



BILINGUALS: EXOTIC BIRDS OR EVERYDAY PEOPLE?

by Johan Acosta



Grandpa shouts, "Dinner's ready" in Danish. My mother asks me in English to lay the table. As I do so, I catch the theme tune of the Brazilian soap opera on TV in the living room, where my sister is relaxing. She speaks perfect Portuguese. My father asks her to record the programme in his native Spanish, and we take our places at the table. And what's on the menu? Italian meatballs.

We know we aren't a normal family. At any moment, you might hear conversations in four different languages, and almost everyone understands almost everything. But what is normal these days? My mother is half-Danish, half-English, and my father, who is from Bolivia, speaks Spanish and Guarani. Because of my mother's work (she's now retired), we lived in Brazil, Italy and Germany, so we picked up three more languages. Now as adults, my sister and I both speak six languages.

Being bilingual, or in our case multilingual, has so many advantages. All the recent research suggests we benefit in many ways: social, cultural, economic, academic, and intellectual. The research has also destroyed some of those persistent myths.

One of the myths is that bilingualism is uncommon, as if we bilinguals are like rare, exotic birds. The truth is that around fifty percent of the world's inhabitants are bilingual. The continents with the most linguistic diversity are Asia and Africa. In Nigeria alone, 500 languages are spoken, in India 400.

Some people believe that you have to learn both languages as a child to be truly bilingual. My sister and I are fortunate in this respect, but we know countless people who have mastered a second language as adults. They may not have such perfect pronunciation as those who acquire their second language as children, but they are still completely fluent and accurate.

Another myth about bilinguals concerns identity. Some people think we have split personalities. As kids, my sister and I were often asked "But where are you really from? Don't you get confused?" Not at all. I am me, the product of many cultures. I can switch languages easily, according to where I am and who I'm with, and this seems completely natural to me.

As for the benefits, bilinguals do better on certain tests, are better protected against mental illnesses such as Alzheimer's, gain insights into other cultures, have access to more of the world's information, and are in some contexts more employable. Being bilingual has made me who I am, and for that I'm grateful.

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A Read the title of the text. What do you think it will discuss? Read to find out.

B Read the text again and match the questions to the answers

What six languages do you think the writer and his sister speak?

How do you think the writer learnt each of his languages?

How many of the world's people are thought to be bilingual?

What are those who learn their second language as children better at compared to those who learn a second language as adults?

What health benefit of being bilingual is mentioned in the text?

1 around fifty percent

2 Danish, English, Portuguese, Spanish, Italian, German

3 protection against mental illnesses such as Alzheimer's

4 Danish and English from his mother; Spanish from his father; Portuguese, Italian and German from living in countries where those languages are spoken.

5 pronunciation

C Match words or phrases in the text with the meanings 1-6 below.

1 relating to the language you grew up speaking

(paragraph 1)

2 learnt by listening/watching other people

(paragraph 2)

3 speaking many languages (paragraph 3)

4 false ideas that people continue to believe and

repeat (paragraph 3)

5 learn without needing to try hard, e.g. a language

(paragraph 5)

6 understand important truths about a subject

(paragraph 7)

pick up (pick something up)

persistent myths

acquire

multilingual

gain insights

native