

# Some Interesting Facts about Bilingualism

by Patrick Schmidt



*“To have another language is to possess a second soul.”*  
 Charlemagne 742 - 814

One characteristic that makes the intercultural field different from other professions is the relatively high percentage of facilitators who have spoken two or more languages fluently since early childhood. Research indicates those who grow up bilingual are able to:

- learn new words easily
- use information in new ways
- resolve conflicts and ambiguities more harmoniously
- better connect with others (listening skills)

Bilingualism seems to have a profound effect on the brain, lasting well into the twilight years, and even improves certain cognitive skills not related to language.

How is it that the words and phrases we hear and speak have such a heavy impact? This is what the research tells us:

**System interference:** Neuroscientific experiments on bilingual persons demonstrate clearly that both languages are working simultaneously, even when only one language is being used. This means one language is blocking the other but this is actually a blessing in disguise — because

neurons are required to obstruct signals from the second language, the cognitive muscles of the brain are given a “positive” workout.

These reinforced cognitive muscles, in turn, refine the brain’s management function, an ordering system for directing attention, solving problems and performing other complex tasks. Examples include ignoring distractions, remaining focused and remembering information, which explains how actors are able to play Hamlet and Lear.

It would seem that the advantage bilinguals have over monolinguals stems primarily from a heightened ability to monitor one’s environment. As a Spanish researcher pointed out, “Bilinguals have to switch languages quite often — you may talk to your mother in Spanish and your father in German.” The continual demand to keep track of changes is similar to the way people observe the traffic when driving.

A fascinating study in the South-Tyrol compared the ability to monitor tasks on the part of German-Italian bilinguals and Italian monolinguals. The bilingual subjects not only performed better, they were also more efficient, doing so with less effort.

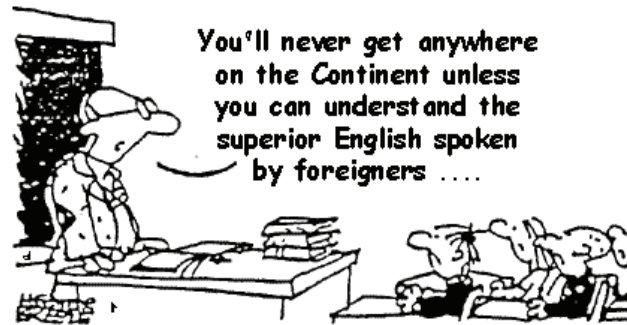
**Linguistic Relativity and Personality Changes:** The language people speak shapes the way they see the world.

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# Bilingualism...

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*A humorous interpretation of bilingualism as seen by the British newspaper "The Guardian".*



Since bilingual people possess two linguistic realities, they have a broader, more diverse way of perceiving phenomena. One's personality is also broader. Ziao-lei Wang writes in her book *Growing up with Three Languages: Birth to Eleven*: "Languages used by speakers with one or more than one language are used not just to represent a unitary self, but to enact different kinds of selves, and different linguistic contexts create different kinds of self-expression and experiences for the same person."

Generating the appropriate personality may be the reason bilingual people get high scores on tests for personality traits such as cultural empathy, open-mindedness and social initiative. This form of contextual self-expression is best summarized by linguist Francois Grosjean: "What's seen as a change in personality is most probably simply a shift in attitudes and behaviors that correspond to a shift in situation or context, independent of language."

**Critical period:** Mastering the high-level semantic aspects of a language implies an understanding of the culture and history in which that language evolved. Children using a second language in the "critical period" up to age 11 or 12 normally assimilate its cultural assumptions, something which doesn't usually occur after that period. A person may know a language fluently but, if the cultural knowledge is lacking, it's a very good way to make a "fluent fool" of oneself. This

is where intercultural trainers come into play--making participants aware of the values and assumptions of the target-culture as well as their own.

**Firewall against dementia:** Bilingualism seems to affect the brain well into our senior years. Researchers at the University of California, San Diego, studied 44 elderly Spanish-English bilinguals and found those who were fluent in both were less susceptible to dementia and Alzheimer's disease. Their conclusion was that the better one is at speaking two languages, the later the onset of cognitive disintegration.

While the advantages of bilingualism are obvious in terms of the development of the brain, as well as social skills, this is not an end in itself. Nothing is more exciting than the actual experience of talking to new people in their mother tongue, understanding the background buzz of conversations on foreign streets, reading a great book in the language it was written in, or watching a classic film without subtitles.

This is why basically everyone on the planet is exhilarated by the intercultural experience of speaking another language, and why most describe it — in whatever language — as "mind-blowing".

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