

Re: Quadrilingual

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"Peter T. Daniels" <grammatim@worldnet.att.net> wrote in message news:<414CCA49.178@worldnet.att.net>...

> *Schurich wrote:*

> >

> > *I'm an Egyptian living in England and my husband is French/German. We have a six-month old son. So far, I've been speaking Arabic to him, and my husband French; following the 'one-parent one-language approach'. However, my husband and I speak English together and to the community around us. We would really be interested in hearing from other parents in a similar situation to learn from their experience.*

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> > *Also, do you think it would be too much to try and keep the German side of things (I mean the language) alive for him, as well? I have heard of cases where children grow up speaking 4 languages from a very early age. Does anyone have some experience of this?*

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> *Speak away! He'll have FOUR native languages, and that will be a VERY useful attribute in the future.*

>

> *Don't worry, he won't confuse them. There's some indication that kids with multiple native languages take a little longer to start talking, but thereafter progress faster than monolingual children.*

I grew up in a trilingual environment in Finland (my mother is an American and my father is an ethnically Swedish Finn). I spoke English with my parents and siblings at home, with my American relatives whenever we met, with many expatriate American and British children that became my friends through my mother, and with my classmates and teachers at a school for English-speaking children. I spoke Swedish with many relatives, with some neighbors, and with my classmates and teachers at a school for Swedish-speaking children. I spoke Finnish with some relatives, with many neighbors, and with strangers when shopping, etc.

I remember always searching for words and struggling to form sentences as a child. I didn't speak any language fluently. There were large

gaps everywhere in my vocabulary: I knew "spatula" only in English, "starboard" only in Swedish, "cash register" only in Finnish, and so on. There was also a lot of interference among the languages. I'd say, for example, "He is long" (instead of "He is tall") based on Swedish and Finnish, and "Ei, se on Pekka, joka voittaa" (instead of "Pekkapa voittaa" 'No, it's Pekka that's winning') based on English and Swedish.

I remember having a hard time understanding what my teachers were saying. In most situations, I was afraid to say much because of my difficulty in expressing myself. I made mistakes with word order, genders (in Swedish), cases, adpositions, and inflections. I was laughed at by Americans, Brits, Swedes, and Finns. Each language group thought I spoke with an accent. Feeling different from my peers was painful, because there was enormous pressure to fit in.

The turning point came one day when I was 14, when a Finn corrected something I had said in English. I was humiliated, and I vowed to myself that from then on, I would look up in a dictionary every word and every phrase that I was unsure of. And so I did. I even got serious about reading my grammar books. I took courses in French and German, and while learning to articulate the various phonemes of those two languages, I became interested in trying to improve my articulation of English, Swedish, and Finnish phonemes as well (I used my mother as a model for English).

By the time I graduated from high school, I no longer had problems with Finnish, I was among the best in my class in Swedish, and I aced the verbal section of the American SATs. I was admitted to a university in New York State on the strength of an essay that I had written. During the last 15 years here in the U.S., I have held several jobs as an editor of English technical and scientific literature.

If you were to ask me whether I benefited from my trilingual environment, I'd say yes, I did, but only after I had made an extra effort.

It took my mother twice as long as it took me to become proficient in Swedish and Finnish. Then again, I spent more of my time than she in learning those languages, and the pressure was greater on me. Whereas I was immersed in Swedish and Finnish about two-thirds of my time, my mother was immersed in them about one-third of her time. The rest of her time was spent writing novels in English, teaching English, chairing the English-speaking wives club, etc. She didn't care about being different: When we were out in public among Finns, she would shout to me in English, and I would remain silent or only whisper because I was so embarrassed.

When I was in my twenties, I studied Spanish intensively for six years and had many Spanish-speaking friends, most of whom were Chilean. I

became so fluent and my pronunciation became so good that on a visit to Chile, people were surprised to find out that I wasn't Chilean or at least Hispanic.

In the "History of French" thread, I agree above all with Jacques Guy (I usually agree with him). Given my experiences, I believe that the language acquisition models described in linguistics textbooks are too simplistic, modular, and nativistic. It seems to me that although there is indeed a difference in language acquisition between an infant and an adult, most linguists exaggerate it, and that they vastly exaggerate the difference in second-language learning ability between a child and an adult. If you compare a 4-year-old and an 18-year-old that are both being taught a second language, the brain of the 4-year-old may be more flexible and open to learning, but the 18-year-old has enough knowledge of his first language and enough self-discipline to learn in a more intensive and efficient way. The 18-year-old may indeed have an advantage over a 70-year-old if age is the only difference between them, but the advantage is not huge.

It seems to me that a person's performance in a language is especially sensitive to interference from another language when that other language is dominant. The dominant language may be one's first language or a language that one has recently been immersed in over a long period of time. One of my Swedish relatives moved to Norway, and now after several years she has a Norwegian accent when speaking Swedish. It seems to me also that the earlier in life and the longer in life a language has been dominant, the greater its influence will be, and the greater the likelihood will be that it will continue to have an influence even if it ceases to be dominant.

But interference from a dominant language is not the only reason why adults speaking a new language tend to have accents even when they have studied hard. There is at least one additional reason. As Mxsmanic pointed out in passing, a person's identity is often tied to his accent. I know several French people here in Maryland who have admitted to me that although they want to speak English fluently without thick accents, they don't really want to speak without any accent at all. They are very proud of being French, and quite often, speaking with a French accent is the only way for them to signal their Frenchness.

My own accent is similar to my mother's Boston Brahmin accent (which she and her ancestors had even though they lived in St. Louis, Missouri), and I have no intention of giving it up, despite the fact that hardly anyone around here speaks as I do (I stopped worrying about being different when I became an adult). My mother tells me, however, that I sound more and more Midwestern as the years go by, so I guess it's difficult not to be influenced by what one hears all the time.

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