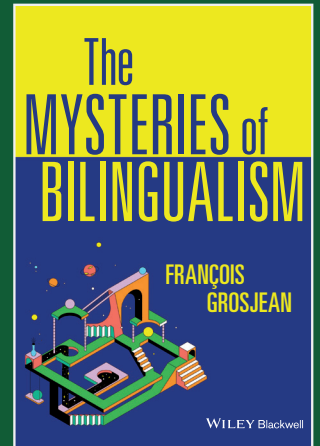


In conversation with Professor François Grosjean about his new book

# The Mysteries of Bilingualism: Unresolved Issues

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Author  
Q&A

**The title of textbooks are often quite sedate and rarely contain eye-catching words like “mysteries.” Can you tell us why you wrote a book on the mysteries of bilingualism?**

Every field of study has issues that remain unresolved, and the field of bilingualism is no exception. Over the years, as I was involved in research on bilinguals or writing about them, I would earmark questions that I needed to come back to at some point. Among these were: Who is bilingual given that there is such a discrepancy in definitions? How many bilinguals are there? How do infant bilinguals who acquire both languages simultaneously manage to separate them? Why do some bilinguals have an accent in one of their languages whereas others do not? Can you lose a language completely, and this at any age? Do you really change your personality when you change language? What does it mean to be both bilingual and bicultural? and so on.

Of course, answers to these questions have been proposed by scholars over the years but never totally satisfactorily. This is because the evidence is either absent or unclear, new studies have contradicted earlier ones, the underlying theories diverge, etc. In this book, I examine these questions and a few more, and I give the best explanation we have for them.

**Do you think there is still a long way to go in terms of changing common beliefs on what it means to be bilingual?**

One of the most complex questions when studying bilingualism is quite simply: Who is bilingual? If you ask bilinguals themselves whether they are bilingual or not, you may come away with affirmative answers but also negative ones, accompanied by remarks such as, “I’m not bilingual (as) I’m not fluent in all my languages,” “I have an accent in Spanish so I can’t be considered bilingual,” etc. Then, if you look up the word “bilingual” in dictionaries, you will find a variety of definitions, going from, “Having the ability to speak two languages” (Wiktionary), all the way to, “Able to speak two languages equally well” (Longman).

For the last 40 years or so, I have defined bilinguals as *those who use two or more languages (or dialects) in their everyday lives*. Putting the emphasis on language use does not do away with language proficiency — the first factor that most people stress — but it increases the range of who can be considered bilingual. I have found that it allows many people who live with two or more languages to accept their bilingualism and be proud of who they are.





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## **Recognizing that bilinguals' use of language is context dependent, are there particular types of context or usage which seem to impact levels of overall comfort or proficiency with a language?**

Back in 1997, I proposed the Complementarity Principle which states that bilinguals usually acquire and use their languages for different purposes, in different domains of life, with different people. Different aspects of life require different languages.

The Principle has an impact on a number of variables, notably language proficiency. If a language is spoken in a reduced number of domains and with a limited number of people, then it will not be developed as much as a language used in more domains and with more people. In the latter case, there will be an increase in specific vocabularies, stylistic varieties, discursive and pragmatic rules, etc. It is precisely because the need and use of the languages are usually quite different that bilinguals do not develop equal and total proficiency in all their languages.

And when one enters the domain of well-learned behaviors such as counting, praying, remembering phone numbers, and so on, doing so in the wrong language is often extremely difficult. Things become even more demanding with translation. Bilinguals can usually translate simple things from one language to the other, but they have real difficulties with more specialized domains, much to the surprise of monolinguals.

## **In *Mysteries*, you touch on the research that has been done on language loss and even mention hypnosis as an approach that can be used. Can you tell us more about this?**

A question that has often been asked is whether those who stopped using a language at a very young age still have remnants of it that can re-emerge through experimentation or brain imaging. I interviewed Noam Chomsky on this and he told me that even if a person can no longer use a language, he/she can relearn it much faster than someone who has never known it. "You can't really erase the system," he stated.

Increasingly complex and demanding experimental studies involving intense re-exposure and training would seem to show that there is indeed some preserved linguistic knowledge of the childhood language. This has been shown also with functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI).

Most studies involve perception, and the question remains whether traces are also found in production of language, in particular in continuous speech? I went back to two older studies that used hypnosis and I describe them in the book. I recount how a young man who was hypnotized and age-regressed to three years old suddenly started speaking a language he had totally forgotten. The effect was absolutely spectacular. I do end with words of caution, though, as the approach must be used with great care.

## **In your book, you address the popular belief, often misreported by popular publications, that bilinguals change their personalities when they change their languages. Can you tell us about this?**

Of the many questions that intrigue people about bilingualism, one never wanes: do bilinguals change personalities when they change language? Is there any truth to the Czech proverb, "Learn a new language and get a new soul"?

Already in my first book on bilingualism, in 1982, I stated that what is seen as a change in personality in bilinguals is simply a shift in attitudes and behaviors corresponding to a shift in situation (or context), independent of language. Over the years, I have continued arguing that what is seen or felt as a personality change is in fact an adaptation to the situation the bilingual is in, and to the





interlocutor(s) being spoken to, and is not caused by the language itself. I also examined studies where personality ratings are obtained for monolinguals, that is those who only speak one language, and found that there too the results are modulated by the situation/context the participants are put in. In sum, as a trilingual put it: “When talking English, French, or German to my sister, my personality does not change. However, depending on where we are, both our behaviors may adapt to certain situations we find ourselves in.”

### **What other questions or mysteries continue to inspire your own curiosity and interest?**

There are many I still find fascinating after all these years. Concerning language dominance, which language is a bilingual’s dominant language and how can this be determined? Can one be globally dominant in a specific language but be dominant in the other language for particular domains of life? Regarding language production, how do bilinguals manage to keep their languages separate when only one language is required? Why does the other language seep through from time to time? Concerning young bilingual children, why is the “person-language bond” particularly strong in some of them? If someone addresses them in the “wrong language”, they can turn away, refuse to answer, or even become angry. In the domain of adult second language acquisition in a natural environment, why do some people become totally enamored of the language and its culture(s)? Who are they and what is happening to them? Finally, what are the linguistic and processing similarities and differences between bilinguals who are monocultural and bilinguals who are bicultural? Research has had a tendency to regroup these two types of bilinguals but I feel that it is time to separate them.

### **Finally, on a more personal note, you have often touched on your own experience as a bilingual in your writings. How has this influenced your academic interest in the topic?**

I am bilingual in French and English, but have changed language dominance four times in my life due to repeated migrations. I acquired other languages to varying degrees, including American Sign Language, but then lost them. And because I lived for long periods of time in different countries, I am a mosaic of four cultures.

As this moving in and out of languages and of cultures took place, I remained very conscious of what was taking place and this played a major role in my scholarly work on bilingualism and biculturalism. I started studying what it means to live with two or more languages, in various cultures, when I was a master’s student at the University of Paris, more than fifty years ago, and have continued to do so to the present day.

Of course, as a psycholinguist, I have used the tools of our trade — description, experimentation, modeling — to better understand who we are. But it is true that many of the views, concepts, and models that I have proposed as a scientist have been influenced by my own itinerary as a bilingual and bicultural person.



François Grosjean is Professor Emeritus at the University of Neuchâtel, Switzerland. He is the author or co-author of many books on bilingualism, including *The Psycholinguistics of Bilingualism* (Wiley Blackwell, 2012; with Ping Li) and *The Listening Bilingual: Speech Perception, Comprehension and Bilingualism* (Wiley Blackwell, 2018; with Krista Byers-Heinlein). He is also the founder of the popular Psychology Today blog ‘Life as a Bilingual’.