

OPINION

Mother tongue, father tongue

Michael Clyne, 16 February 2008

A keen proponent of bilingualism, Michael Clyne grew up with two languages, one of which -- German -- became the language he gave his daughter, to become her father tongue.

If there is one thing that I have found more exciting than being an academic linguist, it is being a father. As such, my enthusiasm for bilingualism has gone hand in hand with my relationship to my daughter. Joanna is one of the people with whom I share my bilingualism most. My wife, Irene, and I raised her bilingually according to the one-parent one-language strategy, with each parent speaking a different language to the child and expecting the child to speak that language to them. Irene doesn't speak German. Irene and Joanna always speak English to each other and Joanna and I always communicate in German.

I started using German to her the moment she was born. I had read quite a lot about the one-parent one-language strategy and about the cognitive benefits of bilingualism and had observed my former colleague George Saunders and his wife Wendy using the strategy with their two sons. It was probably pioneered by some Indigenous Australian communities that had been practising compulsory exogamy for many centuries, that is, the men in a particular community had to marry women from another community speaking a different language, with each parent transmitting their language to the child. I was convinced that bilingual language acquisition was both feasible and desirable. And by the time Joanna was born, I had been quite heavily involved in setting up and evaluating primary school bilingual and second language programs in German, and had been observing young children being immersed in the language.

I was quite delighted at how well Joanna responded to being raised in two languages. Having a 'special' language in common with her, I believe, made our relationship all the more special, and she understands me very well. Raising a bilingual child involved going through some of my own experiences a second time in a more reflective way but also in a far more supportive environment than Australia was during my childhood.

I was born not long after the outbreak of the Second World War. My father was born in Vienna and my mother in Budapest. After the First World War she had moved with her parents to Vienna, where she met my father. My family came to Melbourne as refugees immediately after the *Anschluss*, the annexation of Austria by Nazi Germany. When the Second World War broke out, my parents were declared enemy aliens here in Australia. They had to report once a week to the police in the inner suburb of Prahran, where we lived, and were not permitted to cross the municipal boundaries of Prahran without authorisation but my father had special permission to go to work outside the defined area and my mother to see a German-speaking dentist in the city.

We led a rather isolated life. I was an only child and had little contact with other children. We spoke German at home, in our first-floor flat and English in public, but also in the backyard, where the neighbours could hear. When German was spoken, it was whispered. This was not a time when languages other than English, and especially German, would be tolerated in Australia.

We did have both German- and English-speaking people in our social networks, with the latter increasingly predominating. I had acquired English as well as German mainly from my parents and spoke English with their non-native accent. And apart from some Austrian military songs of the First World War, which my father taught me, I learned English nursery rhymes from my mother - ones she read to me out of a book, with a strong Austro-Hungarian accent. But, in accordance with wartime security precautions, my parents had to sell their camera and their radio, which received short-wave broadcasts. They were able to purchase instead a 3-valve wireless, the reception on which was somewhat inferior to that of today's transistors. And radio acted as a corrective influence, though the Cultivated Australian it passed on to me was not sufficient to prevent the designation of 'the little Viennese boy' at kindergarten.

Once I was at school, English became my dominant language. I read a lot and wrote poetry in it. We didn't have access to German children's books or magazines at the time. The environment in which I existed was assimilationist and I was intended and predestined to be 'British'. However, I took French as well as German at secondary school and later various languages at university, including Dutch, which I adopted as 'my third language'. But by the time Joanna was born, multilingualism and multiculturalism were widely accepted in Australia.

As a linguist, I did not conduct a study of her language development as I did not want recording her speech to interfere with family relationships. However, I did manage to jot down anything she said in my presence about language or languages.

I am sometimes asked how we have managed to communicate as a family, speaking two separate languages. But this was never much of a problem. When Joanna was a small child, she would address one person and not two at a time. She would face one of her parents and say what she wanted to in 'their' language, and then do the same to the other parent. So, while I used the two languages in different contexts of situation when I was growing up, Joanna acquired English and German in much the same context. She has therefore been involved in far more opportunities for translation than I was, so she is a more competent translator than I am. And Irene, who had made a few not very successful attempts to learn German by attending classes, actually acquired more through the immersion situation of which she was a passive participant than through any of the classes - so much so that, when we went to Germany in 1988, she was able to communicate quite well bilingually with her sociologist colleagues speaking German and herself speaking English.

As Joanna grew older, the three of us did need to discuss some matters all together, such as family plans, subjects or career options, and that has been done in English, our common language. But as soon as Joanna and I are communicating directly, we use German, and that is still the case, now that she is nearly 27. And this pattern has not been disrupted by outsiders. From an early age, she has always been happy to initiate German with me in front of others who don't understand the language and taken it upon herself to act as an interpreter for the others.

She has promoted the view that she has something extra that many others don't. Between the ages of four and six, she often proudly compared her bilingualism to the monolingualism of many of her kindergarten and school friends and even of adults. One of many instances was when, aged nearly five, she enquired of a monolingual professor of geography who had rung me: 'Don't you get bored speaking only one language?' She has also been very happy to be different. For instance, when she was about 10, one time when I collected her from school, she walked through the school grounds and onto the road reading a book. When I expressed some concern about this dangerous practice, pointing out that none of the other girls were reading a book while walking across the road, she started speaking English to me which she continued to do for the entire trip home. Before I drove into our driveway, she said: 'Other little girls don't read books while they're walking across the road: other little girls don't speak German to their daddies. Get the message?' and switched back to German. So her bilingualism was part of a more general individuality that characterised her identity. When she was seven, one of her classmates came to play. Noticing that Joanna and I were speaking German to each other, the other little girl asked Joanna if she was German. 'Oh no!', she said, quite offended, 'I'm bilingual'.

I cannot envisage a life without at least two languages. And my languages are inextricably connected. English is very much my dominant language, as it is Joanna's and that of most others who have grown up in Australia, but I need at least two languages to be myself. To different people, the term 'mother tongue' means first language, dominant language, mother's language, parents' languages, or heritage language. But, to many if not most bilinguals, it is a very confusing term. English is Joanna's mother tongue and, in a sense, German is her father tongue.

For the past 17 years, some colleagues and I have been conducting workshops for parents raising their children in more than one language. In my presentations I am able to draw not only on my research and that of others but also on my experience as an Australian-born and raised bilingual and as the father of an Australian-born and raised bilingual. The experiences related by the parents, the questions they ask and the discussions that take place between parents all contribute to my understanding of how bilingualism works in practice and how problems in achieving and managing it can be overcome.

Nine years ago, the Language and Society Centre at Monash University produced a video called, *Growing Up With English Plus*. It tells the story of eight Melbourne families raising their children bi- or trilingually. The language combinations ranged from Italian-English, German-English, Latvian-English to Mandarin-Italian-English, Serbian-English, Thai-English to Auslan-English. The video showed glimpses of family life and what language is used for what purposes. Parents and some of the children reflect on the benefits of the bi- or trilingual experience, what went wrong and how it was put right. Joanna was interviewed for the video just after she had written a Year 12 English essay on her bilingualism. She tells how the two languages which had existed side by side came together in her being. 'The two streams that had always flowed parallel united'. This is, I believe, is the common experience of many bilinguals.

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This presentation was broadcast on the ABC's Lingua Franca program on 16 February 2008 – you can access the transcript and listen to an **Audio** of the talk at:
<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/linguafranca/stories/2008/2163775.htm#transcript>