

## Topic 7

### BILINGUALISM: TEN COMMON MYTHS

Even though research has established the value, advantages and cognitive benefits of using more than one language, bilingualism generally, and dual language learning in young children (see Topic 8) top is still surrounded by myths, misconceptions and false beliefs. The bilingual myths presented here are adapted from the work of bilingualism scholar Professor Francois Grosjean, who was once described by a journalist as my *all-time favourite specialist* on bilingualism and American linguist Mark Guiberson. Each bilingual myth statement is followed by an evidence-based *research check* that debunks bilingual untruths and provides readers with facts and truths.

#### **MYTH 1: Bilingualism is a rare phenomenon.**

##### **Research check**

Not so! Bilingualism is a global phenomenon. More than half the world's population uses two or more languages. Bilingualism is found in all parts of the world, at all levels of society and in all age groups.

#### **MYTH 2: Bilinguals have equal and perfect knowledge of their two languages.**

##### **Research check**

This appears ideal but it is untrue. In reality bilinguals use their languages in very different ways, in different contexts and with different people. Some bilinguals are stronger or dominant in one of their languages, some are literate in both languages, while others have only passive knowledge of one of their languages. A small number of bilinguals are fluent in their two languages.

#### **MYTH 3: True bilinguals have no accent.**

##### **Research check**

Having an accent does not make a speaker more or less bilingual. If a second (or new) language is learned before puberty, there will be little or no trace of an accent. However, later in life, unfamiliar phonological features of a new language become harder to master, resulting in *sounding different*. Here is an example: German adult speakers learning English encounter /w/ and /th/ in words such as *wish* and *this*. These sounds do not exist in German and are pronounced by adult learners as follows: *wish* > vish and *this* > zis. In the same way when English speakers learning German encounter /ö/ and /ü/, two vowel sounds not found in English, they pronounce the words *schöne* (beautiful) and *müde* (tired) with an English accent.

#### **MYTH 4: Bilinguals are born translators.**

##### **Research check**

Bilinguals can manage simple translations from one of their languages to the other. However, translating complex topics from the stronger language into the weaker one can be difficult due to lack of specialized vocabulary.

#### **MYTH 5: Mixing languages is a sign of laziness in bilinguals.**

##### **Research check**

Language mixing, translanguaging or moving across languages is the way bilinguals “language” or talk with other bilinguals. Studies have shown that speakers of two languages, even very young bilingual children, are communicatively aware and sensitive. This means that they know when to mix their languages and with which speakers. They also know when not to mix language. For example, a Ukrainian-English bilingual who meets a monolingual Ukrainian will use Ukrainian only.

#### **MYTH 6: The older a person is, the harder it is to acquire a second language.**

##### **Research check**

Age is only one factor affecting language learning. Other factors include motivation, language attitude, languages spoken, social context and method of language learning (formal or informal). While acquiring native-like pronunciation is easier for children, adult learners have an important advantage when learning a new language: they can transfer the grammar, vocabulary, syntax, and literacy skills they have developed in their native language to the new language.

#### **MYTH 7: Bilinguals are equally proficient at speaking all of their languages**

##### **Research check**

Being bilingual does not mean fluency in two languages. For most bilinguals, the language they use most often becomes their dominant or stronger language. Yet, bilingualism is never a fixed state. This means that life changes, such as age, immigration, travel, family context, education and employment can change a bilingual’s language use and language dominance.

#### **MYTH 8: Bilinguals acquire their two languages in childhood.**

##### **Research check**

Not so. Bilinguals acquire their languages in different times and in different contexts: from birth, in childhood, in the teenage years and/or in adulthood. Life situations that affect bilingualism include moving to a country, marriage, education, employment

requirements and a personal interest in a specific language.

### **MYTH 9: Bilinguals have double or split personalities.**

#### **Research check**

Bilinguals, like monolinguals, adapt their behaviour to different situations and people. This often leads to a change of language in bilinguals (e.g. a Japanese-English bilingual speaking Japanese to her grandmother and English to her sister). This change of language has led to the idea that bilinguals are *different* when speaking their languages. But like monolinguals, it is the situation or the person one is speaking to which causes slight changes in behaviour, opinions or feelings, not the fact that one is bilingual.

### **MYTH 10: Bilinguals express their emotions in their first language.**

#### **Research check**

Some bilinguals have grown up learning two languages simultaneously and hence have two first languages with which they will express their emotions. And for the majority of bilinguals who have acquired their languages successively, that is first one language and then, some years later, another, the pattern is not clear. Emotions and bilingualism produce a very complicated but also very personal reality that has no set rules. Some bilinguals prefer to use one language, some the other, and some use both to express their feelings and emotions.

### **References**

Grosjean, F. <https://multilingualparenting.com/prof-francois-grosjean-on-bilingualism-language-mode-and-identity/>

Guiberson, M. (2013) Language Confusion in Bilingual Children. *Perspectives on Communication Disorders and Sciences in Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Populations*. Bilingual Myth-Busters Series, 20 (1): 5.