

Three common myths about bilingual children

Dutch politicians and language experts regularly get caught up in heated debates. For example, in 2008 the cabinet of ministers wanted to introduce mandatory Dutch language classes for immigrant parents to encourage them to speak Dutch at home. They hoped that this would help improve the below average academic performance of some children of immigrants, although many linguists disagreed. Ironically, less than 10 km away from the center of this debate, in their royal home, the current King of The Netherlands and his Argentine-born wife, Máxima, were teaching their three daughters Spanish.

The royal family is not alone. A whopping [3.5 million](#)¹ Dutch and Flemish people speak more than one language at home. Are parents confusing their children by raising them *bilingually* (with more than one language)? Are these parents lowering their children's chances at success? "No!" exclaims [Sharon Unsworth](#)² associate professor of Second Language Acquisition at Radboud University in Nijmegen and mother of two bilingual children herself. But even she worries about her bilingual children's prospects sometimes— "And I know all the research!"

Unfortunately, there are still many myths surrounding bilingualism. Unsworth is trying to dispel these myths through her research and workshops for parents. We talked about some of the most persistent myths and recent developments with her.

Myth 1: Bilingual children don't speak either language properly

Many people still think that bilingual children will never speak either of their languages well enough. But, in fact, bilinguals usually master both languages really well. Of course, if bilingual children only use one of their languages at home and the rest of the time they are using another language, they will not speak exactly the same as a child who speaks *one* language all the time. For example, the Dutch princesses, who often speak Spanish at home, might not be able to name cooking utensils as quickly in Dutch as they can in Spanish. And they might not know the terms for all the reproductive subparts of a flower in Spanish, but do they have to? Taking their languages together, Amalia and her sisters will likely know more words than monolinguals. Nonetheless, differences in vocabulary are often seen as a problem for which parents are advised to stick to one language, explains Unsworth.

Grammar mistakes are another source for such advice. Take Unsworth's own son, for example, who speaks both English and Dutch and sometimes says things that a monolingual child would not say, such as "*That works not*" (from the Dutch, "*Dat werkt niet*"). Yet monolingual children also make a lot of mistakes and we consider this part of learning. Why should bilingual children be any different?

Myth 2: The two languages are completely independent in the bilingual brain

Researchers have gone to great pains to dismantle the belief that bilingualism confuses children by proving that bilinguals' and monolinguals' language abilities develop in a similar way. What's more, they have assumed that a bilingual child's languages are completely separate and independent in the child's brain. A well-intended assumption that, however, doesn't make much sense, Unsworth explains. Anyone raising a bilingual child will notice that the two languages they speak influence each other. Just look at the example above produced by Unsworth's son.

Interestingly enough, researchers have already established that *adult* bilinguals' languages interact, although they still do not really understand how exactly this interaction occurs. Inspired by her children, Unsworth will explore this phenomenon with her colleagues in her [current project](#)³. She thinks that in five years' time, people may question the long-held assumption that bilingual children's languages are separate. Currently, parents and teachers often worry when bilingual children say things like Unsworth's son, "but if we have an idea about why this influence happens, if we have a credible alternative to 'bilinguals are confused,' then this influence might become acceptable," Unsworth hopes. Because of their multiple languages, bilinguals may end up saying things that monolinguals would not say, "but that's not necessarily a problem!" Unsworth emphasizes. Bilinguals are not confused. They speak their languages well, but they may be a little different from monolinguals, "and that's okay!"

Myth 3: Speaking another language at home disadvantages children

Early childhood teachers or even politicians may advise the parents of bilingual children to speak the country's language at home. Unsworth, who is all too familiar with suggestions like this, explains that there isn't much of a scientific basis for asking bilingual parents to speak Dutch at home. In fact, scientists *are* certain that a well-developed first language will help the second language. In other words, if Maxima's children are good at Spanish, it will also help their Dutch. However, as the 2008 debate shows, researchers often disagree with politicians. It is easy for people and politicians to have a strong opinion about bilingualism, "because everyone speaks another language," says Unsworth. "If we were talking about particle physics, maybe we'd get listened to a bit more."

Bilingual parents' greatest worries

As is in the nature of any parent, bilingual parents worry about their children, and this isn't helped by these persistent myths. According to Unsworth, one of bilingual parents' greatest worries is when their children don't want to use the home language anymore, but always respond in Dutch instead. Unsworth provides parents with tips and tricks for issues like this in her workshops and public events. "The workshops are mostly about encouraging parents." She tries to make bilingual parents realize that even when the child responds in Dutch to a – say – Spanish question, they are still having a conversation. "So the kid is bilingual!" But it's important for parents to have realistic expectations: if they are the only source of a language, it is going to be hard and they are going to have to make an effort. Still some parents, such as the royal family, decide it's worth the effort because of the opportunity it provides children to speak two languages and be in contact with their parents' culture.

For Unsworth, too, it definitely is worth it. She notes that her children are more aware of language (something also shown in the scientific literature), making for fun situations. For example, anytime anyone burps, someone has to say "Horses!" — a pun on the Dutch "*Paarden*," which sounds like "*Pardon*."

Things are looking up for bilingualism

Unsworth has lived in The Netherlands 16 years now and, in her opinion, the view about bilingualism has changed, with more of a positive outlook. "Most people realize now that bilingualism is a good thing, but we still need to move it up a notch." While bilingualism is

rather accepted or even seen as fashionable with languages such as English or Spanish, the acceptance for bilinguals who speak less prestigious languages such as Turkish is still low, she explains. Unsworth hopes that once she has the results of her new study, she'll be able to use them to help further improve how people feel about bilingualism.

Links

¹ http://taalunieversum.org/archief/taalpeil/2011/taalpeil_2011.pdf

² <http://sharonunsworth.org/>

³ <http://www.ru.nl/2in1project/>