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978-0-521-80862-0 - The Bilingual Family: A Handbook for Parents, Second Edition

Edith Harding-Esch and Philip Riley

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# The Bilingual Family

A handbook for parents

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*This book is dedicated to:*

Philip and Emma; Emily, Finn and Katja; Carine and Lydia; Nicolas, Matthias and Jérôme; Roselyn and Etienne; Antoine and Amélie; Marianne and Erik; Anna and Jon; Ellen, John and Jenny; Patrick and Michael; Peter; Anne and Dominic; Dominique, Claire and Stéphanie; Billy, Lia and Alexis; Joanna; Helena and Philip; Lisa and Ian; Wided, Cihame and Sophian; Sebastian, José, Francisco, Trinidad and Manuel; Alvin; Eliot and Robin; David; and to their parents.

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## The authors

### Edith Harding-Esch

Edith Harding-Esch, who is French, is Senior Research Fellow in Language Education at the University of Cambridge and a former member of the *Centre de Recherches et d'Applications Pédagogiques en Langues* (CRAPEL) at the University of Nancy. She was married to an English mathematician and they have two children, Emma and Philip. The family's language is French, English being kept for work and studies. Philip and Emma do not have children yet.

### Philip Riley

Before settling in France, Philip Riley, who is English, taught in universities in Finland and Malta. He now works at the *Centre de Recherches et d'Applications Pédagogiques en Langues* (CRAPEL) at the University of Nancy, and has published extensively on linguistics and language teaching. He is married to a Swedish-speaking Finn and they have three children. While the children were young, they spoke English and Swedish at home and French at school. Emily, the eldest, has married a Frenchman and now has two children of her own, Robin and Eliot, who are learning English and French. Finn and Katja do not have children yet.

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## Preface

This is a handbook for all parents who might be considering bringing up their children as bilinguals. It is written for the English-speaking family living in Stuttgart, or Madrid or Strasbourg, the Spanish woman who has settled in Germany or the Danish family who live in North America. It is not about bilingual societies: we will not talk about the distribution of speakers of different languages in countries such as Finland or Wales. The linguistic problems of immigrant groups are not discussed either: they involve social and political issues that go well beyond the scope of this book.

Although a majority of our examples concern European families, what we have to say will also be relevant to parents in many other parts of the world. In the same way, although many, but not all, of our case studies refer to professional families, we believe that the book should be useful to the wider range of increasingly mobile families who are faced with the problem of educating their children in two or more languages. What we have aimed at here is to help, inform and reassure parents by making available to them the experiences of a number of other families. The term 'family' refers to the social unit formed by any parent(s) plus children.

We have no particular theoretical or psychological axe to grind: this is not a set of dogmatic, hard and fast rules, but rather a practical discussion of some of the basic issues that we hope will help parents in their own particular situation. The book starts with a brief presentation of the uses to which all children, bilingual or not, put language, as well as with the definition of a small number of terms that are useful to talk about language and language acquisition. The major part of the book, however, is devoted to:

- i) A summary of the research which has been done on bilingualism and on the development of the bilingual child.

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- ii) A discussion of the factors which parents should take into consideration when deciding whether to bring up their children as bilinguals.
- iii) A series of case studies of a wide variety of bilingual families, where readers will be able to see the different choices and decisions made by parents in different contexts.
- iv) An alphabetical reference guide to a number of topics or notions likely to be useful to parents.

We would like to emphasise that, although we are both professional linguists, it is the direct, personal and daily experience of bilingualism in our own families which has motivated the book. Readers may not agree with all we have to say, or may find that it does not apply to their particular situation; indeed, it would be surprising if this were not sometimes the case. It would have been impossible to offer a comprehensive treatment of all possible cases; we simply tried to formulate what our first-hand experience over many years has taught us.

Our subject, bringing up bilingual children, is only one aspect of that vast and controversial problem of bringing up children. In any family, there is a wide range of factors influencing the relationships between the individual members (for example, social roles, health, age, religious and political views) which are not linguistic but which are crucial in defining the members' and the family's identities. We are no more competent to talk about these things than any other parents, and so we have tried not to allow our personal views to colour the discussion that follows. Bilingual children are children first and foremost and problems like pocket money or puberty are just as pressing for them as for anyone else. Dealing with only one aspect of a child's life is a risky enterprise, forced upon us by the complexity of the subject, but we are well aware of the importance of the overall context, of the *whole* child.

In the past fifteen years or so, there have been many developments in the field of bilingual studies, which is one of the main reasons for producing this second edition. In particular, there has been a great increase in research and there are now several established international journals regularly reporting on bilingual and multilingual development. Much work has been carried out on the societal aspects of bilingualism (Fishman, 1989), including major studies dealing with language death (Fishman, 1991; Crystal, 2000; Nettle and Romaine, 2000). There have also been numerous descriptive studies, especially in the fields of language contact, code-switching and language change (Milroy and Muysken, 1995; Jones and Esch, 2002), as well as theoretical studies in cultural variation in lan-

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guage use, anthropological linguistics (Duranti, 1997; Foley, 1997) and cognitive anthropology (Gumperz and Levinson, 1996) which have all contributed to lively debates on the relationship between thought and language and to a reassessment of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis on linguistic relativity.

Bilingual education has also received a great deal of attention, both in the USA (Hornberger, 1990) and in Europe (Baker, 2001), where the work of the Council of Europe leading to the publication of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001) has gone hand-in-hand with the promotion of plurilingualism and pluriculturalism. The project has been given even greater impetus by the various events organised throughout Europe during the European Year of Languages 2001. This has been accompanied by the introduction of programmes teaching foreign languages to children in primary school in a number of countries. At the same time there has been a growing awareness of linguistic minorities, resulting in increased stress being placed on the importance of interculturality for individuals and on the realisation that language development and language use are closely related, both being grounded in a unique social and cultural context (Byram, 1997b; Roberts et al., 2001; Kramsch, 1998; DeLoache and Gottlieb, 2000).

However, it has to be admitted that there has been relatively little progress as regards educating one's own children bilingually, a topic which has been further complicated by radical changes in the family as a social unit over the period in question, so that there are now 'a greater variety of household forms in modern society in which the nuclear family is not the most prevalent' (Turner, 1999). We have tried to take these developments into account in this new edition. It is important to understand that, socially speaking, the undoubted increase in bilingual families reflects the fact that, to quote Turner again, there are more and more 'modified extended families in which there are important kinship networks between relatives who do not live with each other, and also a widespread dependence on non-kin relations for support'. None the less, the central function of the family, of whatever shape or size, is still that of providing affection, intimacy and general well-being, and this is why although we have carefully updated this edition, the overall contents and thrust are not vastly different from the first edition.

Before launching into a more detailed discussion of bilingualism, there is one general point we would like to make. It is one that tends to be forgotten, especially by professional linguists, psychologists and teachers when talking about this matter. It is that the vast majority of bilinguals

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themselves find their bilingualism both ordinary and fruitful. In the past, so much work on bilingualism has been carried out by monolingual scientists who regarded it with a mixture of admiration and fear, that the experience and opinions of bilingual individuals themselves were pushed into the background. If you interview bilinguals, as we have done, you will find that nearly all of them value and enjoy their bilingualism, finding in it a source of interest and enrichment. For children, in particular, it is quite literally fun and games.

We would be extremely pleased to hear from any parents or children who have comments to make about this book. We would also like to thank the many parents who have written to us over the years, sharing their experience of raising bilingual children. Wherever possible, we have tried to take their observations into account.

Finally, we would like to make the following two points:

- i) Where an actual boy or girl is not being referred to, we have alternated the use of 'he' and 'she' between chapters rather than use the male or female pronoun throughout.
- ii) When the two languages of a bilingual individual are mentioned, the first language is the one in which the individual is considered to be dominant. However, particularly with children, the stronger language may become the weaker in a very short time (see section 3.3) which explains why the same individual's languages may appear in a different order at different ages.

E.H.-E., P.R.  
September 2002