

## Introduction

In early June 2010, Carlin Flora, a Senior Editor for the New York based, *Psychology Today*, wrote to me to ask me if she could interview me after having read my new book, *Bilingual: Life and Reality*. We emailed back and forth concerning the matter and then, a few days later, she asked me, “I wonder if you’d like your own blog on bilingualism? . . . The website gets two million visitors per month.”

I was totally taken aback as I had been, up to then, a rather traditional academic who mainly wrote scholarly papers, chapters, and books. Blog posts seemed a bit short at first – some 800 to 1,000 words per post as compared to tens of pages for papers – and maybe a bit too personal – I am more used to using the passive voice than the active voice. But then I looked around and saw, among others, David Crystal’s blog on English linguistics. Here was a well-known academic, author, and lecturer, who had been blogging for several years and doing so most successfully.

So, after a few weeks, I accepted for a number of reasons. First, I have always wanted to put to rest the many myths that surround bilingualism, as well as tell the general public about findings in my research field. Since about half of the world is bilingual, that is, uses two or more languages or dialects in everyday life, and studies on bilinguals have been far less numerous than those on monolinguals, I feel that we researchers have the added duty of communicating our results on bilinguals to all those who might be interested in them.

Not all research has a direct impact on everyday life, and one must accept that. But some findings can play a role in our lives as bilinguals or in the lives of bilingual children, whilst others can change our attitudes toward bilingualism. It is therefore important we inform the general public.

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Another reason is that there is the need to reassure bilinguals about their own bilingualism and to give those involved with children – parents and other caretakers, educators, speech/language pathologists, and so on – some basic knowledge about growing up with two or more languages. Hopefully, a blog can help them understand why and how bilingual children behave the way they do, such as develop a dominant language, show a person–language bond, refuse to speak a particular language at some point, mix their languages in certain situations, and so on.

I also wanted to constitute a small online resource on the bilingual person, adult and child, that people can come back to at any time. And finally, there was a more personal reason. Since I was no longer teaching and I missed it, I thought it would be enjoyable to write introductory posts about various aspects of bilingualism for a general audience.

Ten years later, at the time of writing, my blog with the same title as this book, “Life as a bilingual,” has been visited by more than 2.2 million readers, much to my amazement. There are some 150 posts, comprising short texts and interviews, that can be consulted by anyone throughout the world<sup>1</sup>.

In 2014, my colleague, Aneta Pavlenko, kindly joined me and for the following five years, we took turns writing posts for the blog. She authored wonderful texts in her areas of specialty and greatly diversified our offerings. She left the blog in 2019 but her posts are still there, and she has very kindly agreed to have some appear in this book.

But why now a book with a selection of posts? Blogs have many advantages but also some inconveniences: They can be removed by the owner of the platform at any time; the posts are organized from latest to earliest, which makes selecting a topic and finding follow-up posts very difficult; and categories of posts are not easily identifiable. In addition, an electronic medium often lacks some of the advantages of books such as ease of manipulation, durability, and transportability. When I approached Cambridge University Press with a proposal to publish a selection of my

<sup>1</sup> The blog can be found here: [www.psychologytoday.com/intl/blog/life-bilingual](http://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/blog/life-bilingual). For an index by content, see here: [www.francoisgrosjean.ch/blog\\_en.html](http://www.francoisgrosjean.ch/blog_en.html)

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posts, they showed very real interest – confirmed by five outside reviewers they consulted – and for this I am grateful.

The 121 posts written between 2010 and 2020 in this book, including twenty-three interviews, are organized by topic, in fifteen different chapters. The first four set the stage: describing bilinguals, the extent of bilingualism, using two or more languages, and bilingualism across the life span. These are followed by chapters on becoming bilingual, bilingualism in the family, bilingualism in children with additional needs, and second language learning. Next comes a chapter on biculturalism and personality. It is followed by a special chapter, “When the heart speaks,” with posts that concern emotions in bilinguals and how they express and process them in their languages.

The next three chapters concern language processing in bilinguals, the bilingual mind including the lively debate on whether bilinguals are advantaged cognitively, and the bilingual brain, its study, and what happens when it is impaired. This is followed by a chapter on special bilinguals such as translators, interpreters, teachers, and bilingual writers who have both a regular and a unique relationship with their languages. In the last chapter, much shorter than the others, I reminisce on a few events that I lived through during my career studying bilingualism and bilinguals.

To help readers choose the texts they wish to peruse, each chapter starts with an introduction that presents the posts that it contains. Then, each post is preceded by a short abstract. Finally, there is a fair amount of cross referencing within posts to other posts and other chapters.

Since the emphasis in this book is on the bilingual person, adult or child, other topics that relate to the sociology, anthropology, and politics of bilingualism, such as language minorities, language and power, language ideologies, language planning, language and nation building, are not covered<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> Cambridge University Press offers numerous handbooks that deal with these topics. Among these we find *The Cambridge Handbook of Bilingualism* (edited by Annick De Houwer and Lourdes Ortega), *The Cambridge Handbook of Sociolinguistics* (edited by Rajend Mesthrie), and *The Cambridge Handbook of Linguistic Anthropology* (edited by Nick J. Enfield, Paul Kockelman, and Jack Sidnell).

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This book would not have been possible without the help of a number of people. Carlin Flora who encouraged me to start a blog, and the subsequent *Psychology Today* editors who continued to assist me; Aneta Pavlenko who was such a fine co-blogger for five years; the many colleagues who accepted to be interviewed on topics they are experts in; my wife, Lysiane, who read the posts before they were published and helped me choose the accompanying photographs; and all those who encouraged me all these years if only by putting the links of the posts up on social media.

I also wish to thank those at Cambridge University Press who believed in this book from the outset: Helen Barton, the Language and Linguistics Commissioning Editor who has seen this book through the stages of evaluation, preparation, and production; Isabel Collins, her editorial assistant; Joshua Penney, the Content Manager; Jayavel Radhakrishnan, the Project Manager; and Padmapriya Ranganathan, the Copy Editor.

This book is dedicated to my two grandchildren, Ismaël and Mia, both bilingual, and to all those other children of their generation who also live with two or more languages.

## 1

## Describing Bilinguals

### INTRODUCTION

The posts here will help set the stage for many of those that follow in later chapters. In Post 1.1, it is shown how language proficiency has ceded its place to language use when defining bilingualism. Bilinguals are now seen as those who use two or more languages (or dialects) in everyday life.

A monolingual (or fractional) view of bilingualism is presented at the start of Post 1.2. According to this view, the bilingual is, or should be, two monolinguals in one person. A more recent view is then discussed – the holistic view of bilingualism – that I proposed some time ago. It states that bilinguals have a unique and specific linguistic configuration. The coexistence and constant interaction of the two or more languages in bilinguals have produced a different but complete language system.

In Post 1.3, a grid is presented that allows one to visualize a person's bi- or multilingualism. It takes into account language proficiency and language use in each language known. An example is discussed, and an empty grid is proposed for the reader to use.

In Post 1.4, bilinguals tell us about their own bilingualism – the many advantages they see and the few inconveniences they report on.

Posts 1.5 and 1.6 deal with important linguistic aspects of bilingualism. In the first, the Complementarity Principle is explained, which is the fact that bilinguals usually acquire and use their languages for different purposes, in different domains of life, with different people. It accounts for interesting bilingual phenomena, one of them being language dominance, which is dealt with in a separate post (Post 1.6).

The last three posts deal with having an accent in one or more languages. In Post 1.7, the myth that real bilinguals have no accent in their different languages is discussed. In Post 1.8, the factors that explain why some retain an accent whereas others do not are examined. Maturational

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reasons are important but so are the type and amount of input from the language in question. Finally, in Post 1.9, a report is given on a study that looked at the impact that accented speech has on our understanding of what is being said. Contrary to what one might think, even if some speak with a foreign accent, there is a good chance that they will be understood.

### 1.1 WHO IS BILINGUAL?

*Bilinguals are those who use two or more languages (or dialects) in their everyday lives. But this definition is fairly recent.*

“No, I’m not bilingual; I’m not fluent in all my languages.”

“I don’t consider myself bilingual since I don’t know how to write my other language.”

“I didn’t grow up with two languages, so I’m not bilingual.”

“I have an accent in Spanish so I can’t be considered bilingual.”

I have heard such remarks repeatedly and I have always been dismayed that so many bilinguals depreciate their language skills.

The main reason is that the criterion of how proficient bilinguals are in their languages has long been dominant in how we characterize them. Even some linguists have put it forward as the defining characteristic. Hence, the American linguist, Leonard Bloomfield, stated that bilingualism is the native-like control of two languages.

The “real” bilingual has long been seen as the one who is equally, and fully, fluent in two languages. He or she is the “ideal,” the “true,” the “balanced,” and the “perfect” bilingual. All the others – in fact, the vast majority of bilinguals – are “not really” bilingual or are “special types” of bilinguals.

This view of a bilingual person as two monolinguals in one has been assumed and amplified by many bilinguals themselves who criticize their own language competence, or strive to reach monolingual norms, or even hide their knowledge of their weaker language(s).

If one were to count as bilingual only those people who pass as complete monolinguals in each of their languages – they are a rarity – one would be left with no label for the vast majority of people who use two or more languages regularly but who do not have native-like proficiency

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in each. The reason they don't is quite simply that bilinguals do not need to be equally competent in all of their languages. Where, for what, and with whom they use their languages are crucial aspects in understanding how much each language will be developed.

One of the fathers of bilingualism research, Uriel Weinreich, a linguist in the second part of the twentieth century, recognized this and proposed, along with Canadian linguist William Mackey, a more realistic definition of bilingualism – the alternate use of two or more languages. My own definition is very similar: Bilinguals are those who use two or more languages (or dialects) in their everyday lives.

This other way of looking at bilinguals allows one to include people ranging from the professional interpreter who is fluent in two languages all the way to the established immigrant who speaks the host country's language but who may not be able to read or write it. In between we find the bilingual child who interacts with her parents in one language and with her friends in another; the scientist who reads and writes articles in a second language (but who rarely speaks it); the member of a linguistic minority who uses the minority language at home only and the majority language in all other domains of life; the deaf person who uses sign language with her friends but uses the written form of the spoken language with a hearing person; and so on. Despite the great diversity that exists between these people, they all lead their lives with more than one language.

The more recent and more realistic view of bilingualism has allowed many people who live with two or more languages to accept who they are – bilingual, quite simply.

## Reference

Grosjean, F. (2010). *Bilingual: Life and Reality*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

## 1.2 A HOLISTIC VIEW OF BILINGUALISM<sup>1</sup>

*Two views of bilinguals are compared, a monolingual (or fractional) view whereby bilinguals are considered as two monolinguals in one person, and*

<sup>1</sup> The post's original title was "What Do Bilinguals and Hurdlers Have in Common?"

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*a holistic view which states that bilinguals have a unique and specific linguistic configuration.*

The monolingual (or fractional) view of bilingualism, which we mentioned briefly in Post 1.1, has been prevalent – and still is among some people – when we talk about those who use two or more languages (or dialects) in their everyday lives.

According to a strong version of this view, the bilingual has (or should have) two separate and isolable language competencies. These competencies are (or should be) similar to those of the two corresponding monolinguals, therefore, the bilingual is (or should be) two monolinguals in one person.

This monolingual view of bilingualism has had a number of consequences. One of them is that bilinguals have been described and evaluated in terms of the proficiency and balance they have in their two languages. Another is that language skills in bilinguals have almost always been appraised in terms of monolingual norms. The evaluation tools used with bilinguals are often quite simply those employed with the monolinguals of the two corresponding language groups. These assessments rarely take into account the bilinguals' differential needs for their two or more languages or the different social functions of these languages, that is, what a language is used for, with whom, and where (see Post 1.5).

Even experimental work has sometimes led to a straightforward comparison of monolinguals and bilinguals. Some researchers talk of “a bilingual disadvantage,” others more recently of “a bilingual advantage” when the results obtained by bilinguals are unlike those of monolinguals. Why not simply talk of “a bilingual difference”? This clearly shows that for some the monolingual is the norm.

One other consequence that has always saddened me is the fact that bilinguals themselves often find fault with their own language competence: “Yes, I use English every day at work, but I speak it so badly that I’m not really bilingual,” or “I mix my languages all the time, so I’m not a real bilingual,” or even “I have an accent in one of my languages so I’m not bilingual” (see Post 1.7). Other bilinguals strive their hardest to reach monolingual norms, and still others hide their knowledge of their “weaker” language(s).



#### DESCRIBING BILINGUALS

Over the years, I have defended the bilingual or holistic view of bilingualism which proposes that the bilingual is an integrated whole that cannot easily be decomposed into separate parts. Bilinguals are *not* the sum of two, or more, complete or incomplete monolinguals; rather, they have a unique and specific linguistic configuration. The coexistence and constant interaction of the two or more languages in bilinguals have produced a different but complete language system.

The analogy I use comes from the domain of track and field. Hurdlers blend two types of competencies, that of high jumping and that of sprinting, into an integrated whole. When compared individually with sprinters or high jumpers, hurdlers meet neither level of competence, and yet when taken as a whole, hurdlers are athletes in their own right. No expert in track and field would ever compare hurdlers to sprinters or high jumpers, even though the former blend certain characteristics of the latter two.

In many ways, bilinguals are like hurdlers: unique and specific communicators. Apart from a few exceptions (e.g. translators and interpreters; see Posts 14.2 and 14.3), bilinguals use their two (or more) languages, separately or together, in different areas of life and with different people. Because the needs and uses of the two languages are usually quite different, bilinguals are rarely equally or completely fluent in their two or more languages. Levels of proficiency in a language will depend on the need for that language and will be domain specific.

This holistic view of bilinguals has been emphasized by other colleagues such as Newcastle University Professor Vivian Cook who studies the multi-competence of second-language learners and bilinguals, as well as by researcher Madalena Cruz-Ferreira who has examined, among other things, multilingual norms in the evaluation of bilingual children and adults.

Many others defend this view in their thinking and in their research – a real plus for all of us who are bilingual!

#### Reference

Grosjean, F. (2010). The bilingual as a competent but specific speaker-hearer. In M. Cruz-Ferreira, ed., *Multilingual Norms*. Frankfurt am Main, Germany: Peter Lang, pp. 19–31. This chapter originally appeared as an article in the *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* in 1985.

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1.3 VISUALIZING ONE’S LANGUAGES

*The defining factor of bilingualism has shifted over time from language proficiency to language use. And yet both factors are important when portraying the languages of a bilingual or a multilingual. A new grid takes into account each factor and is easily filled in.*

When describing bilinguals – and not just defining them – it is important to take into account both language use and the level of proficiency that bilinguals have in their different languages. I set about finding a way of doing so visually and the outcome is in the form of a grid that is presented in Figure 1.1.

Language use is presented along the vertical axis (from Never used at the bottom all the way to Daily use at the top) and language proficiency is on the horizontal axis (from Low proficiency on the left to High proficiency on the right). These labels can be replaced with numerical values if necessary. Based on the two factors – measured objectively or based on self-reports – a bilingual’s two or more languages can be placed in the appropriate cells of the grid.

To illustrate how the grid functions, I have inserted the three languages of a given bilingual, Lucia: English (E), Spanish (S), and French (F). Her most fluent and most used language is English (E), and it can be found at the top right corner of the grid. She is also fluent in Spanish (S) but slightly less so, and hence it is slightly to the left of E. In addition, she does not use it as much as English and so it is slightly lower than E.

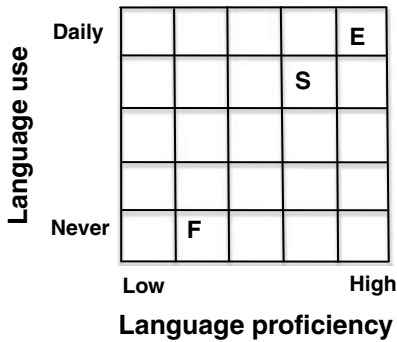


Figure 1.1 A bilingual described in terms of language use and language proficiency