the bilingual family newsletter

news and views for intercultural people

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editorial

It seems incredible to think that the *BFN* is now entering its twenty-fifth year. Much has changed in that quarter of a century, and for many of us the world is probably more understanding and accepting of bilingualism and multilingualism than it was back then. However, confusion and misunderstanding still remain.

All three of our feature articles in this issue deal in some way with moving beyond simple, one-dimensional views of bilingualism. While it is common, for example, to think of translation as a natural and straightforward aspect of bilingual life, in reality it is a much more complex and diverse process. Cristina Banfi takes a close look in her article at how bilingual children may use translation in surprising ways, both to stand out or to fit in, depending on the context.

Meanwhile François Grosjean busts some favourite myths about bilingualism that will sound familiar to many bilingual 'veterans', and Karin Speedy reveals how she and her husband are bringing up their daughter trilingually, and rejecting many language orthodoxies in the process.

So much about bilingual and multilingual family life is about listening to the advice around you, doing your research, but then adapting what you have learned to what works for you. We are delighted that the *BFN* continues to provide a forum for intercultural folks to share their own unique experiences. With your help we can continue to do so for many years to come.

Sami Grover

Translation and the Bilingual Child

Cristina Banfi

Cristina Banfi

To most adults, translation is a job, and a hard one at that. However, for the bilingual child it is part of his or her reality and something that can be a great source of both fun and pride. Bilingual children don't need to be taught how to translate, they do so spontaneously and naturally.

Although translation may seem a straightforward and simple process, anyone who has reflected on it carefully knows that it is not. For one thing, knowing that there may be two names for any one object is not something that comes to us intuitively. At first, when children are learning their first language, they tend to be prejudiced in favour of assigning a single name to each object. The notion of a synonym is not something we are born with but rather something we develop with time. Other problems presented by translation include the challenges of multiple meanings for any one word; variable meanings depending on the context; or the impossibility of obtaining an exact translation for any word, let alone a sentence.

However, translation is a daily part of many people's lives and a much needed resource when it comes to facilitating understanding between people who do not share a common language. For the bilingual child it is simply a fact of life. It is important to clarify though that the bilingual child is not constantly translating every utterance from one language to the other, but rather they translate from one language to another as the context demands. It is a task that the child carries out without much effort and often with pleasure, provided certain circumstances apply.

A related phenomenon often confused with translation is that of code switching, where the child (or adult) switches from one language to the other, either in mid-sentence or between sentences. In these cases there is no evidence that any kind of translation is taking place. In fact, in many cases switching is used when the translation is not known by the speaker or doesn't even exist. In general, code switching takes place in communications between bilinguals who can make sense of the switching between languages. For the purposes of this article, we will concentrate on actual translation, where meaning is conveyed from one language into the other.

How Do Bilingual Children Use Translation?

Bilingual children use translation in different circumstances and for different purposes. Below we describe a number of different possible contexts for translation, and we illustrate these with examples

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Translation and the Bilingual Child

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observed in a three-and-a-half year old child who speaks English at home and Spanish at school and in the community. It's important to note that not all bilingual children will use all instances of translation shown here, and the pattern of use will probably change as the child grows up, or as circumstances change. However, we hope these examples are useful in identifying the role that translation plays in a bilingual child's life, and how parents can encourage its appropriate use.

Translations may be used for a number of different purposes. The following are just a few of the possibilities:

To be inclusive

A child may use translation to include people in the conversation who would otherwise be excluded. Bilingual children are aware of who speaks which language and who will not understand what is being said. If the child decides that a certain person should be included in a conversation, or should be aware of certain information, they will resort to translation to make this possible. In the following situation, for example, the child wishes to aid communication between her mother and her nanny:

Child (to nanny): *Querés la música ésta?* [Do you like this music?]
Child (to mother): *Paula likes this music.*

Translation may also be required when addressing a group of people and there is either no certainty as to which languages they understand, or they are known to be a mix of monolinguals and bilinguals.

To link two languages or domains.

The bilingual child is used to using his or her languages in different domains (e.g. at school, at home, in shops) depending on the circumstances. It is usually the case that a word, phrase, activity or song is first learnt in one of the languages. It is also often the case that the child wants to link two domains by telling the people in the other one about whatever has been learnt or done in the first. For example a child might learn a song at school and wants to sing it at home, so she finds the words to say what the song is about in English, and then sings it in Spanish.

> *The domains that the child inhabits are not always something that he or she wants to highlight. At times, it may be something to play down, if not hide altogether.*

Children will also display creative translation techniques making up phrases or words from those they already know to label objects when they lack the exact word. Parents can play an important role in supporting their child's attempt to link the two domains by providing the necessary language. In the following example, the child went to the cinema to watch a film about dancing frogs that was dubbed into Spanish. She was accompanied by her English-speaking father. Thus, although the film was in Spanish, the experience was in English. The following day, her mother asks her to explain to her caregiver what she did yesterday:

Child (to nanny): *Fui a ver una tele grande.* [I went to see a big telly.]

Later, in the car going to school, her mother asks her if she will tell her classmates about the experience:

Child: *But I don't know what 'cinema' is in Spanish.*
Mother: *'Cine.'*
Child: *And I don't know how to say 'dancing frogs'.*
Mother: *'Sapos bailarines.'*

To fit in.

The domains that the child inhabits are not always something that he or she wants to highlight. At times, it may be something to play down, if not hide altogether. In this sense, you will find that your child may feel inclined to translate names or other distinguishing features into the majority language. This may include the use of a name that exists in the other language (e.g. translating Richard into 'Ricardo'), but it may also include "translated" pronunciation. This use will be intentional and purposeful, and displays an ability of the bilingual child to perceive subtle distinctions in pronunciation that many adults will find almost impossible to detect

Dora's Alright: Language Mixing is Not a Problem

I wanted to respond to the letter in the last issue about Dora the Explorer [*Dora the Explorer: One Adventure Too Many?* - BFN 24:4] - We are an American/German family living in Germany. My daughters are ages 5 and 3 and they really like Dora. It's fun for us to watch Dora in English and learn a little bit of Spanish. And when German-speaking friends or Oma come over, we can watch Dora in German and they learn a little bit of English. I think that's a nice way to open up the language issue to others without making them feel uncomfortable.

To me there really isn't any issue about Dora mixing her languages. The amount of Spanish is so little that it doesn't seem to be a problem. It certainly doesn't bother the kids and now they can count to 10 in Spanish and know one or two other words.

They love the program, talking to Dora and helping her accomplish her tasks. I think that's much more important.

Claudia Ziersch, Germany

More information about Dora the Explorer can be found at:
www.nickjr.com/shows/dora/index.jhtml

or that may be disregarded as unimportant. So, don't be surprised to come across an exchange such as the following:

Child: *Dad, how do you say Harry Potter in Spanish?*
Father: *There is no translation. It's the same.*
Child: *No Dad, it's pronounced Harry Potter* [delivered with Spanish pronunciation].

To attract attention.

It has been known for children to seek the attention of adults or other children. A child can try to attract this attention in a number of conventional ways (shouting, interrupting the others' conversation, making a noise, by physical intrusion, etc.). However, when the child is bilingual, and particularly if they are addressing bilinguals, they may also switch languages to achieve their goal.

To show off.

The bilingual child is aware of the fact that he or she can switch back and forth between two languages. For the most part, and particularly in the early stages, they tend to think of it as a natural thing, and not necessarily something to boast about. However, the reactions of others around them, particularly adults, may indicate that this is a rather unusual ability. If the second language of the child is one of prestige and recognised as valuable by the surrounding society, the reactions will be positive and range from amusement and surprise to awe and even in some cases envy. For the most part, when a bilingual child uses translation to show off, it is simply done to indicate that they know two languages and that two names exist for the same thing, particularly if they believe their interlocutor doesn't:

Child: *Look how I say 'Snow White' in Spanish, Dad!*
Father: *How do you say 'Snow White' in Spanish?*
Child: *Blancanieves*

When asked to do it.

Adults or other children may ask the child to provide a translation for some word or expression. This may be done for very practical purposes or as a source of amusement. These situations are not usually problematic, although in some cases problems may arise. Many different things may happen: there may not be a translation, or there may be more than one, or the child may not know the translation, or it may be very difficult to provide a translation without a context. This may generate disappointment in the

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Notes from the OPOL Family

You Must Be Joking

Suzanne Barron-Hauwaert

Since we moved back to France I have noticed a few subtle changes in Marc and Nina's language use. They had no problem speaking 'proper' French before, after four years in French-language expat schools. What they did not have before was that indefinable way of talking 'like a local'.

Being bilingual is not only about knowing your grammar, or getting the accent right; there is also the all-important local knowledge of current slang and swearwords. Here are a few examples: Marc and Nina now say *'oui'* (*yes*) in a slower way, more like *'oueii'*, similar to how you would say *'yeah'* instead of *'yes'* in English, consequently driving parents and teachers mad. They also say *'ah bon?'* which means *'oh right?'* or *'oh really?'* which sounds a bit cheeky to my ears. Nina adds *'hyper'*, *'super'* or *'trop'* to many words, for example *'That film was trop-cool!'* It's contagious though and even I found myself the other day saying to my sister, *'You must read that book, it's super-cool!'*

At school they collect funny jokes and one-liners, especially one about a daft dog called Toto. They recount them to me after school, laughing not only at the silly joke, but the fact that I can't get the joke! When we watch television with the kids they often choose comedy shows. When jokes have cultural references, or rely on accents or nationality, I simply don't get it. We end up with three members of the family cracking up on the sofa laughing, while Gabriel (who is just too young) and I sit wondering what the joke is. The French often make jokes about people from Belgium, which I find offensive because my father-in-law is Belgian. But Jacques reminds me that every country has a neighbour who they joke about. *'Look at all those jokes the English make about the Irish,'* he says. I should tell you that Jacques has an excellent sense of humour in both languages, and he loves English comedy.

The older French cousins come to play often, bringing with them their jokes. One day 9-year-old Manon arrives with a sweet smile and asks me to choose my favourite word 1) *poubelle* 2) *balcon* or 3) *salopette* (a bin, a balcony or ski trousers). I can't see the link, or guess the game, so I pick number three. My nieces and nephews collapse on the floor laughing, while Marc and Nina translate: *'You chose pette, that means you fart!* (more laughter) *And if you had picked balcon that would mean you are con or very stupid! You should pick poubelle – belle means beautiful, not bin like you thought!'*

The children think it is very funny to have a mother who still does not know her '*gros mots*', or big bad words. I don't even recognize half of them. The other day the cousins helpfully wrote a list of the Top Ten Bad Words, so at least I would know. When the cousins sing current pop-songs together in the car I am furiously trying to translate them, in case the words are dodgy.

And worst of all Marc has become the language-policeman of the family. He always had a love of correct speech, ever since he was a little boy, but he tolerated his mother's low-level lazy French while we lived in mostly English-speaking countries. Now that we are back in France it bothers Marc that his sister and brother mix languages intentionally, or make mistakes. Marc is highly tuned to errors and he has no problem correcting my pronunciation, grammar or glaring errors in public. The other day we had a little friend over to play and we talked about going to the vet, and in mid-conversation Marc announced *'You know, Mummy, Simon can say vétérinaire better than you and he is only four and a half!'* I have to concede that he is right. I am guilty of being lazy with words that are similar in both languages and agree that he is way ahead of me in terms of languages.

As Marc and Nina move into the pre-teen age range, it's clear that they prefer to talk like their friends, and our parental controls are losing their effect. We cannot control their jokes, their slang or their accent, even if we want to. So far Marc and Nina know when and how to use slang appropriately, and rarely swear, but as they tell me with a glint in their eyes, they know all the words…

You can read more about how Suzanne and her family cope with bilingualism and bringing up their children on her blog:

http://opol-family.blogspot.com/

Translation and the Bilingual Child

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others and shame or embarrassment in the child.

To get their own way.

Children know that they can use language to their benefit and to 'get things done.' Bilingual children also know that by using a certain language they are more likely to get away with murder by pleasing their interlocutor (particularly if they are talking to an adult, and especially a grandparent!). The following is an instance of such 'manipulation' on the part of a bilingual child when being picked up from preschool by her mother:

Child: *Mami, ¿qué me trajiste?* [Mummy, what did you bring me?]
Mother: *What do you mean 'qué me trajiste'?*
Child (Looking puzzled, until she realizes her mistake): *Mummy, what did you bring me?*

For emphasis.

The equivalent form may be used in both languages, one after the other, to emphasise the message being communicated. It will typically be done in rapid succession, with no signalling of the switch:

Child: *Thank you, Mummy. ¡Gracias, Mamá!*

To be understood.

Bilingual children may switch language to be understood. This may be the case because their interlocutor is monolingual and the child is not certain which language he/she has spoken in. Alternatively, the child may be aware that the interlocutor is bilingual, but after trying to be understood without success (perhaps because he or she is mispronouncing, or mumbling, or speaking in a low voice), he or she will attempt the other language to get the message across.

Child: *The b____* [Unclear pronunciation]
Mother: *What?*
Child: *Las pelotas.* [The balls]

Just to play.

Bilingual children tend to be interested in playing with language, and particularly, with all their languages and their interactions. There may be little communicative purpose in their use of translation or the purpose may be to communicate something quite different from 'this is the translation of that.' You may find that the child will alternate the words for the same object or concept as

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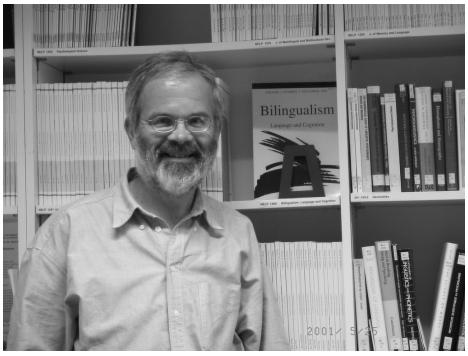
My Favourite Myths About Bilingualism

François Grosjean



The following article first appeared in the Bilingual and Bicultural Family Network's Multilingual Living Magazine*. We would like to thank Corey Heller for the opportunity to republish. For more information on* Multilingual Living Magazine*, please visit:* ***www.biculturalfamily.org***

François Grosjean is the author of *Life with Two Languages: An Introduction to Bilingualism* (Harvard University Press, 1982). Below he lists some of his 'favourite' myths about bilingualism:

Bilingualism is rare. WRONG. It has been estimated that more than half the world's population is bilingual, that is lives with two or more languages. Bilingualism is found in all parts of the world, at all levels of society, in all age groups.

Bilinguals have equal and perfect knowledge of their languages. WRONG. This is a myth that has had a long life! In fact, bilinguals know their languages to the level that they need them. Some bilinguals are dominant in one language, others do not know how to read and write one of their languages, others have only passive knowledge of a language and, finally, a very small minority, have equal and perfect fluency in their languages. What is important to keep in mind is that bilinguals are very diverse, as are monolinguals.

Real bilinguals have acquired their two or more languages in childhood. WRONG. One can become bilingual in childhood, but also in adolescence and in adulthood. In fact, many adults become bilingual because they move from one country, or region, to another and have to acquire a second language. With time, they can become just as bilingual as children who acquire their languages in their early years (minus the native speaker accent). In general, people become bilingual because life requires the use of two or more languages. This can be due to immigration, education, intermarriage, contact with other linguistic groups within a country, etc.

Real bilinguals have no accent in their different languages. WRONG. Having an accent or not in a language does not make you more or less bilingual. It depends on when you acquired your languages. In fact, some extremely fluent and balanced bilinguals have an accent in the one or the other language while other less fluent bilinguals may have no accent at all.

Bilinguals are born translators. WRONG. Even though bilinguals can translate simple things from one language to another, they often have difficulties with more specialized domains. The reaction people have is almost always, *"But I thought you were bilingual!*. In fact, bilinguals use their languages in different situations, with different people, in different domains of life (this is called the complementarity principle). Unless they learned their languages formally (in school, for example), they often do not have translation equivalents in the other language.

> *...mixing allows you to use the right one [language] without having to resort to a translation that simply does not do justice to what you want to express.*

Mixing languages is a sign of laziness in bilinguals. WRONG. Mixing languages, whether through code-switching or borrowing, is a very common behaviour in

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bilinguals speaking to other bilinguals. It is a bit like having coffee with milk instead of just straight black. The two language repertoires are available in bilingual situations and can be used at will. Many expressions and words are better said in one language or the other. Mixing allows you to use the right one without having to resort to a translation that simply does not do justice to what you want to express. This said, in other situations, bilinguals know that they cannot mix their languages (e.g. when speaking to monolinguals) and they tend to then stick to just one language.

All bilinguals are also bicultural. WRONG. Even though many bilinguals are also bicultural (they interact with two cultures and combine aspects of each), many others are monocultural (for example the inhabitants in the German speaking part of Switzerland often acquire three or four languages during their youth). Thus one can be bilingual without being bicultural, just as one can be monolingual and bicultural (e.g. the British who live in the USA).

Bilinguals have double or split personalities. WRONG. Bilinguals, like monolinguals, adapt their behaviour to different situations and people. This often leads to a change of language in bilinguals (e.g. a Japanese-English bilingual speaking Japanese to her grandmother and English to her sister). This change of language has led to the idea that bilinguals are "different" when speaking the one, or the other, language. But like monolinguals, it is the situation or the person one is speaking to which induces slight changes in behaviour, opinions, feelings, etc., not the fact that one is bilingual.

Bilingualism will delay language acquisition in children. WRONG. This is a myth that was popular back in the middle of the 20th Century. Since then much research has shown that bilingual children are not delayed in their language acquisition. This said, one should keep in mind that bilingual children, because they have to deal with two or more languages, are different in some ways from monolingual children, but definitely not on rate of language acquisition. As for bilingual children with language challenges (e.g. dyslexia), they are not proportionally more numerous than monolingual children with the same challenges.

If you want your child to grow up bilingual, you must use the One Person-One Language approach. WRONG. There are many ways of making sure a child grows up bilingual: caretaker 1 speaks one language and caretaker 2 speaks the other; one language is used in the home and the other outside the home; the child acquires his or her second language at school, etc. The critical factor is NEED. The child must come to realize, most of the time unconsciously, that he or she needs two or more languages in everyday life. This is where the One Person-One Language approach often breaks down, as the bilingual child quickly realizes that the weaker (often minority) language is not really needed (the caretakers or other family members often speak the other stronger language to one another, so why keep up the weaker language?). A better approach is that all family members use the weaker language at home, if at all possible, so as to increase the child's exposure to it and mark the language's main language territory.

When children grow up bilingual, they mix their languages. WRONG. If bilingual children interact in both bilingual and monolingual situations, then they learn to mix languages at certain times only. When they are with monolinguals (e.g. Grandma who doesn't speak any English), they quickly learn to speak just the one language, as communication would break down otherwise. It is important though that the situation be truly monolingual (and not a pretend situation, in which a bilingual parent pretends not to know the other language); children will make an effort to speak only one language if they feel it is vital for communication. Thus, caretakers will want to create natural monolingual environments where children will need, and hence use, just one language.

In The News...

UK Government Proposes Advice Packs for Migrants

The UK Communities Secretary, Hazel Blears, has proposed that local councils should provide information packs to new migrants, including advice on British customs, taboos, and even on how to queue:

"Information packs are a way of getting that info across - providing a rough guide to the country, the county and the city and helping to ensure that new arrivals avoid doing or saying things that might upset local settled communities or getting into trouble with the law."

The proposal is part of a wider range of measures that the government hopes will help new migrants settle into the country.

Examples of the type of advice that may be given to immigrants include:

- Don't drink and drive
- Don't drop litter
- Put bins out for collection on the correct day
- Make sure children attend school
- Get a licence before you go fishing
- Don't touch people without their permission
- Respect the law
- Avoid spitting in the street
- Don't play music loudly

Reactions to the proposal have been mixed, with some immigrant groups welcoming the measures as a useful tool to aid integration. Others, however, have rejected the idea as patronising.

One reader of the BBC's website, Veronica Everson, suggested that the advice would be equally applicable to UK citizens, who often fail to live by these rules themselves:

"A good idea to help integrate those wishing to come over to the UK to live and work. However, they will be led by example and so the pack should be sent to every household in the UK as a lot of British citizens need to be reminded about litter, drink/driving, spitting in the streets, respecting the law etc!"

Meanwhile, the BBC also approached migrants themselves to see what kind of advice they would give to others who are new to the country.

Shopkeeper Imtiaz Ahmed suggested that advice to follow the law certainly makes sense:

"In a country like Pakistan, if you are caught jumping a red light and you have money in your pocket, you assume you can bribe the policeman. But you can't get away with that here. There is a system that works, and that's what makes this country a great place."

He did, however, also concede that the UK's drinking culture may be a shock to many migrants.

Christopher Kozolkowski, a Polish labourer said that he'd advise any fellow immigrants to leave their prejudices at home:

"In London you have black and white, Arab and Jew, living right next to each other. You have to leave your prejudices at home because we're all the same underneath.."

The weather, of course, also got a look in, with Tanya Nelson, originally from Jamaica, warning newcomers to wrap up warm!

Source: bbc.co.uk

Translation and the Bilingual Child

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they are playing, simply talking to themselves as children often do.

Child: *'Purple' is 'violeta' in Spanish.*
Mother: *Yes, that's right.*
Child: *'Purple', 'violeta', 'Purple', 'violeta'...*

As these examples show, translation is, for bilingual children, part and parcel of learning their languages. This obviously is not a sign that a child will ultimately become a translator, but simply one more way of making sense of the world and languages around them.

All the examples provided here are from an English/Spanish bilingual. The author would be grateful to receive other examples for the same languages and for others language combinations. Please contact via: info@multilingual-matters.com

In The News...

Transitional Bilingual Programs in Higher Education

Fairleigh Dickinson University, in New Jersey, USA, is this year launching a new 'transitional bilingual' business degree that is taught in Korean to start with, then Korean and English in the second year, before moving to a sole emphasis on English.

The program is based on an existing Spanish-language program at the university, and differs from the traditional approach to teaching students from abroad, in which students first enrol in English classes, before then starting their credit-bearing courses all in English.

Joy Peyton, of the Center for Applied Linguistics in Washington welcomed the idea:

"When you're at the university level, you need to learn a lot of content and you don't have a lot of time. You [a student speaking another language] need to learn the same amount of content every other student does, so why waste the time trying to get to a certain proficiency level in English before you start studying certain content?"

Peyton did suggest, however, that it would be good to see a continuation of tuition in both languages throughout the course, rather than eventually phasing out the Korean.

Source: InsideHigherEd.com
Link: fdu.edu

Nurturing Natural Multilingualism

Karin Speedy

Karin's daughter, Aliyah.

The birth of my daughter, Aliyah, nearly 18 months ago now, was certainly the most wonderful experience of my life. While her early arrival meant that we hadn't set her cot up, or even had my bag ready for the hospital, we did have a linguistic strategy in place – or so I believed!

I had given quite some thought on how best to ensure that she grow up trilingual – English/French/Arabic. I am a native English speaker (a New Zealander) with "near-native" competency in French (I am a university lecturer in French) and my partner, Youcef, is an Algerian who grew up in Paris. For him, French and Arabic compete as first languages and now, after around ten years of living in Anglophone countries, his English is also very good. Our *"langue de couple"* was always French but, since our move to Australia three years ago, this has become more and more mixed, with code-switching mid-sentence the norm rather than the exception.

As a linguist, I was aware of the various theories on raising bilingual children and thought that, on an individual basis, it would be best for each of us to use our respective mother tongues with Aliyah and have French as our home language. This notion went out the window within hours of the birth as, when alone with my beautiful babe, I looked into her eyes and began whispering to her and singing softly to her in French! It just seemed the most natural thing in the world. *"OK,"* I thought to myself, *"we'll just use French at home and she'll pick up English from those around her."*

The next day, my mother flew in from New Zealand and she and Youcef came to visit us in the hospital. Suddenly, we were all speaking English. Youcef was cuddling his little daughter and singing to her in English. Grandma was cooing away at her in English, and I found myself comforting her in English too. This was going to be more complicated than I had anticipated.

When we were allowed to leave the hospital, we returned home to what was temporarily an English-speaking environment. My monolingual mother was staying for a few weeks to help me with my new baby and it seemed more polite to use English in her company. Youcef was quite happy to use English with Aliyah, though he did begin calling her *"Bintee"* (my daughter in Arabic) and using some simple Arabic phrases and commands. When we found ourselves alone, we would then switch to French. I continued to sing to Aliyah in French and, in those middle of the night feed-times, French was definitely the language of choice.

As I had maternity leave, I decided to take 5-week old Aliyah back to New Zealand to stay with my family. We have made four trips back and forth across the Tasman since then. This has meant that she has spent quite a lot of time in a purely English-speaking milieu. (This hasn't stopped her, however, from picking up the Maori haka and performing it on cue as soon as she hears the opening words *"kamate kamate"*!)

> *...the fact that we were not adhering to any kind of fixed linguistic strategy began to play on my mind. Were we doing the right thing?*

While speaking to Aliyah in English in all social settings in New Zealand, I did continue to use French when alone with her – feeding times, sleep times, at night and when driving with her in the car. Nevertheless, the fact that we were not adhering to any kind of fixed linguistic strategy began to play on my mind. Were we doing the right thing? Were we disadvantaging our daughter by not sticking to the One Parent-One Language plan, or even the approach of having one home language?

Back in Australia, I thought things would sort themselves out. We'd just have to make an effort to use more French and more Arabic around Aliyah. However, it soon became clear to me that neither Youcef nor myself were going to be able to

limit our linguistic interactions with our daughter to our mother tongues or to a single 'home language'. In our household, it just isn't natural!

What has happened, rather, is that we speak whatever pops out at the time. Sometimes this is a choice governed by external factors, such as the presence of English-speaking, French-speaking or Arabic-speaking visitors. Phone conversations with grandparents also tend to have some impact on the language of choice, in the short-term at least. When the grandparents in Paris call, Aliyah hears more Arabic and French. When the Kiwi grandparents call, English is preferred. Most often, however, language selection is spontaneous.

One tool that has proved important in Aliyah's linguistic development is French cartoons. Youcef's parents sent us several parcels of French DVDs – the cartoon series of *Heidi* in French and several *Tintin* episodes. Aliyah took to these immediately – she seemed fascinated by the language and watched (and still watches) them all the way through. For us, they provided a context for discussion in French. And for Aliyah, they have been the source of her first French words!

Indeed, we had long wondered what her first words would be. Would they be English? Or French? Or even Arabic? As it happened, like almost all children, Aliyah's first words were *"Daddy"*, *"baby"* and *"Mummy"*. And all were most definitely English. What she said next, though, was interesting – *"Heidi"* and *"Tintin"*, both in the most perfect of French accents! So far, as her vocabulary has grown, she has shown a preference for English words, though some are French such as "balle" rather than "ball". While she certainly understands Arabic – she does exactly what she is asked when addressed in this language – she does not, as yet, use it actively. This will hopefully come, perhaps later this year when she will travel to France to meet her paternal grandparents.

As for her French, I was thrilled to discover that she is perfectly at home in my *"langue de cœur"*, when I took her on a 10-day trip to New Caledonia this month. As soon as the plane touched down at Tontouta airport, my brain switched to French mode and, it would seem, so did hers. For ten days, Aliyah heard no English, not even from me. I was a bit worried that this would perturb her, but not at all. She listened intently to everyone, tried to participate in conversations in her own 'language', and apparently understood all that was said to her. She was able to follow directions given in French seemingly effortlessly.

When *Dora the Explorer*, a favourite in English, became *Dora l'Exploratrice* Aliyah remained unfazed. Better still, she was able to interact and communicate with other children. We were staying with a French friend of mine whose three-year old son became Aliyah's "big brother".

> *...it soon became clear that we weren't going to limit our linguistic interactions with our daughter to a single 'home language'. In our household, it just isn't natural!*

The two were inseparable, playing all kinds of games together and sometimes just dissolving into fits of giggles – language was never an issue. Extraordinarily, Aliyah even demonstrated an early talent for interpreting. When listening to a conversation between Tom and his babysitter, she heard *"Maman"* and *"Papa"* and instantly said *"Mummy"* and *"Daddy"*. On another occasion, she heard *"voiture"* and said *"car"*. Curiously, when we arrived home, she began to call Daddy *"Papa"*.

While it is certainly too early to draw any definitive conclusions from our experience, the trip to New Caledonia assuaged any lingering doubts on my part that our rather laissez-faire approach to raising a multilingual child was the wrong one, for us at least. The fact that Aliyah has been exposed to code-switching from birth and has witnessed her parents negotiate different social settings in different languages would appear not to have hindered her language development. She comprehends English, French and Arabic and understands the different contexts in which they are used.

Rigidly sticking to one 'home language', or only using one's mother tongue create artificial linguistic boundaries that have very little to do with the real world. These approaches have thus far proved unnecessary, even undesirable, in our case. Indeed, it is a good thing to remember that in many places, especially here in the Pacific, multilingualism is a perfectly natural phenomenon!

This is not to say, however, that we will not change our behaviour as Aliyah grows. Flexibility is going to be the key. Even now I have noticed that over the past few weeks I have begun saying things in English (or French) and then repeating them in the other language. This is not something that I have done consciously. In fact, only when I sat down to write this piece did I realize that I was doing it! I also know that when Aliyah begins to read and write, we will almost certainly need to adopt a more structured approach to her language learning. Until then, we'll just keep on nurturing her natural multilingualism, something that, as a child of mixed cultural backgrounds, she may very well embrace as part of her own individual identity.

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Glossary

Accent: People's pronunciation which may reveal, for example, which region, country or social class they come from.

Acculturation: The process by which an individual or a group adapt to a new culture.

Active Vocabulary: This refers to the actual number of words that people use as opposed to a passive vocabulary which is words they understand. Native language speakers often have an active vocabulary of between 30,000 and 50,000 words. Their passive vocabulary may extend up to 100,000 words or more. In foreign language learning, reasonable proficiency is said to be achieved when someone attains an active vocabulary of between 3000 and 5000 words with a passive vocabulary of up to 10,000 words.

Acquisition Planning: Part of formal language planning where interventions are made to encourage families to pass on their minority language, and schools to produce more minority language speakers.

Additive Bilingualism: A situation where a second language is learnt by an individual or group without detracting from the development of the first language. This is the opposite of subtractive bilingualism.

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