

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ABOUT BILINGUALISM

Document drawn up by the Bicocca Language Group
to answer the questions asked by the participants
during the Meet Me Tonight 2020 event

1. Who speaks English in addition to his/her native language can be considered bilingual?

Yes, a person who speaks English, in addition to his/her native language, is considered bilingual. To speak English does not mean to know only a few words, but perfect knowledge of a language is not required to be considered bilingual.

2. Is it possible to raise a bilingual child in a monolingual family?

Yes, children can become bilingual also if they grow up in a monolingual family. This is often the case for children of immigrants, who speak their own language at home and the language of the country of residence outside the family environment. Children may also become bilingual by attending a bilingual school. It is important to remember, however, that it is crucial that children are exposed to high-quality input. Therefore, we recommend that parents raise their children in their native language or the language in which they feel most comfortable.

3. It is possible to become bilingual as adolescents? Is it possible to become bilingual even as adults, after that the optimal time window to learn a language is closed?

It is possible to become bilingual at any age. What is most important for reaching high proficiency in a language is not the age of a person but the input received, that has to be quantitatively and qualitatively adequate (to simplify, you cannot learn a language properly if you are hardly ever exposed to it and you are taught wrong sentences). There are researchers who say that there is an 'optimal time window' for learning a second language, which means that learning a new language would be easier for children up to a certain age. However, this is still highly debated.



4. A person who knows Latin can be considered bilingual?

Latin is considered a dead language because these days there are no native speakers of Latin. However, we can imagine situations where Latin is still used as a spoken language. For example, Latin is used in many official and unofficial contexts from the Catholic Church; that is why some of its members who currently communicate in Latin can be considered bilingual.

5. Since a bilingual person is not necessarily native speaker of both languages, is there a lexical distinction between people who speak two languages since birth and people who have learned one of the languages in the course of life?

The definition of 'bilingualism' is very broad; it may include those people who learn two languages from birth as well as people who learn a second language in school. Nevertheless, these are different types of bilingualism, and we have different words to describe the ways in which people can become bilingual. For example, we can distinguish between early bilingualism (in children) and late bilingualism (when a second language is learned in adulthood). Furthermore, we distinguish between simultaneous bilingualism (i.e. children who learn two languages at the same time from birth) and sequential bilingualism (i.e. children who start learning one language at home, followed by another language at a later point, usually when they enter school). When we talk about 'second language learners', we may differentiate between contexts in which a foreign language is learned in a classroom setting and contexts in which a person learns a second language because he/she is immersed in a new environment in which this language is spoken (for example, when someone moves to another country). In sum, bilingualism is a very diverse phenomenon, which may vary depending on the context and time in which a person learns his/her languages.



6. Can a language be considered as the first language even if it has not been acquired as first?

In bi- and multilingualism research, the terminology is quite complex. In the earlier days, people referred to first, second and third languages, which is still quite common in societal language. In order to address the problem of naming the language that one has learnt as a first language, which is not used as frequently any longer, the terms dominant or non-dominant language are used, which doesn't refer to the order of languages acquired, but to their current state. In order to highlight which one is the language used from birth, one can also use the term "native language". Furthermore, people distinguish between minority and majority languages: in Italy, for example, Italian would be the majority language whereas dialects are considered the minority languages. Minority languages can also refer to bigger societal groups, such as Chinese (Mandarin & Wenzhounese) in the community of Prato, Tuscany. So with respect to the question: yes, we could say that a second language can become the dominant language.

7. A bilingual child who loses his first language for lack of use can easily retrieve that language as an adult?

This issue has not been sufficiently investigated. Some studies suggested that the first language of an adopted child is completely lost if it is not used anymore. However, a more recent study proposed that the first language, even if not used, leaves a trace. This trace makes the relearning of the "lost" language easier in comparison with those who learn that language for the first time. This issue needs to be further investigated.



8. *We know that learning a third language is easier if you are bilingual. Is this true even if the third language is a tonal language (as Chinese Mandarin) or, in general, a language very different from the ones already known by that person?*

Learning a third language if you are bilingual is easier mainly because you already know the strategies that are useful for learning a foreign language. In particular, bilinguals who learn a third language are more flexible and more efficient precisely in the use of those strategies, that they have already applied while learning the second language. Moreover, given that they already know two languages, bilinguals have a wide base of words and linguistic rules that are useful for the acquisition of a third language. Besides these general advantages, that are valid regardless of the languages acquired, if two languages are similar it is easier to learn the second language since the first language may serve as a base.

9. *Is it harder for bilingual children who have learning disorders or special educational needs (SEN) to distinguish between the two languages?*

The way in which learning disorders and SEN affect child development varies a lot, thus it is difficult to find a generic answer to the question. Bilingualism doesn't cause language or learning disorders, but when cognitive processes like attention or memory are impaired, language learning (be it one or more languages) can be more challenging. This means that children with cognitive problems or SEN can be exposed to more than one language - parents should in any case speak the language they feel most competent in to guarantee high-quality language input. However, the (bilingual) language environment of children with cognitive problems or SEN could be optimized to facilitate focusing on the language input, i.e. by eliminating disturbing noise, increasing the number of repetitions, reading out the same story repeatedly (supported by pictures).



10. Replacing words of your native language with words from a second language is similar to what bilingual children do when they mix the two languages they are acquiring?

In some cases, using words from a second language when speaking your native language may be similar to the type of language mixing that we often see in bilingual children. For example, an Italian speaker who is fluent in English and uses it very often in daily life, may experience a situation in which an English word or language structure will come to mind before the Italian word/structure. As a result, they may use some English when speaking Italian (especially when talking about topics that he/she usually talks about in English). This may be similar to language mixing in bilingual children: in both cases, a speaker who knows two languages may experience cross-linguistic influence. Furthermore, both bilingual children and bilingual adults often creatively mix their two languages on purpose when speaking with other fluent bilingual speakers. They may switch languages within a conversation or within a sentence: this typical bilingual behavior is called code switching. However, in other cases, an adult may use words from a foreign language when speaking in their native language, even when they are not so fluent in this second language. For example, an English speaker may use the French word “café” instead of “coffee”. This is not a characteristic of bilingual speech, because such words are also used by monolingual speakers. Such words are also referred to as loanwords.



11. Is it more difficult for a dyslexic child to learn a second language?

Being dyslexic doesn't necessarily imply that a child has difficulties in acquiring oral language(s), but often language and reading skills are related. Nevertheless, bilingual dyslexic children can be perfectly fluent in their spoken languages, but show difficulties in (both) written language(s). Differences in the orthographic systems of different languages don't allow for a direct comparison. Generally speaking, children who show reading and writing problems in their first/majority language are also likely to have difficulties when learning to read and write in a second language (be it a language they hear at home or in the context of second language learning at school, e.g. English).

12. How can the vocabulary of a bilingual child be improved? Are there activities that can be done to increase his/her vocabulary?

There are several ways to support a child's vocabulary development. For example, you may read books together, sing songs, play games or engage your child in new activities in which it is exposed to novel words (which may vary from cooking together to going to the zoo). In general, it is good if your child has the opportunity to interact with native speakers (including adults and children). So if you do not speak Italian in your family and you want to support your child's knowledge of Italian, you may want to enroll him/her in Italian daycare or after-school activities. On the other hand, if you wish to support your child's development of another language spoken at home, regular contact with grandparents or other native speakers may be helpful. It is important to remember, however, that bilingual children have to learn twice as many words as monolingual children, and it is therefore expected that they may need a bit more time before they arrive at the same level as their monolingual peers.



13. If a bilingual child aged around 5 has a restricted vocabulary and uses simple and sometimes incorrect sentences does he/she need help?

This depends a lot on the language input that the child receives, so it is impossible to find a generic answer to this question. Children who hear two languages in an equal amount from birth onwards can be expected to use a relatively comprehensive vocabulary and more complex sentences. Instead, if the child has only been exposed to the second language for a shorter period of time, language abilities can still be more limited in comparison with monolingual children. Sometimes we observe that the comprehension skills of bilingual children are very advanced while they are hesitant in actively speaking the language - those children might need a little more time to become comfortable with the language or to identify the need of actively using that language (maybe because the child knows that the conversation partners understand both languages). If a child shows a delay in only one of the languages spoken, this is most likely due to reduced input, so language enhancement helps to increase the amount of input for that language. Instead, if the child shows difficulties in both languages spoken, a specialist (pediatric or Speech and Language Therapist) should be consulted. The concept of misdiagnoses is important: in case of overdiagnosis, children are sent to speech and language therapy even though they show difficulties in only one of the languages spoken and those difficulties can be explained by the reduced amount of input. Underdiagnosis means that a child who actually needs language therapy does not receive it because the language difficulties he/she shows are thought to be due to the variation in bilingual language acquisition. Early risk identification of language disorders and early intervention is beneficial.

For any bibliographic reference, please contact us by email!
bilinguismoconta.bicocca@gmail.com