

# Being Bilingual: Facts and Fictions

David Crystal is honorary professor of linguistics at the University of Bangor, and works from his home in Holyhead, North Wales, as a writer, editor, lecturer, and broadcaster in language and linguistics. He lives online at [www.davidcrystal.com](http://www.davidcrystal.com), [www.originalpronunciation.com](http://www.originalpronunciation.com) and [www.shakespeareswords.com](http://www.shakespeareswords.com).

**M**ultilingualism is the default human condition. When we look around the world, that is what we find. Estimates can never be precise, in the language field, but the best opinions suggest that three-quarters of the world's population use at least two languages in their everyday lives, and perhaps half use at least three. Only a few nations – chiefly those with a recent colonial past – have developed an egotistical monolingualism.

## Ten myths about multilingualism

**Myth 1:** Multilingual people are equally fluent in the languages they speak (they are 'balanced').

**Reality:** This is never the case; there are always situations in which people are better in one language than others (e.g. the language used for nursery rhymes, for making love, or in which a specialised subject has been learned).

**Myth 2:** Multilingual people have a dominant language.

**Reality:** Different languages take turns to dominate, depending on the nature of the communicative situation.

**Myth 3:** One language needs to be given special educational attention to ensure that children develop their full cognitive potential.

**Reality:** One language is usually chosen as the primary language of education, but this does not prevent subjects being taught in other languages or other languages being used to provide an additional perspective on a subject.

**Myth 4:** Multilinguals have no mother tongue.

**Reality:** Multilinguals may have several mother tongues. Similarly, asking a multilingual 'Which is your mother tongue?' is the kind of question asked only by people who see language from a monolingual point of view.

**Myth 5:** Successful multilingualism is for children only.

**Reality:** Adults can learn other languages to any required fluency level, depending on such factors as motivation and opportunity.

There is no absolute target that has to be achieved (such as number of words) and some targets are artificial, the result of a monolingual mindset (such as the need to acquire a native-like accent).

**Myth 6:** Mixing languages shows inadequate learning - semilingualism.

**Reality:** Mixing languages is the norm. All it shows is that speakers use all the linguistic resources available to them when need arises. When a speaker switches from Language A to Language B (in mid-sentence), it is not a matter of A being deficient, but of B being a preferred means of expressing what the speaker wants to say. Monolinguals mix languages too, in the form of loan words and phrases. *C'est la vie*.

**Myth 7:** The brain cannot cope with multilingualism. Learning a new language threatens the quality of the one already there because there is limited brain space.

**Reality:** The brain can cope with an indefinitely large number of languages. With over 100 billion neurons available, a language takes up a relatively small amount of space (with just a few dozen sounds, a few thousand grammatical constructions, and a few tens-of-thousand words).

**Myth 8:** Multilingualism impairs thinking because one language gets in the way of another.

**Reality:** That would mean most of the human race can't think properly! Nobody knows exactly how languages are represented in the brain, but what is known is that they are not assigned individual spaces, like bricks in a box, and there is no basis for the idea that one language is somehow blocking another. A multilingual's languages are 'always on', equally available to access. Multilingual people often don't know which of their languages they used on a particular occasion.

**Myth 9:** Multilingualism retards language development in children, and causes speech disorders (such as stammering).

**Reality:** This is the result of assessment tools originally devised for monolingual children being inappropriately used to evaluate multilingual ability. If monolingual children were assessed in terms of their multilingual strengths, they would come out as retarded too. There are huge individual differences in both monolingual and bilingual development, so that a simple notion of 'delay' is unrealistic. As for specific symptoms: all monolingual children become non-fluent when they are coping with complex speech processing tasks or where the teaching methods are too demanding.

**Myth 10:** Parents need to structure the learning environment of the child to ensure efficiency multilingualism.

**Reality:** Parents need to be natural at all times, using the different languages as need arises. Over the first three years or so of life, children are unaware that what they hear around them are in fact different languages.

### **Seven benefits**

**Cognitive skills:** Languages make people think in different ways. As a result, multilingualism is likely to promote greater flexibility of thought, creativity, problem-solving abilities, and both verbal and non-verbal IQ. The greater brain activity involved may, as with all forms of mental exercise, reduce the onset of mental disorders in later life.

**Human understanding:** The world is a mosaic of visions, each expressed through an individual language. The totality of human wisdom is not found in any one language. The more languages we know, the more we understand what it is to be human.

**Achievement:** Learning another language (even to a limited level) removes the frustration of being unable to communicate in its setting, and generates a strong sense of fulfilment. As with any acquired skill, people are justly proud of what they have achieved.

**Political benefits:** Mutual understanding, alliances and alignments, and other forms of political cooperation are enhanced when the parties know each other's languages. Interpreters and translators foster intelligible communication, but cannot replace the sense of mutual respect which comes from first-hand linguistic ability.

**Economic benefits:** Multilingualism is a desirable skill in the modern highly competitive marketplace. At an individual level, it provides a wider range of opportunities for jobseekers. At a corporate level, it promotes interest in a company's products and services, if they are expressed in the language of the customer.

**Linguistic ability:** The more languages we know (even in a limited way), the more we come to understand 'how language works'. We stop being scared of languages and find new languages easier to learn. We also become more aware of the characteristic features of our mother tongue. English-speaking people often say they learned about English grammar as a result of having to learn a foreign language.

**Social skills:** Learning another language is to learn another culture and another way of behaving. As a result, multilinguals develop a wider range of social skills, become more outward looking, and are likely to have a greater respect for cultural difference.

How to remember this list? Use the initial letters of each point and think CHAPELS.

Good luck! Bonne chance (French). Buona fortuna (Italian). Pob lwc (Welsh). Buena suerte (Spanish). Viel Glück (German). Semoga berjaya (Malay). Bahati njema (Swahili) . . . There are another 6000 or so languages awaiting your call.

---