingual nor bilingual.

*Ann Giles, Stockport, England*

Semantic pragmatic disorder (sometimes called pragmatic disorder or pragmatic language impairment) is an ill-defined and controversial term and as the writer suggests, many involved in teaching children may have never heard of it or may have only a hazy notion of what it is. It is characterised by poor use of language in context; typically the person may be able to speak clearly, construct sentences and know the meaning of words, but tends to say odd things and respond in unexpected ways to, for example, questions. They typically have difficulty with figurative language, tend to interpret things literally, and have trouble with irony. This type of problem may be secondary to a more basic problem with language itself (for example anyone is likely to respond oddly if they haven't fully understood something), or may be a feature associated with autistic tendencies. Opinion is divided about whether it can genuinely exist in isolation, and not as a knock-on effect of something else.

As we don't know how the speech therapist arrived at her conclusion, it is difficult to know how Helen might fit into this. Any hint of autistic spectrum disorder would probably have been detected by now, so it is unlikely that this is the problem. However, it is suggested that Helen has always had something not quite right about her developing language and also that there is a gap between her hearing and brain. This might mean that she has some residual effects of an earlier language difficulty which in other ways has now resolved. It is very unlikely that being bilingual has anything to do with this, although some apparently pragmatic problems might arise when using the less dominant language if there are genuine difficulties with comprehending or expressing ideas in that language.

As regards what can be done, if the problem is mild, probably very little, other than explaining to teachers that it exists and that Helen is not really stupid/rude/etc. As Mrs Giles says, this

may be difficult without a professionally issued label, especially as this is a label used almost exclusively by speech and language therapists. I can only suggest that she tries to obtain a report from the most recent therapist which would confirm the diagnosis, or that she requests an assessment with a different therapist (this would probably have to be done privately). Further assessment would have the advantage of confirming whether or not any further help could be usefully given.

Although there are pockets of ignorance – I hope they are just pockets – and prejudice about bilingualism within the speech and language therapy profession, every effort is being made to sensitise students in training to the issues, and to recruit non-monolingual therapists. There are some people doing excellent work in bilingual communities in the UK.

Dr Carolyn Letts

Contact details removed

## Dual Language Montessori

Chicago 19th to 22nd April 2001

The American Montessori Society is hosting a special multicultural track at its annual convention this year. The multicultural track will feature several sessions of special interest to families of bilingual children and adolescents, and to the faculties and administrators of international schools and agencies. Examples of sessions include:

- immersion in English as a second language at a Montessori program in Mexico
- independent project work and cooperative learning for the potentially bilingual child
- using sign language to support second language development
- new drawing materials for the bilingual Montessori classroom
- 'Save our language, save our culture' Lithuanian and Spanish Montessori programs
- research by Montessori teachers serving potentially bilingual children.

This conference provides a unique opportunity to consider developmental bilingualism within the context of one of the most vibrant and productive educational traditions at work in the world today.

For more information, dial up AMS at [www.amshq.org](http://www.amshq.org) or fax AMS in New York at (212) 358-1256.

Reported by M.J. Rosanova who is the Director of the Montessori Bilingual Institute at InterCultura (MOBI) in Chicago: [www.intercultura.org](http://www.intercultura.org).



Please send us material which you think might be of interest to our readers. Remember the Newsletter is for you, but above all, by you!

## Language for homework?

We have 2 children, Leon (age 3½) and Max (age 9 months). I am German, my husband is Irish, we live in England and Leon goes to full-time nursery. We felt it was important to support the weaker language (German) at home by both speaking only German to our children, although we speak English amongst ourselves. We support German with videos, tapes, books, at least bi-annual visits to Germany etc. Despite these efforts, until he was nearly three Leon spoke to us in a very incomprehensible language which was partly English and partly made up and did not seem to relate to either language – although he understood German perfectly. For a short while, we were so desperate that we seriously considered changing to the *one parent – one language* model in the hope of separating out his German and improving his English.

A complete turnaround happened after our last visit to Germany last May. We insisted that our relations would not speak any English with us and made a big show of how people in Germany all spoke only German. Leon came back and started speaking in full sentences almost immediately. He now translates into English/German instantaneously and knows how to separate languages by people and on request. His grandmother almost cried when she found that she can now at last have conversations with her only grandson!

The model we adopted however will present us with a different challenge in future: how can we help with schoolwork and support Leon's learning when all he will learn is in English and we do not speak it at home? It seems an insurmountable problem unless my husband and I both start to speak English at home to help with the homework. Do you think it is acceptable that we introduce a 'homework language'? Although both children hear us speaking English to friends and family, we have (at least consciously) never addressed them in English before. I fear they then would feel it is unnecessary to keep up the German when talking to us.

Sabine Bowers, Manchester, UK

First, you have made a wise decision to bring up Leon and Max in German at home. They will surely have enough English in the street and shops, at school and on the TV screen to become very competent (and dominant) in English. Giving them German could well have career and cultural benefits, widening their cognitive, communication and curriculum repertoires. Bilingualism is a wonderful gift to give children.

Second, sticking to speaking German with your children is very wise. Supporting this with German media and particularly visits to Germany is excellent. They will be mostly immersed in English, so retaining periods where only German is spoken is important.

Third, like many parents of bilingual children, you are worried about helping with homework and school success. Many parents have not found the dual language home a problem when it comes to helping with homework. Indeed you may have an advantage, which will now be explained.

When a child is taught to add up, to use a computer or the concept of evolution in English, do they have to be re-taught in German for those skills, concepts and processes to be available in German? The answer is clearly 'no'. Once a skill or concept has been understood it is 'available' in either language (if the vocabulary is present to express it). So if Leon and Max have well developed German, they should have little difficulty in talking to you in German about their homework. Sometimes they will not have the exact term in German – but that is soon learnt.

Better still, there is a reason why you should talk to the children about their homework in German. The act of the children discussing school learning in German means there is some processing of meaning, or re-processing occurring in the thinking of the child. When the input has been in one language and we have to explain it in another language, then we are aiding the process of understanding and assimilation. There is a 'thinking through' that helps ensure a little deeper understanding and embedding.

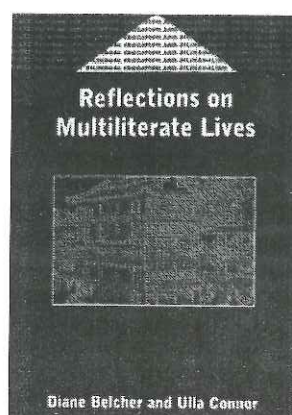
Rather than repeating the words in English and using terminology without fully comprehending, switching from English to German will help the child to process and sift meaning.

In schools in Wales this is increasingly becoming a strategy used to deepen learning. Called 'translanguaging', the idea is to vary the language of input and output. For example, a child reads something in English and then is required to write about it in Welsh. Not only are both languages being enhanced, so also is thinking and learning. This approach requires both languages to be reasonably well developed, but seems an effective strategy for increasing achievement.

So far from being a problem, talking about homework in German may well be advantageous beyond language practice. You may well be helping a deeper understanding of the curriculum to occur.

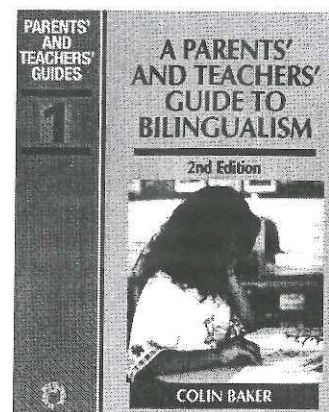
Colin Baker

Colin Baker is Professor of Education at the University of Wales, Bangor and a member of the BFN Editorial Board



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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.

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## GLOSSARY

**CALP = Cognitive/Academic Language Proficiency.**

The level of language required to understand academically demanding subject matter in a class.

## FUN WITH FOUR LANGUAGES... From page two

naturally to her: 'Are you get dressing?' (= are you getting dressed?) 'We have to wash we foots', and to my question 'Have you finished yet?' the answer came 'No I doesn't done!'

Sometimes she has translated literally from Chinese into English as: 'Open the water' (turn the tap on) but very occasionally she has mixed two languages together. However, she has invented her own original way of greeting people at Chinese New Year by mixing two different phrases from Mandarin and Cantonese: Anna says '恭喜快樂' (gong si fai loc). A bit like mixing 'Seasons Greetings' and 'Bon Noel' and saying 'Seasons Noel' !!

Anna started translating very early – if I couldn't understand what she was saying, she would swap languages, but since her third birthday she will sometimes explain what she means. One day we went to a party. 'Why are they all outside?' she asked. 'They're chatting' I replied. 'What's 'chatting'?' she asked. I told her the Chinese word: 傾偈 (king gai). She thought for a moment then said: 'Chatting is 傾偈 (king gai). Say, is that 講 (gong)?' I was astonished at her ability to translate so deeply at such an early age.

It's been a lot of hard work for me, keeping up with two foreign languages but it's all been well worth the effort. Anna starts school next year, so it's even more important to maintain Chinese as Baby Number Two is on its way and a lot will depend on which language Anna chooses to speak with the little one.