What Bilingualism is NOT
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In my study of bilingualism, I have found that people all over the world share many misconceptions about bilingualism and bilingual people.

Among shared misunderstandings, one is that bilingualism is a rare phenomenon. In fact, it has been estimated that more than half of the world’s population is bilingual, that is uses two or more languages in everyday life. Bilingualism is found in all parts of the world, at all levels of society, in all age groups. Another common misconception is that bilinguals have equal knowledge of their languages. In fact, bilinguals know their languages only to the level that they need them and most are stronger in just one of them.

There are also the myths that real bilinguals do not have an accent in their different languages and that they are excellent all-around translators. This is far from being true. Having a strong accent or not does not make one more or less bilingual. Furthermore, bilinguals often have difficulties translating, even if they know both languages well. Another misconception is that all bilinguals are bicultural (they are not).

Bilingualism in Children – more misunderstandings

Concerning children, many worries and misconceptions are also widespread. The first is that bilingualism will delay language acquisition in young children. This was a popular myth in the first part of the last century, but there is no research evidence to that effect. Their rate of language acquisition is the same as that of their monolingual counterparts.

Some people fear that children raised bilingual will always mix their languages. In fact, they adapt to the situation they are in. When they interact in monolingual situations (e.g. with Grandma who doesn’t speak their other language), they will respond monolingually; if they are with other bilinguals, then they may well code-switch¹. Finally, there is the worry that bilingualism will negatively affect the development of bilingual children’s brains. Recent research appears to show the contrary; bilingual children do better than monolingual children in certain brain-related tasks.

Different Cultural views of Bilingualism

Aside from these common misunderstandings, certain attitudes are specific to countries and areas of the world. In Europe, for example, bilingualism is seen favorably but people have very high standards for who should be considered bilingual. The latter should have perfect knowledge of their languages, have no accent in them, and even, in some countries, have grown up with their two (or more) languages. At that rate, very few people consider themselves bilingual even though, in Switzerland for example, the majority of the inhabitants know and use two or more languages in their everyday life.

Bilingualism is a personal enrichment and a passport to other cultures. At the very least, it certainly allows you to say more than merci or arigatou when interacting with someone in another language. One never regrets knowing several languages, but one can certainly regret not knowing enough.

¹. “code-switch” means to use more than one language in a conversation, sometimes even in one sentence. For example, a child who is bilingual (Japanese/English) might say, “Wow! I have a lot of shukudai to do tonight!”