



Babel

Young Writers' Competition undergraduate winner

Abhishek Dedhe is the undergraduate winner of our 2017 Young Writers' Competition. Here, Abhishek looks at the reasons why immigrant parents in the US face an unexpectedly tough choice.

BEING BILINGUAL IN AMERICA

Not exactly a piece of cake

“Daddy, मैं तुम्हारे head को थोपटा रही हूँ” says little Raina innocently, eliciting the laughter of her parents. Her Hindi-speaking father and Marathi-speaking mother are amused that four-year-old Raina, who lives in California, has decided to mix three languages – English, Marathi and Hindi – in the same sentence. Raina’s parents laugh

off Raina’s code-switching – her use of more than one language in the same utterance. However, other immigrant parents in America do not have such a relaxed attitude.

The US has the largest immigrant population in the world. New immigrants to the American melting pot bring varied cultures, cuisines, customs and languages. However, despite a large immigrant population and the widespread acceptance of immigrants, only 21% of American adults are fluent

in more than one language. This stands in stark contrast with the European Union: although immigrants account for less than a tenth of the population of the EU, more than half of its residents are bilingual. What accounts for this discrepancy? I look here at how immigrant parents in the US are faced with a tough choice: whether or not to raise their children as bilinguals. It turns out that in America, there is no obvious answer to this dilemma.

A historical perspective

Monolinguals are often puzzled, amused, and even worried about bilingual idiosyncrasies such as Raina's code-switching.

Natalie Darcy, a language and education specialist, observes that early 20th century psychologists and linguists were concerned about the “problems” and “handicapping influences” of bilingualism, which were thought to range from low IQ to stunted cognitive abilities. However, Darcy found that these early studies often employed flawed methodologies and inconsistent definitions, leading to biased results. For example, researchers would label subjects ‘bilingual’ based only on their national origin or family name; they did not control for socioeconomic status, and would often use English to test bilinguals who were not

proficient in English. Darcy helped bring about a paradigm shift in the mid-20th century, when the methodologies and definitions for bilingual research finally became standardised and the winds of bilingual research began flowing in the opposite direction.

Scientists began to realise that bilingualism does not have the harmful consequences it had been assumed to have. They felt that, in fact, bilingualism may actually have its benefits. Bilingual research exploded: the number of published articles about bilingualism more than tripled between 1997 and 2005. Popular media outlets like The New Yorker, The New York





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Times and Scientific American quickly picked up on this rise in interest, and the ‘bilingual advantage’ began to capture the public’s attention.

This advantage mostly related to enhanced executive control: it was thought that bilinguals may be better at the mental processes involved in planning and multitasking. Scientists reasoned that since bilinguals constantly juggle between two languages, they

must also be capable of switching effectively between unrelated tasks. This multitasking ability allows bilinguals to ignore distractions and remain focused on the task at hand. This enhanced brain activity also helps protect bilinguals from neurodegenerative disorders. For example, it has been found that bilinguals have a delayed onset of dementia and are not as severely affected by Alzheimer’s disease as monolinguals.

The American public has been quick to take note of such developments, especially where it has been speculated that the advantages of bilingualism may extend to the socioeconomic world. Books like Ana L Flores and Roxana A. Soto’s *Bilingual is Better* make strong claims about the contribution of bilingualism to one’s success in life. At the same time, statistics about income, such as the fact that Spanish-English bilinguals annually earn about \$7,000 more than their monolingual counterparts, enthrall the American public.

Rethinking the bilingual advantage

However, the media and the scientific community often fail to address the many challenges faced by immigrant parents who raise their children as bilinguals. Parents often worry that their children will be confused by the two languages and end up mixing them up. Instances like Raina’s code-switching confirm their suspicions. These fears aren’t completely unfounded. Early linguists considered code-switching to be substandard – a departure from the ‘pure’ and ‘unadulterated’ forms of language. Utterances like Raina’s 3-language hodge-podge would probably give them nightmares. And even though most current

scholars do not hold such views, there is still a stigma attached to code-switching in American classrooms and among the general public. Research by Cecilia Montes-Alcala and Ana Roca shows that code-switching among Spanish-English bilinguals is often attributed to “illiteracy, lack of formal education, and lack of proficiency in one or both languages”. Unfortunately, immigrant parents are more likely to know about this social stigma than about the obscure scholarly views that tout the bilingual advantage. Given that many immigrants come to the US in search of a better life for their families, it is only natural that they try to shield their children from such social stigma and are hesitant about raising them as bilingual.

There are also some cognitive disadvantages to bilingualism. While these disadvantages are not as handicapping as 20th century scholars thought, they are worth considering. Recent research by Ellen Bialystok has found that bilinguals score lower than monolinguals on vocabulary tests. While the combined vocabulary of bilinguals might be comparable to that of monolinguals, their vocabulary for each language is smaller. For example, while a bilingual and a monolingual may each have an overall vocabulary of 1,000 words, the bilingual’s vocabulary is distributed across two languages (e.g. 500 words of language 1, and 500 words of language 2). Thus the competence of bilinguals in any one of the languages that they know is significantly lower than that of monolinguals.

Additional research by Ellen Bialystok, Fergus Craik and Gigi Luk suggests that the extra processing costs of having

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two active languages leads to fluent bilinguals having lower verbal skills. Bialystok and her colleagues have reason to believe that these disadvantages are not limited to vocabulary, and that they extend to other areas of language such as syntax (sentence structure). On a related note, Tomas Folke and his colleagues talk of a “bilingual disadvantage” in ‘metacognition’, the term for the ability to evaluate one’s own cognitive performance or, more simply, to “think about our own thinking”. This is worrying because metacognition plays a central role in different aspects of everyday life. Furthermore, the scientific community has recently begun questioning whether the ‘bilingual advantage’ has been oversold and is becoming increasingly sceptical about research which touts what Kenneth Paap, Hunter Johnson and Oliver Sawi call the drastic “unforeseen benefits of bilingualism”.

Lessons from abroad

The sometimes contradictory nature of this research does little to help immigrant parents make an informed decision. Parents attempt to juggle the pros and cons of raising their children as bilinguals: how do they decide between social

stigma and higher pay, or between an underdeveloped vocabulary and a lower risk of dementia? Fortunately for such worried parents, many websites and blogs provide advice on raising bilingual children. Many parents also get information from countries where, unlike in the US, bilingualism is the norm. Researchers have found that more than 50% of children throughout the world are bilingual. They also estimate that bilinguals may greatly outnumber monolinguals in many countries around the world. One such multilingual country has embraced its multilingualism as an asset rather than dismissing it as a problem: in India, multilingualism is encouraged – even expected. In urban areas, it is common for people to be proficient in 2 or even 3 languages. Consequently, most urban Indian parents don’t spend much time worrying about whether or not to raise their children as bilinguals.

It may therefore seem that the concerns of immigrant parents in the US are unnecessary. However, while India does provide us with important insights, it is crucial to note some of the key differences between the US and India. India is what Kurt Braunmüller

and Christoph Gabriel call a multilingual society, where many languages are spoken and used alongside each other in day-to-day life. On the other hand, the US is a largely monolingual society where English is almost the exclusive language of the public sphere. Raising one’s children as bilinguals in monolingual societies presents challenges which do not exist in multilingual ones. These challenges arise from the different language-learning environments that these societies have to offer. James Cummins, who studies the dynamics of language in monolingual and multilingual societies, distinguishes between two kinds of language learning environments: “subtractive” ones where competence in a second language is achieved at the cost of first language competence, and “additive” ones where second language competence does not compromise competence in the first language.

Given the current state of social stigma against bilinguals, it seems that the US provides a subtractive environment for bilinguals. In her book *Power, Prestige, and Bilingualism*, Anne-Marie de Mejiá describes the position of prestige that English has in American society. De Mejiá illustrates how a variety of social and educational issues mean that an additive environment is not possible, including the Speak English movement, which holds that one has to speak English in order to fully assimilate in the US, and the teaching environment in ESL (English as a Second Language) programmes, where children are actively discouraged from code-switching (one of the most integral parts of the bilingual experience). In light of such unfavourable conditions,

immigrant parents in the US are forced to acknowledge that their decision is much more difficult than that of parents from multilingual societies across the world who would never consider *not* raising their children as bilinguals.

Tippling the scales

Immigrant parents in the US must weigh the pros against the cons and try to judge each argument in an objective, disinterested manner. As we have seen, this is not a simple task. However, it is here where a different type of argument comes in, one which may just tip the scales in favour of raising children as bilinguals. While this argument may not appeal to the mind, in my opinion it definitely appeals to the heart.

The crux of this argument is based on the inseparable relation between language and culture. If immigrant children know the language of their parents, then they can connect with their ancestral culture. It means that they can bring smiles to the faces of their grandparents when they ask them “तुम्ही कसे आहात?” (‘How are you?’) from halfway across the world. It means that they know the histories behind their own names, and the stories behind their religions. And more importantly, it means that immigrant children don’t form stereotypes about their own culture: consider the contrast between an Arab-American child getting to know about the Arab world via only the English-using American media, and an Arabic-English bilingual child who is able to learn about the Middle East through both English and Arabic information sources. Who do you think will be able to form a more balanced opinion? And just consider how much misunderstanding could

be avoided by a child who can tell bullies that the meaning of ‘Allahu Akbar’ is simply ‘God is great!’, rather than anything more threatening. While language may sometimes create barriers, it is in fact better at breaking them.

The importance of breaking barriers cannot be overstated, especially in our increasingly multicultural world. The noted language philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein famously said that “The limits of my language are the limits of my world”. While many current psycholinguists

may not subscribe to such an extreme version of linguistic determinism, they do agree that the language one speaks helps shape the lens (or lenses?) through which one looks at the world. Knowing more than one language helps make us aware that there may be more than one way of thinking about an issue – an attitude that I believe is greatly lacking, yet extremely necessary, in today’s world. ¶

Find out more

Books

Anne-Marie de Mejiá (2002) *Power, Prestige, and Bilingualism: International Perspectives on Elite Bilingual Education*, Multilingual Matters – discusses the connection between language and social power and prestige.

Articles

Ellen Bialystok, Fergus I. M. Craik and Morris Freedman (2007) ‘Bilingualism as a protection against the onset of symptoms of dementia’, in *Neuropsychologia* 45 – discusses the protective role of bilingualism against dementia.

Ellen Bialystok, Fergus I. Craik and Gigi Luk (2012) ‘Bilingualism: Consequences for mind and brain’, in *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 16(4) – a comprehensive summary of current bilingual research.

Natalie T. Darcy (1953) ‘A review of the literature on the effects of bilingualism upon the measurement of intelligence’, in *The Pedagogical Seminary and Journal of Genetic Psychology* 82(1) – a paper that helped dispel stigma and myths about bilingualism in academia.

Tomas Folke, Julia Ouzia, Peter Bright, Benedetto De Martino and Roberto Filippi (2016) ‘A bilingual disadvantage in metacognitive processing’, in *Cognition* 150 – a recent paper which attempts to quell overinflated accounts of the ‘bilingual advantage’.

Subhash (2013) ‘Three language education formula in multilingual India: Problems and prospects’, in *International Journal of Educational Research*, 1(4) – an overview of the Three Language Formula, India’s multilingual educational framework.

Online

Fred Genesee’s ‘A short guide to raising children bilingually’ is an instructive guide for parents planning to raise their children bilingual. Available at [psych.mcgill.ca/perpg/fac/genesee/A Short Guide to Raising Children Bilingually.pdf](http://psych.mcgill.ca/perpg/fac/genesee/A%20Short%20Guide%20to%20Raising%20Children%20Bilingually.pdf).

Heather Timmons’ ‘If bilingual is good, is trilingual better?’ provides an insight into non-Western multilingual societies. Available at india.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/03/20/if-bilingual-is-good-is-trilingual-better.

Ask a linguist

Experts answer your questions



“Is English the only European language to have tag questions?”

Tag questions (also called ‘question tags’) are an interesting linguistic phenomenon. Technically, they are not originally questions, but rather statements which are turned into questions by adding something at the end. In English, for example, the statement ‘You like to read’ can be turned into a tag question by adding ‘don’t you?’ to the end: ‘You like to read, don’t you?’

We use tag questions for a number of reasons, for example to ask for the listener’s approval, assurance, agreement, or simply to make sure that they are still listening. They are often used for pragmatic reasons, without the expectation of a direct answer, for example to express irony or disappointment (‘You’re a great friend, aren’t you?’). The fact that they are not originally questions is also reflected in the fact that they often have a falling intonation pattern in English, i.e. we say them like statements rather than questions, for which our intonation would usually rise at the end.

In English, a question tag consists of an auxiliary verb (e.g. ‘do’, ‘be’, ‘have’, ‘will’) and a pronoun – as if you were asking if the sentence was true. If the

verb in the sentence is positive, then the question tag will be negative (‘You like to read, don’t you?’); if the verb in the sentence is negative, then the question tag will be positive (‘You don’t like to read, do you?’). Therefore, English tag questions are rather complex constructions. Sometimes we just add a simple word like ‘right?’ at the end of the sentence: ‘You like to read, right?’

Tag questions are very common across languages, and there are a number of different forms. Many languages use a word for ‘yes’ or ‘no’: French uses *non?* (‘no’) as in ‘Tu aimes lire, non?’ (‘You like to read, don’t you?’), and Russian uses *да?* (‘yes’). Other languages use a variant of ‘right?’ or ‘not true?’ or simply ‘or?’ In German, for example, you can use *nicht wahr?* (‘not true?’) or *oder?* (‘or?’), as in ‘Du liest gerne, oder?’, while a common question tag in Swedish is *eller hur?* (‘or how?’).

Then again, there are some languages that use a specific word to form a question tag. In colloquial French, for example, we have *hein?*, which can be added to the end of a sentence to turn it into a tag question – ‘Tu aimes lire, hein?’ In some southern German dialects, there is the word *gell?*, and the dialect spoken in the Berlin area has *wa?*.

These words are exclusively used to form tag questions.

As you can see, English is not the only European language to have tag questions. In fact, tag questions are very common in many languages, and there are different ways of forming them. They are a very complex and fascinating linguistic phenomenon. ¶

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