

2 Establishing bilingualism in the family

The family

This study looks closely at two Australian-born boys's acquisition of bilingualism in English and German. The two boys, Thomas and Frank, were born on 9 November 1973 and 1 October 1975 respectively and have never been outside Australia. They have a sister, Katrina, born on 13 February 1981, but she features only peripherally, since, at the time of writing, she has not begun to speak. From birth, the children have been addressed by their mother and most other people in English, whilst their father has always spoken to them in German. This situation differs from most of those reported in the literature on bilingual families in that not only is English the dominant and official language of the community in which the family lives and the native language of the mother, but it is also the native language of the *father*. Such a situation makes possible the observation of many factors affecting the fostering and maintenance of a minority language, and, since the father is not a native speaker of German, it also affords some insight into difficulties experienced by parents who, by choice or necessity, communicate with their children in a second language.

Both parents were born in the Australian island state of Tasmania. They both come from monolingual English-speaking families and speak General Australian English as their native language. As far as can be ascertained, both sides of the family have consisted of only English-speakers for at least six generations. The father's great-great-grandfather, for example, was born in England in 1814 and, like the forefathers of most Australians, arrived in Australia as an immigrant, albeit not a voluntary one. He ran foul of the harsh penal system of the time, being sentenced in Nottingham at the ripe old age of thirteen to transportation for life to Van Diemen's Land (present-day Tasmania) for the obviously serious offence of misappropriating a brace-and-bit.

Both parents' first contact with foreign languages came in high school, an experience which had not been available to their own parents. The mother learnt French for four years and did moderately well at it, but she did not like the subject particularly, finding the pronunciation of the language strange and difficult.

The father studied both French and German for five years at high school, where, encouraged by enthusiastic and skilful language teachers, the two languages quickly became his favourite and best subjects. This interest continued on to university, French being studied for a further three years and German for another four years as major subjects in a Bachelor of Arts honours degree at the University of Tasmania. He attained the degree with First Class Honours in German. This was followed by four years working on a doctoral dissertation in German linguistics. Fourteen months of this time were spent studying German linguistics and Dutch and carrying out linguistic field-work at a university in Germany. Since completing his doctorate the father has taught languages at a high school, colleges of advanced education and a university. Because of his occupation, and also because of his interest in shortwave broadcasts, particularly those in German, he has been able to maintain a high degree of competence in the language. His German could not be called perfect in the English sense of the word, i.e. not entirely flawless, although errors in grammar and pronunciation are rare. Native speakers of German have referred to his German as *perfekt* which, in its German sense, means "excellent". Some native speakers of German, particularly those not from North Germany or those who have lived in Australia for a number of years, have mistaken him for a native speaker of the language. He feels confident about using German in most situations, although he is aware that his command of the language is not equal to that of his native language, English. (See p. 209 for details of the father's language dominance, and pp. 146ff. for references to his accuracy.)

The mother's motivation to learn German came shortly after her marriage at the age of twenty-one. There was a distinct possibility, which later eventuated, that her husband would receive a travelling scholarship from the German Academic Exchange Service which, together with an Australian Government Postgraduate Scholarship he already held, would enable him to conduct research for his doctorate in Germany the following year. Since she wished to continue practising her profession of nursing sister while in Germany, and since her return fare to Australia would have to be earned in this way, motivation to learn some German was, understandably, strong. After eleven months of tuition from her husband she had acquired a rudimentary knowledge of German grammar, a vocabulary of about 1,500 words, and a reasonably accurate pronunciation, which enabled her to

participate somewhat hesitantly in simple conversations. She took care to learn carefully the medical terminology she thought she would need in a German hospital.

Even so, her minimal competence was not to be enough to shield her from a number of rather traumatic linguistic experiences, experiences most likely encountered by many an immigrant, guest-worker or simply traveller abroad. On arrival in Germany, the mother took up employment firstly as a nursing aide, then, when her qualifications were finally recognized, as a sister on a private ward of a large hospital where the medical personnel and cleaning staff were predominantly monolingual speakers of German. Recourse to English when faced with a linguistic predicament was therefore not possible. Aided only by a small pocket dictionary, she had to cope with being in sole charge of the ward three hours a day, answering the telephone, dealing with emergencies, and so on. Whilst this experience was initially rather nerve-racking and stressful, it did bring about a dramatic improvement in her comprehension of and fluency in German. Within a short time, patients unaware of her origin thought she was Dutch, in itself a kind of compliment and an indication of her progress in German.

On her return to Australia, she decided to consolidate the knowledge of German she had acquired by studying it more formally as a subject for the Tasmanian Higher School Certificate (H.S.C.), the prerequisite for studying the subject at university. This year of study proved very beneficial in increasing her proficiency in German grammar and giving her much practice in writing the language. During the year she won first prize in a German essay competition run by the German Australian Club in Tasmania, and in the end-of-year H.S.C. exam gained 166/200, the second highest mark. Since then she has maintained her German mainly through reading and, of course, through being consistently exposed to the language in the home. She still speaks it fluently and her level of comprehension is very high. Moreover, her experience with German had aroused her interest in other languages and cultures. As a hobby, she and her husband studied Indonesian together at H.S.C. level, both reaching a good level of competence.

The father also sat, for interest's sake, the H.S.C. Dutch exam and obtained a good mark. In addition he has acquired a good reading knowledge of the closely related Afrikaans.

It needs to be pointed out that in this study the children usually address their father as Bert, pronounced [bɛrt] as in German, and that in German Thomas is usually addressed and referred to as Ernie, pronounced [ɛrni]. These are nicknames which date from when Thomas was aged 4;9 and was fascinated by the television show *SESAME STREET* and by German comic

books (*Sesamstraße*) which the father had about the same show. Thomas subsequently assigned each family member the name of a character from *SESAME STREET*, and these two have remained and become the usual forms of address in German. Before this time the father was referred to as either Dad [dad] or Schorsch, and these forms of address will also occur in some of the quotations given.

As would no doubt sooner or later become obvious to the reader, the present author and the father referred to in this study are one and the same person; such constant, close observation of the children would be very difficult, if not impossible, for an outsider to carry out effectively. The account has been written in the third person in an attempt to look at the children's linguistic development more detachedly. Of course, as any parent knows, it is difficult for someone so closely involved with the children to remain completely objective; nevertheless, every effort has been made to give an honest picture of their bilingual development, with the problems and failures being recorded along with the benefits and successes. Fortunately, as will be seen, the successes have outweighed the failures by a considerable margin.

Motives for creating bilingualism in the family

In this case there were several motives for the parents' decision to raise their children bilingually. Firstly, both parents believed in the intrinsic value of a knowledge of more than one language, providing as it does an awareness and appreciation of another culture and its way of thinking. They themselves had gained much pleasure and insight from their acquaintance with other languages and wished to share this with their children, just as music-loving parents might encourage their children to appreciate music and perhaps even to play a musical instrument.

Secondly, on a more practical level, due to the father's profession and interests, it was probable that the family would at some time in the future be visiting or living temporarily in a German-speaking country. In view of the difficulties encountered by the mother during her stay in Germany, both parents were convinced that, if the children were fluent in German, the time needed to adjust to the new environment would be significantly reduced and such a stay would consequently be much more enjoyable for both children and parents, particularly if the children had to attend school while there. Observations of difficulties encountered by the children of guest-workers in Germany and by recently arrived immigrant children in Australia reinforced this conviction.

Thirdly, both parents were curious about the difficulties seemingly associated with attempts to maintain a language other than English in the Australian setting. They knew of many parents who had as their native language a language other than English and who had not succeeded in passing it on to their children. This seemed to be particularly so when one marriage partner was Australian-born. Clyne's³ analysis of the 1976 Australian Census shows, to take one example, that 27.8% of Australian residents born in Germany no longer regularly used German. The shift to exclusive use of English among Australian-born children of two German-born parents is about double this figure: in Melbourne, for example, 58.3% of such children use English only. The chances of languages other than English being passed on diminish even more in mixed marriages, that is, marriages where one spouse is born overseas, the other in Australia. For example, if we look at marriages in Melbourne in which one parent is German-born, the other born in Australia, the U.K. or Eire, we find that only 6% of children with a German mother and 4% with a German father speak German. Moreover, such mixed marriages are by no means unusual in Australia: for the period 1969-1973, for instance, Price⁴ shows that 38% of males and 24% of females from twelve different groups of immigrants born in non-English-speaking countries married Australian-born persons.

Fourthly, the father was also interested in the problems faced by parents who, by choice or necessity, use a language which is not their native language to communicate with their children, a situation also by no means unusual in immigrant families in Australia where English has in many cases become the language of the family.

Fifthly, the father felt a need for a regular conversation partner willing to talk only German with him at all times and on all topics. He had, it is true, in his work and in various organizations he belonged to, some opportunities for speaking German on a reasonably regular basis. However, by their nature, such conversations tended to be rather formal and technical. Informal conversations about ordinary, everyday, even mundane matters rarely took place. The father could have used German in the home with his wife for such conversations, which they indeed did do occasionally for practice, but these interchanges, whilst enjoyable and helpful, did have an air of artificiality about them. In addition, the father had discovered that many German-speaking immigrants who had lived for some time in Australia were unfortunately often more interested in demonstrating their knowledge of English, even if it was poor, than conversing in German, even among themselves.

It was felt (and hoped) that a child would have no inhibitions about speaking German to his father, and would regard it as natural to use it at all

times with him. As will be seen, this feeling proved in large part to be justified.