

# The Bilingual Family Newsletter



News and Views for Intercultural People  
Editors: Sami Grover & Marjukka Grover

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## EDITORIAL

All too often bi/multilinguals are asked the following:

*‘What exactly is the point of preserving your Spanish/ German/ Arabic/ Urdu?’*  
(delete as appropriate)

In a world where English predominates, monolinguals can find it hard to understand that language can mean so much more than *just* being a tool for communication. For many of us, our multiple languages are important links to our heritage and our cultural identities. They are part of who we are.

In this issue we hear from David Hough and Alister Tolenoa on a language program in Micronesia that is empowering the inhabitants of a tiny island to preserve their own language. This article is a shining example of how language can be a ‘carrier’ of so much cultural heritage and indigenous knowledge.

On page two, Leena Huss also discusses the importance of language to an individual’s sense of identity:

*‘Without Finnish and my Finnish history, I was a pale shadow of myself...’*

She argues clearly and effectively why it was so important for her to speak with her children in her mother tongue, something that many readers will no doubt identify with.

Whilst it would be too much to hope that the contents of this issue could help put an end to the ever present ‘*why bother?*’ argument, we hope that it will at least provide some encouragement to those multilingual families struggling against the indifference, and sometimes open hostility, of their neighbours, colleagues, relatives, teachers or healthcare professionals.

Sami Grover

## PRESERVING LANGUAGE FROM THE BOTTOM UP: A Case Study From Micronesia

David A. Hough and Alister Tolenoa



**Official efforts to preserve a language, or anything else for that matter, are often led from the top down by government and experts who may not be aware of the needs and wishes of local populations. Here David Hough and Alister Tolenoa describe a project that aims to do the reverse, engaging the local population of a small island in the preservation of their own language.**

This is a story about a small Micronesian island and how islanders, along with Japanese college students, are working together to help preserve both the local language and culture. It is part of a three-year project funded by a grant from the Japan Ministry of Education and Science, entitled *The Kosrae Dictionary and Curriculum Development Project*.

Kosrae is a small island in Micronesia with a population of just under 9000. It is the easternmost state in the Federated States of Micronesia. With a landmass of approximately 107 sq. kilometres, it is a tall volcanic island that receives ample rain from the trade winds and, as a result, is extremely green and fertile. Linguistically, the Kosraean language is probably closest to Marshallese, although the two languages are not mutually intelligible. The next closest language is

Pohnpeian, with Kiribati, Nauruan and Chuukese also related.

Much of Kosrae’s early history has been lost because of colonisation and depopulation. From 1840–1880 the population decreased from about 7000 to 300 due to diseases brought by Western whaling ships. Direct colonial rule followed, first under Spain until 1898, then Germany until 1914, Japan from 1914 until 1945, and following that the United States. The legacy of this colonialism is still very much alive.

Today, the island is part of the Federated States of Micronesia, a nation that is nominally independent from the US. Kosrae is made up of four municipalities and six villages. Each village has an elementary school. In addition, there is one high school on the island. The College of Micronesia also has a small campus on Kosrae for students who are unable to attend the main campus on Pohnpei. With such a small population and a limited educational budget, it is difficult to produce sufficient teaching materials in Kosraean. At present, most materials are in English. Given this problem, in 1995, Alister Tolenoa, Director for Instructional Services at the Kosrae State Department of Education, requested assistance in developing Kosraean language materials for use in grades K–12. Of particular concern was that despite a bilingual education policy, the preponderance of English–language materials in the schools is helping to make Kosraean an endangered language. Likewise, there is concern about the culture. Traditional subsistence activities,

*Continued on page 2*

Letters



### Multicultural Adoption

Reading the letter re: bilingualism and adoption in Vol 20. No.1 made me think that our own experience might be useful.

My husband, myself and my adopted son, Ben, lived in Thailand. I and Ben were based mainly in Bangkok and my husband in the south, travelling up to stay with us regularly. Ben spoke English with me and Thai with Boonya, my husband. I spoke reasonable Thai having lived in the country for many years. We fostered Bin, who was Thai. I wanted him to learn English so he could feel fully part of this bilingual family but I also wanted him to feel at home and understand what was going on. I therefore adopted the strategy of saying things to him in English and then repeating them in Thai and vice versa.

When he had been with us for a month or so he started to attend an international summer school where English was the medium of instruction. We continued the used of both Thai and English at home until he felt comfortable with me just speaking English.

I was amazed by how painless and quick this transition was. I think two things played a part. One was the summer school but the other was undoubtedly Bin's determination to be part of the family. He observed that Ben always spoke to me in English and that this was part of family life. He was determined to do the same thing so the motivation to learn was high.

Now we live in The Gambia and Bin has a smattering of Wolof as well as English and Thai. He goes to an English language school but, interestingly, Ben and Bin still speak to each other primarily in Thai!

I hope this story is useful to other families. Perhaps what it illustrates is that you have to assess your own situation and make the most of it. Saying things in two languages was possible for me and so I made use of it.

**Tracey Martin**  
**The Gambia**

### Preserving a Language... Continued from page 1

for example, are giving way to increased proletarianisation, stratification and out-migration to Guam, Hawaii and the US mainland.

In 2001, David Hough of the Shonan Institute of Technology in Fujisawa, Japan, began working with Mr Tolenoa and the Kosrae Department of Education (DOE) to revise an out-of-print dictionary of Kosraean and put it on computer database. The purpose of the database was threefold:

- to allow for ongoing input and revision
- to facilitate small print runs as needed
- to make it available via the internet to some 2000 Kosraeans living off-island.

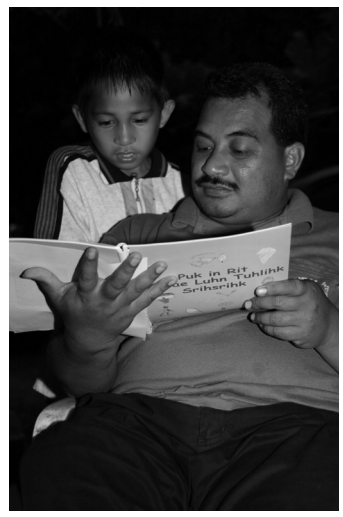
In addition, the DOE set up a working group of educators and community leaders who met to plan what materials they needed. Their first priority was for grade-appropriate dictionaries for the schools. In addition to the out-of-print dictionary, which is being put on database, these included a children's picture dictionary, a wordbook and a junior dictionary. Members of the working group also felt that it was extremely important to involve Kosraean students in all of the projects as much as possible – in essence, to make them the authors. In this sense, the project is a bottom-up approach to language preservation and enrichment.

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*“... it was extremely important to involve Kosraean students in all of the projects as much as possible – in essence, to make them the authors.”*

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Mr Tolenoa and Dr Hough decided to begin with the children's picture dictionary. Mr Tolenoa arranged for a special assembly of first and second graders from two elementary schools for this. First, he reviewed the Kosraean alphabet. Following this, he had pieces of paper and boxes of crayons passed out to each student. He then assigned different letters of the alphabet to each student and asked them to draw something representing each of their letters. The students were then asked to think up what they considered to be funny or interesting sentences in Kosraean to go along with their pictures. The students wrote their sentences on separate pieces of paper, sometimes accompanied by additional pictures. After completing the pictures



and being given candies – students were also allowed to keep their pencils and boxes of crayons – there was a group photo session so that class pictures could also be included in the dictionary.

In some cases, the pictures the children wrote didn't fit with the sentences. Here, Mr Toneloa's children offered to help. The pictures and sentences were then brought back to Japan where 11 Shonan Institute of Technology (SIT) students began work on producing the actual dictionary. Drawings which were not selected for the inside pages were included on the front and back covers so that all of the students would have their pictures included somewhere in the book. For the SIT students, the project offered them the opportunity to combine hands-on use of computers with real-world experience in helping to preserve indigenous language and culture. It also gave them the opportunity to get a feel for the culture both through the pictures that the elementary school students had drawn, and through subsequent email correspondence between Japan and Kosrae.

The student pictures were very reflective of the culture and the everyday life on Kosrae. They ranged from pictures of special hand-made sticks used to pluck fruit from trees, to local foods such as breadfruit and taro. The Kosrae DOE felt that this type of cultural input was extremely valuable. As noted earlier, most textbooks used in Kosrae schools are commercially published materials from the US. As a result, students are presented with an idealised version of life in America. In contrast, things Kosraean are often looked down upon. US textbooks present other problems as well. Not only do they use English as the medium and content of instruction, they are also replete with American cultural values. This type of cultural assimilation – often implicit, sometimes explicit – is seen by the Kosrae DOE as a threat to

indigenous language preservation and growth.

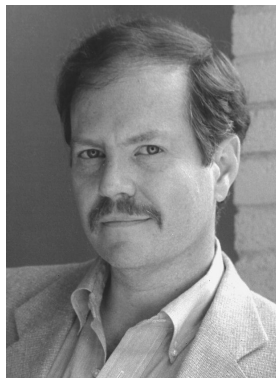
Throughout the entire development process, SIT students were in frequent e-mail contact with Kosrae DOE to verify what was appropriate and to make changes as necessary. This allowed for the inclusion of pictures and sentences, which reflected culturally appropriate humour, such as 'The bird pooped on the baby.' It was also decided by the working group that the dictionary should be trilingual – in Kosraean, English and Japanese. This was in keeping with national language policy guidelines, which call for both English and Japanese to be taught as second languages in schools. SIT students helped in this effort by translating part of the text and preparing a trilingual glossary.

After completing the first edition, SIT students printed out, cut and bound 40 copies, which were then pilot tested in Kosrae. Pilot testing is now complete and final revisions are being made so that the books can be used in local schools starting in the 2003 academic year. Initial reaction to the Children's Picture Dictionary has been extremely positive. Not only is it the first full-color text in Kosraean, it is also the first time that young Kosraean schoolchildren have been both artists and authors in the creation of their own learning materials.

Following the completion of this first project, some SIT students began to make cardboard pop-ups of the dictionary pages which can be used as supplements for storytelling in classrooms and libraries. In addition to the Children's Picture Dictionary, work has begun on other grade-appropriate materials, including a Junior Dictionary for third–fifth graders, which began in the summer of 2002. Based on a 1500-word frequency list of Kosraean words that appear in current school materials, the dictionary will include pictures of local artifacts and plants. In designing this dictionary, a number of problems were encountered, including the fact that there are no words in Kosraean for parts of speech. After considering various options, it was decided to create new terminology based on local words. Thus, the word for noun is a compound which means "thing one", and the word for verb means "thing which moves". Other projects include the construction of a website which will allow access to Kosraeans living off island, and a computer-based spelling game – the first in Micronesia. All of these projects follow a similar bottom-up approach to first-language literacy and maintenance bilingualism.

## NEWS FROM THE USA: NY Bucks The Trend

James Crawford



On taking office last year, New York mayor Michael Bloomberg made no secret of his distaste for bilingual education. He announced an initiative to 'reform' programmes for teaching the city's 144,000 English language learners, voicing his personal preference for 'total immersion'. He reminded New Yorkers that 'this is an English-speaking country, like it or not,' and accused the school 'bureaucracy' of refusing to teach the language. He described bilingual education as an employment programme for teachers who 'couldn't get a job' otherwise because of their limited English skills.

So when Bloomberg's plan was finally announced this summer, language-minority advocates were prepared for the worst. They were pleasantly surprised.

Rather than dismantle bilingual education, which now serves about 40% of English language learners in New York, the plan provides an additional \$20 million to improve existing programmes. Innovations will include:

- Hiring more than 100 'instructional support specialists' to train teachers and ensure that children learning English are provided with the same rigorous curriculum available to other students.
- Initiating after-school tutoring programmes.
- Creating an assessment and monitoring structure to ensure that schools are held accountable for students' progress.
- Opening 14 dual language schools (also known as two-way bilingual education) designed to promote bilingual fluency for both language-minority students and native English speakers.

While numerous details remain to be worked out, education activists generally hailed the outcome as a victory – especially in the current political climate.

Two years ago, the city came under pressure from Ron Unz, the software millionaire who has successfully promoted ballot measures outlawing bilingual education in other states.

Numerous pundits and political figures, including Bloomberg, were sympathetic to the idea of an English-only mandate in New York.

But Unz's foray also united local supporters of bilingual education. Hispanic and Asian organisations established a coalition to help educate the public about the benefits of teaching in two languages. They did research, produced reports, organised rallies, and worked with news media to get the message out. They also mobilised political allies at a time when Bloomberg's support was sinking in minority communities, especially among Latinos who had helped to get him elected. Over time, the coalition's efforts at public outreach played a decisive role in changing the mayor's mind.

Unfortunately, this kind of outcome and the pro-bilingual activism that produced it remain rare. While English-only school initiatives have passed only in California, Arizona and Massachusetts thus far, the three states enroll 43% of the nation's English language learners. Opponents worked hard to defeat these measures and tried a variety of strategies to win over voters. Still they were badly defeated. Unlike the New York coalition, none of the organised campaigns attempted to explain or defend bilingual education. In effect, they surrendered the intellectual battle without firing a shot. Perhaps there is a lesson here.

According to reports by state officials, in 2001 only one in four American children whose English is limited received any kind of native-language instruction. Although comparable figures are lacking, this is probably the lowest level since the 1970s.

Bilingual education remains most widely available in states like New York, where immigrants have traditionally settled and where schools are most experienced in serving immigrant students. But in the states with the fastest-growing immigrant populations, bilingual programs are virtually nonexistent. These include Georgia (where English learner enrollments over the past decade increased by 901%), North Carolina (776%), Nebraska (719%), Alabama (554%) and South Carolina (481%).

This is an ominous trend for the future of effective language programmes. While the victory in New York is encouraging, it is likely to be an aberration – unless bilingual educators in other states get better organised.

**For further information on bilingual education and related issues, visit James Crawford's Language Policy Web Site at:**

***[Http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/jwcrawford/](http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/jwcrawford/)***



## HELP, HELP...

Guten Tag! Bun di! Bonjour! Buenos dias! God dag!

I am a Bilingual (German/English) African-American linguist, married to a trilingual (German/ English/ French) European man who is personally and professionally committed to ensuring that that the voices of bilingual and bicultural families are not only heard but respected. I am conducting an international study on people of bicultural/bilingual parentage. I am looking for volunteers who fit the following description:

- You are 18 years or older.
- The native language of your mother is different from that of your father.
- The nationality or ethnicity of your mother is different from that of your father.
- You currently live in Germany, England, Switzerland or the United States.

If you or someone you know fits the above description, please contact me at the following address:

Contact details removed

## HUMOUR, HUMOUR



### Bad Press

Nadia (my three-year old daughter who speaks Arabic, English and Serbian) threw a serious tantrum when she saw her Yugoslavian grandmother holding an Arabic newspaper.

*'This newspaper is not for you - it is not Yugoslavian!'*

Grandma tried to explain that she was just looking at photographs, but Nadia wasn't convinced, she grabbed the newspaper from her grandma's hands explaining that only Mammy and Daddy know how to read Arabic!

Nadia started recognising Arabic alphabet very early and she is now desperate to learn to distinguish the Serbian alphabet (which is Cyrillic) from the English.

**Ljiljana Anicic, Surbiton, UK**

## CREATING A BILINGUAL FAMILY IN A 'MONOLINGUAL' COUNTRY

by Leena Huss



*Leena's sons Mikael, Mattias & Markus, and Mikael's wife Li Li*

Throughout Europe families face similar problems when trying to raise their children bilingually. Newsletters in several countries<sup>1</sup> tell the same tale, regardless of official policy or of the languages concerned. Other people's negative attitudes towards bilingual upbringing overshadow family life. However, some parents stubbornly stick to their aim, link up with other families in a similar situation and fight against the prejudices of the surrounding world. Many parents feel that it is a worthwhile effort, and the rewards of family bilingualism are described in bright colours. Parents maintain that the double linguistic heritage belongs to their children, connects the children to past generations and strengthens their identities.

When I moved from Finland to Sweden, I went through the metamorphosis that so many emigrants experience: from being a 'normally competent' person into a 'deviant', 'different' human being. Suddenly, one belongs to those who are 'not from here', do not speak in the same way or have the same cultural and social knowledge as everybody else. I had the advantage of knowing some Swedish when I arrived but in practice my skills were not nearly adequate. A year or two passed before I could relax and let the words flow freely. After a while I noticed another change: my own mother tongue was beginning to fall away. Suddenly it became difficult to remember words, or to explain something that I had learned in Sweden. At the same time, I worried that I would never learn to speak Swedish as well as I had spoken Finnish when I left Finland. Would my fate be 'OK Swedish - OK Finnish', a bit worse than everybody else in both languages? In view of this, I started reading Finnish books again, and later began studying Fenno-Urgic languages at the university - something that had never occurred to me when I lived in Finland.

When my first child was born in 1974, I had just moved to Sweden. I had not yet begun worrying about my Finnish, but I felt clearly handicapped in Swedish. I felt that Finnish was the only language that I could speak to my child. My husband agreed, so I did not have to cope with the problem of an unsympathetic partner, something that many immigrant parents encounter. I have since met many unsympathetic people, like a physician at the child welfare centre who indirectly discouraged me from speaking anything other than Swedish to my child. I have often wondered how much influence doctors, teachers and other so-called authorities wield. They will, without having the least experience or knowledge of bilingual development 'give advice', and sometimes even orders, about how parents should deal with language issues. It is like hiring your doctor to repair the car.

In our case, the indirect warning did not matter, we had made up our minds. Together we perused everything written

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*"... so-called authorities[ ...] will, without having the least knowledge of bilingual development 'give advice', and sometimes even orders, about how parents should deal with language issues."*

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about child bilingualism that we came across. In the mid-1970s, the selection was limited, and the scholarly publications were unsuitable for use by parents. However, we did find some articles recommending the one parent - one language principle. This suited us very well and we felt it was the natural thing to do.

My arrival in Sweden coincided with large scale migration from Finland and intense debate about the schooling of immigrant children. Skutnabb-Kangas' view that the mother tongue of immigrant children should be protected created a favourable climate for bilingual families and the founding of 'home language classes' with mother-tongue-medium instruction for several of the larger language groups.

Regardless of the volatility of the debate, our micro-level bilingual programme proceeded as planned. Swedish was established as the language between father and son, and Finnish between mother and son. This pattern was well established when our second son was born. We parents always spoke Swedish together, but my husband showed a keen interest in Finnish, and had learned enough to understand what I said to the children. However, the fragile balance of

language use was soon disturbed by the overwhelming inflow of the majority language. In spite of me spending a lot of time with the children when they were small, I noticed that the boys' Swedish rapidly became stronger. In such an ideologically monolingual society it was difficult to maintain another language, especially a somewhat stigmatised language like Finnish.<sup>2</sup> I had to make a special effort if we wanted the children to grow up bilingual. I felt that the Finnish language was important for my own sense of well-being: it was what made me able to continue being *me*. Without Finnish and my Finnish history, I was a pale shadow of myself with an incomplete language.

From the mid 1980s, the impact of the 'Don't Forget Swedish!' doctrine (Hyltensham, 1986), to be followed by 'Do Forget the Home Language!' in the 1990s (Nauclér, 1997), was noticeable in the press. Articles warned against too much emphasis on the mother-tongue of minority children. I had by then met other Finnish parents who were eager to discuss family bilingualism and who found it exceedingly difficult to fight negative attitudes in their surroundings. A group of us decided to found an association for parents in bi- and multilingual families and the association was soon busy organising meetings and information campaigns.<sup>3</sup>

Concerns about meeting prejudice were initially only a matter for the adults. For the boys bilingualism was completely natural. Both spoke Finnish with me, sometimes more or less mixed with Swedish, but still Finnish. With my husband, they spoke Swedish without any other elements mixed in. Their friends were Swedish-speaking, as was all of our environment. Discounting a couple of annual visits to Finland and some of my Finnish friends, I was the only source of Finnish for the boys during their early years. The linguistic situation changed dramatically when the boys were three and six years old. We moved to Helsinki. In Finland, a country with two national languages, we suddenly faced the choice between Finnish- and Swedish-medium day-care. We were initially attracted to the idea of a Swedish one, but decided to opt for Finnish. We wanted the children to retain their 'standard Swedish' accent and thus avoid complications when we moved back to Sweden. We also knew that the boys' Finnish must be strengthened. Our eldest son went to a Finnish school for two years. During our years in Helsinki the boys developed native fluency in Finnish and very soon dropped any Swedish borrowings. Their

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## Too much of a good thing?

**We are a German-US American family currently living in England. I speak German with our son Max (born 1999). As I do not work outside the home, this is his main language; his English comes from his father in the evenings and on weekends, as well as from friends.**

**So far our *one-parent-one-language* approach seems to working well. Max is proficient for his age in both languages, speaking in full sentences and picking up complex words and grammar. He is also very particular about who speaks what language to him and gets upset if one of us should use the 'wrong' language or, heaven forbid, a third language altogether.**

**However, things are about to change drastically, as we are considering a move to Ukraine. In addition, I will be returning to paid employment while my husband stays home with Max.**

**The two main languages in Ukraine for us will probably be Russian and English, with Ukrainian thrown in and German coming fourth. I speak all these languages, my husband speaks English, French and some German and plans on learning Russian. Any nursery or playgroup Max might go to is likely to be either Russian- or English-speaking.**

**My main concern is that Max's overall language skills might deteriorate and, specifically, that he will lose his proficiency in German, as he will see me less and hear less German overall. Although I would love for him to learn Russian and/or Ukrainian, I do wonder whether it might not be best to stick to German and English, especially as we are only likely to be in Ukraine for 2-3 years. This would mean, for instance, finding a German-speaking nanny/helper rather than my preferred choice of a Russian- or Ukrainian-speaking one. Maybe I am needlessly concerned and he will pick up the third and fourth language as easily as he did the first two.**

**Does the editorial board have any advice or comments? We would also be interested to hear from other families with similar experiences.**

*Elisabeth Waechter  
Faringdon, UK*

Contact details removed

I respond to your very interesting query based on comparative cases of hundreds of other families I have worked with and on my research for my books *Raising Multilingual Children* (2001), and *The Multilingual Mind* (2002).

It sounds as if Max has a high aptitude for foreign languages, which is certainly a gift (fewer than 10% of the world's population enjoy such a talent). Your consistency with a *one-person, one-language* strategy has certainly been of help, and the fact that the minority language (German) was spoken by his (as-of-yet) stay-at-home mother has given him a firm basis in both English and German.

However, as you point out, changing strategies on a small child can be a very drastic decision. Consistency in language strategy is very important for small children, but especially for those under (about) the age of five. It is typical for a bilingual/multilingual child to have a 'normal' mixing stage, and then begin to separate and label his languages ('Mommy says it like this, daddy says it like that') and then to name his languages ('Mommy speaks German, daddy speaks English'). Families can change their language strategies, but generally, until a child can name his languages, this is a very difficult and often traumatic task.

Once Max does name German 'German' and English 'English', you can strike a deal with him, and bargain a third, fourth or fifth language. ('Max, you know Mommy speaks German, and Daddy speaks English, but we are going to live in a nice new house with new friends who all speak something called Ukrainian [or Russian]. Would you like to learn to speak Ukrainian [Russian], too?')

Other factors, such as the opportunity to use the target languages throughout the day, and Max's own motivation to learn are also extremely key variables. You have also considered things such as the length of stay and your family language goals. It is very important for you to think about why you want him to learn Ukrainian [Russian]: To integrate into the community? Because he is good at languages and could probably take on Ukrainian [Russian] with little effort? To give him the choice to return to that country to study/work someday (meaning you also want literacy skills)?

You should feel confident that German will not be lost. Both quantity as well as quality time are needed to ensure that it flourishes, however. Be sure you are the one to read the bed time stories (in German), and that you spend a great deal of time asking him questions and giving

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**Too Much...**continued from page 5

him vocabulary for the answers. You could try to arrange some German-speaking playgroup situations or an occasional German baby-sitter, but as you have been the primary care giver for the first three years of his life, his foundations in German are quite strong, and they will grow even stronger so long as you give a steady, high-quality input of language daily. You can do this, despite your working schedule.

Regarding English, your husband, one of the two most loved people in the world to Max, will be the person spending the most time with him. So long as your husband takes it upon himself to engage Max in conversation, read with him, and encourage his use of English, that will also flourish.

As far as schooling is concerned, a Russian environment would be ideal for a child who will already have English through his soon-to-be primary caregiver (Dad).

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*“... changing strategies on a small child can be a very drastic decision. Consistency in language strategy is very important for small children...”*

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Every family has to make up their own minds and gauge their own limitations and possibilities with language. You have a wonderful opportunity to build on an already strong language foundation and add even more with your family's travels.

On a personal note, I am American and speak English to the children, my husband is from Ecuador and speaks Spanish, my three children, ages 9, 7, and 5 have attended the German School in Geneva for the past four years, and the community is French-speaking. They all speak all four languages, but oral English is strongest in terms of vocabulary, though their written German is better. I tell you this to emphasise that with the right balance, and consistency in strategy, multilingualism is very possible, and I highly encourage it.

**Tracey Tokuhama-Espinosa**  
**www.Multi-Faceta.com**

Tracey's books:  
*Raising Multilingual Children: Foreign Language Acquisition and Children* Bergin & Garvey, 2001

*The Multilingual Mind: Issues Discussed by, for, and about People Living with Many Languages* Greenwood Publishing Group, 2003.

**Refusal to speak french**

**We are a French/Scottish family with a 4 year old living in France. Our child understands both French and English but is unwilling to speak English. Given that my husband, the “Scottish” element, works overseas and is away from home for weeks on end we chose to use only English at home rather than the one parent one language approach. Obviously the bulk of our communication outside the home with family and friends is in French.**

**Since our son has started French school his French has come on in leaps and bounds and now its reached the stage where he only uses French when talking to either of us although our response is always in English. This is very frustrating for my husband with his French level.**

**Any advice or book recommendations would be appreciated.**

*Laurence McKenzie, France*

What you are experiencing is quite normal. Many studies of children growing up with two or more languages at home report the same reluctance, around the age of three or four, to use one of the two languages. For example, Saunders (1988, p.123), Baker (1995, p.81), Harding and Riley (1986, p.135) all give the same advice: keep speaking the minority language to your child but do not chastise him when he answers in the majority language.

It is normal at the moment for your child to be dominant in French, and you should not expect bilingual competence to be equal in the two languages at all times. Bilingual competence varies a lot with age, of course, but also place, people, subjects of discussion etc. At present your child is in the process of acquiring two languages but he is having more exposure to the French language than to English. It is quite normal that having started school in French, his competence in this language is improving faster, since your child is not only learning but learning through French. This does not mean his English cannot develop as well, it means his linguistic knowledge in English at present is not adequate enough for him to express his thoughts.

You need to give your child plenty of exposure to the English language through storytelling, games, songs and learning to do new things. You should keep speaking English to him and make sure you supply him with the vocabulary and idioms he might know in French but need in English. However do not force your child to speak English or refuse to answer him when he addresses you in French. You could inhibit his desire to communicate in

English or in any language. Make sure you are flexible and keep communication with your son as your priority, do not correct him when he uses French rather than English but help him to formulate what he wants to say in English.

Another suggestion would be to reinforce for your son the link between the English language and his father. You could explain to your son that English is his father's language and you want him to speak both his father's and his mother's language. Children very often understand far more than they let on. You could ask your husband, when he is home, to record your son's favourite stories in English on cassette tapes so your son could listen not only to stories in English, but to his father's voice when he is away.

As far as strategies are concerned, you have chosen the right one, i.e. the strategy of place, which means using the non dominant language at home, which is for you English. This strategy will ensure your child has the exposure to English he needs in order to develop his competence in this language and to balance his greater exposure to French. Make sure also that you stick to your strategy, for if you use French from time to time with your child, he will see no reason to speak English to you. Another point to be aware of is that your child's reluctance to speak English does not mean he does not understand English, it just means it is easier for him at present to answer you in French and you should accept his replies in French, but keep speaking to him in English. As Saunders (1988, p.126) writes: 'be persistent yet show understanding and good humour'.

**Christine Helot**

Here is a bibliography on raising children bi/trilingually

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Baetens Beardsmore H.: *European Models of Bilingual Education*. Multilingual Matters 1993.

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## Creating a Bilingual Family... From page 5

Swedish remained seemingly the same, while my husband felt he was under pressure, as he was the one now responsible for minority language development.

Our third child was born in Helsinki and was only one year old when we moved back to Sweden. By that time, the elder brothers had become accustomed to speaking Finnish with each other and Finnish was their stronger language. We expected that, back in Sweden, Swedish would replace Finnish as the dominant language and we wanted to postpone this as much as possible. With that in mind, we told the boys, then six and nine, that their little brother would not hear much Finnish in Sweden and therefore it was important that they always speak Finnish to him. Both listened and, amazing as it may sound, they have spoken Finnish to him ever since, even after reverting to Swedish with each other. There are therefore interesting patterns of language choice in our family: Finnish between the children and me and between little brother and the bigger brothers; Swedish between the bigger brothers, between my husband and myself and between my husband and all the children.

In spite of the fact that the boys shared the same home environment and were exposed to the same kind of bilingual upbringing, they responded in different ways. Little brother, who was too young when we returned to Sweden to remember his time in Finland, eventually became the 'most Finnish' and would shout: 'Speak Finnish!' when he passed the bigger brothers' room and heard them speak Swedish with each other, something which I would never dare to do myself in order not to make the boys negatively predisposed toward Finnish. Somehow, this was tolerated by the elder brothers, as an idiosyncrasy of the youngest one.

We continued over the years, juggling two languages in Sweden, and found it stimulating. The bigger brothers retained a relaxed attitude towards bilingualism, speaking two languages but never making a big issue out of it, while little brother held the Finnish flag high, discussing language issues or fighting ethnic prejudice outside the home. The elder brothers are now 26 and 29 years old, while little brother is 21. A couple of years ago our eldest son came back after a long stay in China with a Chinese wife, another reinforcement of our family's multilingualism.

What do the boys themselves think about their bilingualism? When asked about it, they all say that it has been a privilege. They have all done well both in school and socially and appear not to be upset when someone makes a joke about their

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*"...a result of their bilingualism is their open-mindedness, their interest in all languages and their curiosity about other cultures."*

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Finnish background. What I myself want to believe is a result of their bilingualism is their open-mindedness, their interest in all languages and their curiosity about other cultures. One of the boys said once, when asked whether there were any differences between Finnish people and Swedish people, that they were really very alike: the Swedes thought everything should be as it was in Sweden, while Finns thought everything should be as it was in Finland. If he pointed out to the Swedes that something was different in Finland but worked equally well, they could not understand it at all. In the same way, the Finns could not believe that the Swedish way was feasible. He knew himself that both ways worked, and that many monocultural people could only appreciate their own, singular reality.

I dare not have too high hopes for the future, linguistically speaking. Naturally, I hope that the boys will have enough contact with Finnish so that it will not fade away. I am happy that all three also read books in Finnish, even if not nearly as many as in Swedish or even English. Due to lack of bilingual education, the boys' strongest language by far is Swedish and it is uncertain whether Finnish will live on in their own future families. But there is a better chance that bilingualism is some form, at least in Swedish and Chinese, will occur in this generation. The situation in Sweden is also vastly different now from what it was

in the 70s and 80s. Although we are definitely still in the 'Do Forget the Home Language!' period, there are some encouraging signs. In the wake of the ethnic revival, many linguistic minorities are intensifying their efforts to maintain and develop their languages. This tendency is clearly visible among Sweden Finns (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1987; Huss & Lindgren, 1999), the Tornedalians (Huss, 1999) and the Sámi.

The literature on child bilingualism available for parents has grown enormously over the past two decades. However, easy access to information and research results does not imply that they are utilised by political decision-makers. Policy on mother-tongue instruction or bilingual school tends to be based on the personal opinions of key people or on 'common-sense' notions of what is considered to be 'in the best interest of the child'. Current debate in the media therefore sometimes reminds one, rather depressingly, of the assimilation period of the 1950s and 1960s. In addition to hoping that Sweden will be influenced by

*Continued on page 8*

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## GLOSSARY

**Productive Bilingualism:** Speaking and writing in the first and second language (as well as listening and reading).

**Phonology:** The sound system of a language.

**Plurilingual:** Someone competent in two or more languages

## Creating a Bilingual Family... from page 7

international moves on minority rights and linguistic rights, another positive step would be the full acceptance and promotion of family bilingualism in Swedish society, as well as increased bilingual pre-school and school options for children from these families and for other youngsters as well. Increased cultural and linguistic competence is urgently needed in today's world, while the resources available in Sweden in terms of linguistic and ethnic diversity are still largely untapped.

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Examples include *The Bilingual Family Newsletter* from England, the bulletin of *Interessengemeinschaft Mehrsprachiger Familien* in Germany and of *Föreningen för Flerspråkiga Familjer* in Sweden.

<sup>2</sup> While the stigma of Finnish is gradually fading in Sweden, people still tend to be surprised by a person who speaks accent-free fluent Swedish and who also knows Finnish. Knowledge of Finnish in Sweden has, in the eyes of the majority, long been associated with low competence in Swedish, as well as with other problems.

<sup>3</sup> Föreningen för Flerspråkiga Familjer (Association for Multilingual Families), FFF, founded in 1986.

This is an edited version of a chapter in *Rights to Language: Equity, Power and Education* edited by Rober Phillipson, published by Laurence Erlbaum Associates, New Jersey (2000). Copies can be ordered online at: [www.erlbaum.com](http://www.erlbaum.com)