

An interview of François Grosjean on bilingualism¹

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Your own life with two languages

1. Do you remember how you became bilingual?

I was born in 1946 in Paris. My mother was British and my father French but I did not become bilingual immediately as my parents spoke French to me at first. It was only when I was sent to an English boarding school in Switzerland at the age of 7 that I acquired English in a "sink or swim" manner. I don't recall it being difficult as the staff and my peers were all very friendly. I stayed in that school for 7 years and then, at the age of 14, was sent to a boarding school in England where I remained until my A-levels. This change was culturally very difficult and I never quite managed to become totally monocultural (i.e. British only) in the way others wanted me to be. But after 11 years of English schooling, I wasn't really French any longer and my return to France to enter the University of Paris at the age of 18 was quite a change. It took me a number of years to adapt linguistically, but especially culturally, to France and that explains many of my reflections in the book I was to write some years later.

2. Is your own family bilingual?

Yes, despite what I wrote in the dedication at the beginning of my book, "To my wife, Lysiane, for her encouragement and her informative bilingualism, and to my sons, Marc and Eric, for their monolingualism, so categorical and yet so natural", the whole family is now bilingual in English and French. In 1982, after some eight years in the United States, we came back to Europe for a year and our two monolingual English-speaking boys acquired French. We kept it alive when we went back for three years and since 1987, when we returned to Europe for good, both French and English have been family languages that we use interchangeably. We change base language a lot and we code-switch from one language to the other constantly.

3. What approach did you use with your family when your children were small?

Although we wanted our children to be bilingual, living in an English environment in a country like the United States made this very difficult. It is a well known fact that children do not acquire (or only partly acquire) the minority language if there isn't community or educational support, or other motivating factors that make using the language a natural thing. So it was only when our boys were in a French-speaking environment for a year in 1982 that they finally became natural users of French. We then worked hard to keep their French alive when we returned to the States (but in as a natural way as possible).

4. To what extent did your being bilingual determine your research area?

My personal, and early, interest in bilingualism found a first outlet in my Master's thesis at the University of Paris in which I surveyed English-French bilinguals in Paris. This was a way for me to start understanding who I was and to begin thinking of the bilingual as a different type of speaker-hearer. It was while I was preparing that piece of work that I discovered researchers like Weinreich and Haugen, among others. I never dreamed that I would actually become good friends with Einar Haugen himself.

¹ Questions asked by Judit Navracscs, Veszprem University, Hungary.

Your book, "Life with two languages"

5. What led you to write your book?

The idea of writing my book arose when I was asked to teach a course on bilingualism in the United States and I realized that there just weren't any books that covered all aspects of bilingualism. I therefore very naively asked Harvard University Press whether they would give me a contract to write such a book. They asked for a chapter, reviewed it and gave me the go-ahead. I had met Einar Haugen in the meantime and had become friends with him and his wife, Eva. Einar Haugen was just the kind of person a young author needed: he took me under his wing, was very supportive and read every chapter of my book. Of all the authors on bilingualism, he was, I felt, the most "human" (in the sense that he wrote about the bilingual PERSON) and I tried to follow his example in my book (hence the many first-hand accounts in those boxes). I wanted my book to be comprehensive but especially to give the bilingual's point of view. Much of what had been written about bilinguals had been written from a monolingual view point and I wanted the bilingual to come through in the book. Even now, my biggest source of satisfaction is when bilinguals tell me they enjoy my book.

6. What positions did you want to defend in your book (and in later writings)?

When writing my book, and ever since, I have tried to defend a number of positions which I find important. These are:

- Bilingualism is the use of two (or more) languages in one's everyday life and not knowing two or more languages equally well and optimally (as most laypersons think).
- Bilingualism is extremely widespread and is the norm in today's world (and not the exception).
- The older, monolingual, view of bilingualism has had many negative consequences, one of the worst being that many bilinguals are very critical of their own language competence and do not consider themselves to be bilingual.
- The bilingual is a unique speaker-hearer who should be studied as such and not always in comparison with the monolingual. The bilingual uses two languages - separately or together - for different purposes, in different domains of life, with different people. (See the Complementarity Principle below). Because the needs and uses of the two languages are usually quite different, the bilingual is rarely equally or completely fluent in his/her languages.
- In their everyday lives, bilinguals find themselves at various points along a situational continuum which induce particular language modes. The concept of language mode is critical (see below also) and it helps to differentiate such things as interference, code-switching, borrowing, etc. which researchers like Weinreich never actually differentiated.
- People testing (or examining) bilinguals need to take into account whether the person is in a stage of language restructuring (i.e. acquiring a new language and/or losing the first one) or whether the person has attained a stable level of bilingualism. In addition, such factors as the domains of use of the languages, the language mode the person is in when being studied, etc. has to be taken into account.

Aspects of bilingualism

7. Your holistic approach to bilingualism is well-known all over the world. However, many people still hold a monolingual view of bilingualism, and bilinguals themselves claim that they are not bilinguals since their language competence is not equal in both languages. Do you think this is a widespread phenomenon?

Yes, I am afraid it is. Although most researchers throughout the world have the same defining view of the bilingual, based on the regular use of two (or more) languages (or dialects) in everyday life, the layperson still holds a monolingual view of the bilingual who should be balanced and equally fluent in his/her languages. The problem is that if one were to follow this "two monolinguals in one person" view, we would be left without a label for half the world's population. More seriously, we would be putting forward and describing a person who is extremely rare. That person would be similar to international conference interpreters but even they have specialties. I believe that it is our role as researchers to change the public misconceptions of bilinguals. I realize that this might take a lot of time but I hope that one day we will reach that goal. When defending my holistic approach, I am constantly thinking of bilinguals who belittle their bilingualism because they do not master their languages to the same level. This leaves them insecure and worried about their status as human communicators. This saddens me as all bilinguals should have positive feelings about their bilingualism. I often tell them that monolinguals have to cover all domains of life with just one language and that they, as bilinguals, have to do so with two or more languages (one language for some domains of life, the other language(s) for other domains, and two or more languages for yet other domains). They are human communicators, like monolinguals, but they simply communicate differently.

8. You state that you investigate stable bilinguals but can a person ever be a stable bilingual considering the fact that the mental lexicon keeps changing all the time?

It is true that lexical knowledge, and other linguistic knowledge, do change over time but probably much more slowly for the stable bilingual. In my studies, I look at bilinguals who are not restructuring their languages at that moment (they have not just moved from one country to another, they are not acquiring a language or forgetting another language, etc.). All bilinguals are interesting (those who are becoming bilingual, those who are in the process of restructuring their various languages, etc.) and they should all be studied. However, I concentrate on those who have achieved some level of stability simply because it is easier to study them experimentally. (Recall that I am an experimental psychologist and that I run experiments on bilinguals).

9. In your definition of bilingualism, you mention two (or more) languages (or dialects). Does that mean that you consider bilingualism and multilingualism to be the same? Aren't there both quantitative and qualitative differences?

This is a very difficult question for which I don't have a clear answer. However, I wouldn't be surprised that when we know as much about multilingualism as we do about bilingualism, we will probably realize that there are many similarities but also quite a few differences. I'm happy to see the work on multilingualism increase in importance in the literature. I'm also happy to see that many concepts and approaches developed to study the acquisition, the knowledge and the use of two languages carry over quite easily to three or more languages, sometimes after having been adapted. It makes a lot of sense after all.

The complementary principle

10. You have recently proposed the complementary principle to characterize the bilingual. Can you explain what you mean by this?

The reasons that bring languages into contact and hence foster bilingualism are many: migrations of various kinds (economic, educational, political, religious), nationalism and federalism, education and culture, trade and commerce, intermarriage, etc. These factors create various linguistic needs in people who are in contact with two or more languages and

who develop competencies in their languages to the extent required by these needs. In contact situations it is rare that all facets of life require the same language (people would not be bilingual if that were so) or that they always demand two languages (language A and B at work, at home, with friends, etc.). This leads to what I have called the complementary principle which I define as follows:

"Bilinguals usually acquire and use their languages for different purposes, in different domains of life, with different people. Different aspects of life normally require different languages."

It is precisely because the needs and uses of the languages are usually quite different that bilinguals rarely develop equal and total fluency in their languages. The level of fluency attained in a language (more precisely, in a language skill) will depend on the need for that language and will be domain specific.

11. Why is the complementary principle important?

In general, the failure to understand the complementary principle has been a major obstacle to obtaining a clear picture of bilinguals and has had many negative consequences: bilinguals have been described and evaluated in terms of the fluency and balance they have in their two languages (when in fact they are rarely balanced); language skills in bilinguals have almost always been appraised in terms of monolingual standards (but monolinguals use only one language for all domains of life whereas bilinguals use two or more); research on bilingualism was often conducted in terms of the bilingual's individual and separate languages (the use of language A or of language B when in fact both languages are often used simultaneously); and, finally, many bilinguals still evaluate their language competencies as inadequate.

12. How does the complementarity principle help us understand the bilingual?

It helps us understand a number of phenomena. First, it reflects the true configuration of the bilingual's language repertoire: what languages are known and to what extent, what they are used for, with whom and when, why one language is less developed than another, etc. Second, it helps to explain why the bilingual's language repertoire may change over time: as the environment changes and the needs for particular language skills also change, so will the bilingual's competence in his or her various language skills. New situations, new interlocutors and new language functions will involve new linguistic needs and will therefore change the language configuration of the person involved. Third, an increasing understanding of the complementary principle has changed researchers' view of bilinguals these last years. Bilinguals are now seen not so much as the sum of two (or more) complete or incomplete monolinguals but rather as specific and fully competent speakers-hearers who have developed a communicative competence that is equal, but different in nature, to that of monolinguals. This, in turn, is leading to a redefinition of the procedure used to evaluate the bilingual's competencies. Bilinguals are now starting to be studied in terms of their total language repertoire, and the domains of use and the functions of the bilingual's various languages are now being taken into account. Finally, the complementary principle accounts for why regular bilinguals are not usually very good translators and interpreters. Some may not know the translation equivalents in the other language (words, phrases, set expressions, etc.) which in turn will lead to perception and production problems. Unless bilinguals acquired their second language in a manner which involves learning translation equivalents, many will find themselves lacking vocabulary in various domains (work, religion, politics, sports, etc.) even though some may appear to be fluent in their two languages.

Language mode, code-switching, borrowing and interference

13. You have developed the concept of language mode. Can you tell us what it is?

Language mode is the state of activation of the bilingual's languages and language processing mechanisms at a given point in time. Bilinguals find themselves at various points on a situational continuum which will result in a particular language mode. At one end of the continuum, bilinguals are in a totally monolingual language mode in that they are interacting with monolinguals of one - or the other - of the languages they know. One language is active and the other is deactivated. At the other end of the continuum, bilinguals find themselves in a bilingual language mode in that they are communicating with bilinguals who share their two (or more) languages and with whom they can mix languages (i.e. code-switch and borrow). In this case, both languages are active but the one that is used as the main language of communication (the base language) is more active than the other. These are end points but bilinguals also find themselves at intermediary points depending on such factors as interlocutor, situation, content of discourse and function of the interaction.

14. You believe that language mode is important in the study of bilinguals. Why is that?

Language mode has received relatively little attention in bilingualism research and yet it is a crucial factor: it gives a truer reflection of how bilinguals process their two languages, separately or together; it helps us understand data obtained from various bilingual populations; it can partly account for problematic or ambiguous findings relating to such topics as language representation and processing, interference, code-switching, language mixing in bilingual children, bilingual aphasics, etc.; and, finally, it is invariably present in bilingualism research as an independent, control or confounding variable and hence needs to be heeded at all times. Let me take just one example among many. In the bilingual language development literature, it has been proposed by some that children who acquire two languages simultaneously go through an early fusion stage in which the languages are in fact one system (one lexicon, one grammar, etc.). They then slowly differentiate their languages, first separating their lexicons and then their grammar. Evidence for this has come from the observation of language mixing in very young bilingual children and from the fact that there is a gradual reduction of mixing as the child grows older. However this position has been criticized by a number of researchers such as Juergen Meisel and Fred Genesee, among others, and one of the points made each time (in addition to the fact that translation equivalents may not be known in the other language; see the complementarity principle) is that the context in which the recordings were made for the studies probably induced language mixing as it was rarely (if ever) monolingual. The children in these studies were probably in a bilingual mode and hence language mixing took place.

15. There are quite a lot of misconceptions and some confusion regarding the definition of code-switching, mixing, borrowing and interference. Tell us about interference first.

As I have just said, I believe that much of the misunderstanding regarding these categories comes from the fact that researchers do not take into account the bilingual's language mode when studying bilingual language production. Language mixing (which for me is a cover term for code-switching and borrowing) does not usually occur in a monolingual mode (there are some exceptions however). In this mode though, one does find interferences which are speaker-specific deviations from the language being spoken due to the influence of the other language(s). They can occur at all levels of language (phonological, lexical, syntactic, semantic, pragmatic) and in all modalities (spoken, written or sign). Interferences are of two kinds: there are static interferences which reflect permanent traces of one language on the other (an aspect of interlanguage therefore) and there are dynamic interferences which are

the ephemeral intrusions of the other (deactivated) language as in the case of the accidental slip on the stress pattern of a word due to the stress rules of the other language, the momentary use of a syntactic structure taken from the language not being spoken, etc. Interferences can only be studied if the bilingual is in a monolingual mode as other forms of mixing (code-switching and borrowing) do not normally take place in that mode.

16. What about code-switching and borrowing then?

In a bilingual mode, once a base language has been chosen, bilinguals can bring in the other language (the "guest" or "embedded" language) in various ways. One of these ways is to code-switch, that is to shift completely to the other language for a word, a phrase, a sentence. The other way is to borrow a word or short expression from that language and to adapt it morphologically (and often phonologically) into the base language. Thus, unlike code-switching, which is the juxtaposition of two languages, borrowing is the integration of one language into another. Most often both the form and the content of a word are borrowed (to produce what has been called a loanword or more simply a borrowing). A second type of borrowing, called a loanshift, consists in either taking a word in the base language and extending its meaning to correspond to that of a word in the other language, or rearranging words in the base language along a pattern provided by the other language and thus creating a new meaning. I believe, like Shana Poplack, that it is important to distinguish idiosyncratic loans (also called "speech borrowings" or "nonce borrowings") from words which have become part of a language community's vocabulary and which monolinguals also use (called "language borrowings" or "established loans").

Psycholinguistics of bilingualism

17. How do you see of the bilingual's mental representations?

I am still very much a believer in the difference between competence and performance. The bilingual has knowledge of two or more languages (to differing levels) and uses this knowledge when perceiving and producing his/her languages, spoken individually or together in the form of mixed language. The concept of "representation" can be used to characterize knowledge (e.g. grammatical competence, lexical competence, etc.) or a stage in the actual use of language: the representation which is verbalized during language production, or the representation which is the outcome of processing during language perception (one talks of the interpretative representation then).

18. Some researchers seem to say that the bilingual memory does not exist. What is your feeling about this?

In my mind, it is important to separate memory processes from what is stored. Memory processes allow you to put information into various memories (iconic, short term, long term, etc.) and they are probably very similar, if not identical, among all speakers, be they monolingual or bilingual. However, the permanent linguistic stores (containing our lexical and grammatical knowledge) must be different, in large part, for the languages known. Bilinguals have two language networks which are both independent and interconnected. They are independent in the sense that they allow a bilingual to speak just one language. And they are interconnected in the sense that the monolingual speech of bilinguals often shows the active interference of the other language, and that when bilinguals speak to other bilinguals, they can code-switch and borrow quite readily. This view has long been defended by Michel Paradis who proposes that both languages are stored in identical ways in a single extended system, though elements of each language, because they often appear in different contexts, form

separate networks of connections, and thus a subsystem within a larger system. It is what he calls the subset hypothesis.

19. What do you think about the structure of the mental lexicon? Weinreich's categories are a bit out of date but what are your views of the compound, coordinate and subordinate distinction?

I have a lot of respect for Uriel Weinreich's work which, I think, has not always been understood clearly. His categories did not only apply to lexical meaning but to other levels of language too and I do not believe he stated that bilinguals could only reflect one type. I cover the whole controversy in several pages in my book (pp. 240-244) and after rereading what I wrote, I still agree with the main points I make. The bilingual's linguistic knowledge is far too complex to be categorized into one of three categories when most bilinguals are a bit of all three. For example, at the level of the lexicon, researchers now hypothesize that within the very same bilingual, some words in the two lexicons will have a coordinate relationship, others a compound relationship and still others a subordinate relationship, especially if the languages were acquired in different cultural settings and at different times.

20. Would you briefly summarize the essence of your Bilingual Model of Lexical Access?

Back in 1988, I proposed an interactive activation model of word recognition in bilinguals, which has since been named BIMOLA (Bilingual Model of Lexical Access). It is strongly inspired by McClelland and Elman's TRACE model and it is governed by two basic assumptions. First, it is assumed that bilinguals have two language networks (features, phonemes, words, etc.) which are independent yet interconnected. They are independent in the sense that they allow a bilingual to speak just one language but they are also interconnected in that the monolingual speech of bilinguals often shows the active interference of the other language, and in that bilinguals can code-switch and borrow quite readily when they speak to other bilinguals. The second assumption is that in the monolingual language mode, one language network is strongly activated while the other is only very weakly activated (the resting activation level of the units of this other network is therefore very low) whereas in the bilingual language mode, both language networks are activated but one more than the other. In BIMOLA, the feature level is common to both languages but the next two levels - phonemes and words - are organized according to the subset hypothesis, that is, both independently (each language is represented by a subset of units) but also interdependently (both subsets are enclosed in a larger set). At both the word and phoneme levels, units can have close or distant form neighbors, both within a language and between languages. Connections are unidirectional between features and phonemes and bidirectional between phonemes and words. Features activate phonemes which in turn activate words. Descending connections bearing information about the listener's base language and language mode serve to activate words which in turn activate phonemes. Language activation (reflected by the overall activation of one language system over the other) takes place through these descending connections but also through within language connections at the phoneme and word levels. The model has been refined these last years and implemented on computer by Nicolas Lévy.

Deafness and bilingualism

21. Your paper on the right of the deaf child to be bilingual has been translated into several languages. Tell us about it.

One day, back in 1999, I was asked to give a short presentation on the bilingualism of deaf children. As you may know, I had already written several papers on the bilingualism of the

Deaf. When planning this particular talk (and then paper), I came up with the idea of starting with what a deaf child needs to do with language, that is, communicate early with his/her parents, develop his/her cognitive abilities, acquire knowledge of the world, communicate fully with the surrounding world, and acculturate into the world of the hearing and of the Deaf. I then continued with the fact that if these behaviors are truly important for the child, then the only way of meeting these needs is to allow the child to become bilingual in sign language and speech. Sign language can help trigger the language acquisition device, give a natural language to the child in the first years, and also help the acquisition of the oral language. I ended the paper by stating that one never regrets knowing several languages but one can certainly regret not knowing enough, especially if one's own development is at stake. The deaf child should have the right to grow up bilingual and it is our responsibility to help him/her do so. Since then, this short paper has had more success than any of my other writings! It has been translated into some twenty languages (among them Chinese, Japanese, Russian, Spanish, Hungarian, etc.) and has appeared in numerous publications.

22. Is the situation of deaf children changing? In some countries the oral vs. sign debate is still raging.

I do believe that things are changing since the bilingual approach that many of us defend does not put into question the importance of either the oral language or sign language. Both are needed and so the defenders of the one, or of the other, feel less threatened by this middle of the road approach. In addition, since recent research has shown that sign language can help the acquisition of the oral language, in particular that of writing skills, parents, educators and language pathologists are showing real interest in this other way of doing things. Many schools in North and South America (e.g. Canada, the United States, Nicaragua, Colombia, etc.) follow a bilingual approach. This is also the case of Scandinavia, The Netherlands and other European countries. Still other countries are slowly opening themselves up to this approach. I firmly believe that in the years to come, deaf children will be allowed to be bilingual in their very early childhood.

Current research

23. Tell us something about your current research on bilingualism.

Since I am an experimental psycholinguist by training, I am continuing experimental (and computational work with N. Léwy) on bilingual speech processing (see, for example, our recent study with D. Guillelmon on the processing of gender marking by early and late bilinguals). The aim is to better understand how bilinguals process language when in a monolingual mode (and hence when their other language is deactivated) and when in a bilingual mode (that is, when they produce and perceive a base-language as well as code-switches and borrowings from the other language). I also write general papers on the bilingual and bicultural person (hearing and deaf) and I keep "fighting" against well-established (but false) ideas about bilingualism. In addition, as you know, I have been very busy these last five years editing, with fellow editors, the journal Bilingualism: Language and Cognition (Cambridge University Press). As soon as I step down from the co-editorship, I would like to write another book on bilingualism which will summarize all the work that I have done on the subject since Life with Two Languages.

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