

# Issues surrounding trilingual families: Children with simultaneous exposure to three languages

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## 1. Introduction

Trilingualism is generally treated in the relevant literature as another type of bilingualism, and theories and findings from studies of bilinguals are often assumed to be applicable to trilinguals by extension. Trilingualism is frequently explained briefly as a special phenomenon of bilingualism, using special cases of brain-damaged trilinguals who recover all three languages, or of young children who are precociously trilingual. There are many types of trilinguals: children growing up in a trilingual environment, adults living in a trilingual or multilingual community, and fluent bilinguals who have learned a third language at school or for other reasons. Most of these types do not have much choice of whether they wish to be trilingual; it is simply a fact of their particular circumstances. How they deal with three languages is interesting in that the three languages (or cultures) cannot be 'balanced' or equal, as they can be in a bilingual person.

To be sure, some level of interference or receptive use of one or two languages is perhaps to be expected, but there is little research to indicate a specific pattern of language selection or usage. Many theories on bilingualism simply cannot be transferred to trilingualism. A great deal of research has been carried out on bilinguals, but relatively little on trilinguals. This is because comparative testing or longitudinal studies are difficult to undertake with two languages, and the same is even more true for three languages, as it is hard to find a sample of trilinguals who use the same three languages at roughly the same competence levels and who have similar backgrounds. Individual case studies of trilinguals exist, but they are limited in number and scope.

My research focuses on the *trilingual family* - parents who speak two different languages and live in a third language country and their children - to explore the question how a family copes with the three languages and cultures. Involved are questions as to how the languages are acquired, the parents' educational choices, and the social and cultural issues arising from daily contact with two or more languages and cultures. The main aim of this research is to show several different aspects of trilingualism and to examine the manner in which these phenomena interconnect and overlap within a trilingual family<sup>1</sup>.

## 2. Research into trilingualism

In the current literature there are some interesting but rather limited case studies on young trilingual children written by parents/linguists, such as Hoffmann (1985) who described her two German/ Spanish/ English trilingual children. Widdicombe (1997) did a case study on her code-switching English/ Italian/ French child, as did Oksaar (1977) and Elwert (1959). Several books aimed at the parents of bilingual children contain one or two case studies of

trilinguals (De Jong, 1986; Harding and Riley, 1986; Arnberg, 1987).

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Laboratory studies exploring cognitive and acquisition processes have been carried out by Williams and Hammarberg (1997), Klein (1995), Abunuwara (1992), and Mägiste (1986). A long-term study is currently being undertaken by Clyne (1997) with trilingual families in Australia. Baetens-Beardsmore (1993) and Bryram (1990) have written about models of trilingual education in Europe, such as the European Schools, Luxembourg's school system, and the Foyer project in Brussels. However, there is still a lack of data comparing bilinguals to trilinguals, and little research on the social or cultural effects of using three languages, or on the question how the family as a whole unit uses three languages.

### 3. Research questions

Four research questions follow from a decision to investigate the areas of language, education, language-mixing, and the social and cultural aspects of being a trilingual family.

1. How do the three languages co-exist in the family?
2. Which choices do parents make regarding their child's education?
3. How does the family deal with language mixing?
4. How do families define themselves culturally and linguistically?

### 4. Data collection

I contacted trilingual families across Europe through advertisements in the *Bilingual Family Newsletter*, the *Zurich International Women's Association Newsletter*, and through ten international schools in Switzerland, Belgium and Britain. Respondents were judged for suitability using the following criteria:

- a. they had to use three different languages (as compared to regional dialects);
- b. they had to have resided for more than a year in a country with a language other than their mother tongue; and
- c. the children had to be over two years of age so that they could be judged for their level of language acquisition.

Questionnaires were sent out to ten selected families with children across an age range from 2 to 12 years where the members used altogether 14 languages (*see Appendix for further details*).

### 5. Findings

#### 5.1 Language use in the family

##### 5.1.1 The dominance of the local language versus the parental languages

The families listed their children's proficiency in the order of their 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> languages. Table 1 shows the first, second and third languages of the child and the country of residence.

<b>Family</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Child's L1</b>	<b>Child's L2</b>	<b>Child's L3</b>	<b>Conclusion</b>
two	<i>Belgium</i>	French	Spanish	English	<b>Country</b>
five	<i>Switzerland</i>	French	English	-	<b>Country</b>
six	<i>Switzerland</i>	Swiss-German	English	Dutch	<b>Country</b>
seven	<i>Switzerland</i>	Swiss-German	English	French	<b>Country</b>
eight	<i>Germany</i>	German	English	Polish	<b>Country</b>
one	<i>Belgium</i>	English	German	-	Family
three	<i>Belgium</i>	English	Swiss-German	French	Family
four	<i>France</i>	Catalan	English	Spanish	Family
nine	<i>UK</i>	Italian	Czech	English	Family
ten	<i>Nepal</i>	French	Dutch	Nepali	Family

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The data shows the emergence of two distinct groups: families with children whose first language is one of the languages spoken in the **country of residence**, or families where the child speaks a **parental** language as his or her first language. In no case is the local language used as the L2.

The children either follow a pattern of:

- |  |           |  |
|--|-----------|--|
| 1 <sup>st</sup> : <b>Mother's</b> language | <i>or</i> | 1 <sup>st</sup> : <b>Local</b> language    |
| 2 <sup>nd</sup> : <b>Father's</b> language |           | 2 <sup>nd</sup> : <b>Parental</b> language |
| 3 <sup>rd</sup> : <b>Local</b> language    |           | 3 <sup>rd</sup> : <b>Parental</b> language |

What is unusual is that the local language plays a major part in half of the families' linguistic combinations. I would have expected more families to preserve the parental languages and to keep the local language as the third language. An explanation for this pattern could be due to several factors; for example, how long the family has lived in the country or intends to stay, the prestige value of each language, the age of the child, or the choice of language which the parents wish their children to use as their first language.

### 5.1.2 Choice of language within the family

In a trilingual family the parents have to select a language of communication among its members, but the impact of conversations between the parents - although not directed at the child - should not be underestimated. The choice of the father's or mother's language as the one most frequently used in the home could affect the child's language use order, too.

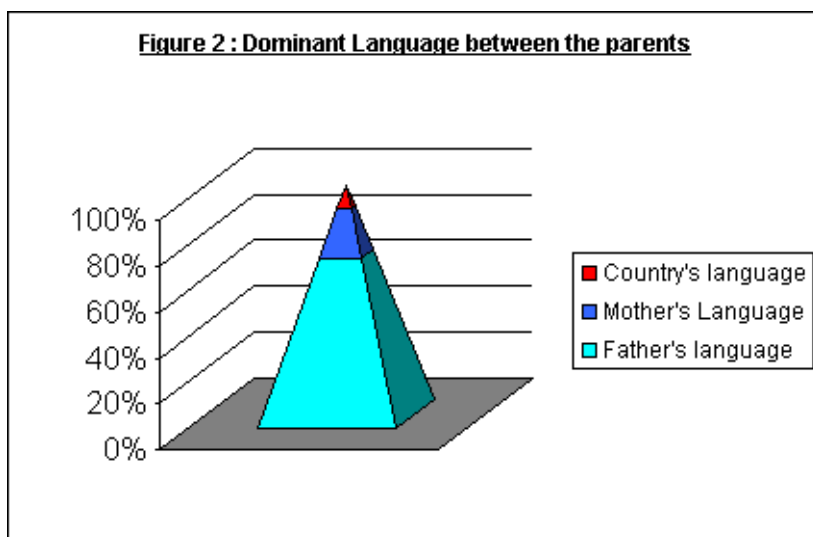


Figure 2 clearly shows the dominance of the father's language in the family configurations (most fathers spoke English). The language of communication between the parents also seems to be accepted as the 'lingua franca' in the families, with the children being aware of the fact that they could use one of the two parental languages and choose a language as the situation demands. The choice of parental language can also be the result of a 'prestigious' language taking over from a language with 'minority' status. This was the case with six families who 'dropped' minority languages (Swiss-German, Polish, Catalan, Dutch, and Czech) in favour of English, French or Italian. In the case of parents with two equally prestigious languages (English with German, Spanish or French) no pattern is evident; probably a choice was made for reasons of parental proficiency or personal preference for a certain language of communication. Furthermore, the parents may well have decided on a language of communication before the children were born, and they had to decide whether to continue with that choice or to switch in order to help balance the child's language exposure.

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The minority-language-speaking parent seems to have decided that it is better for that language to occupy second or third place in the child's use of languages rather than to remain passive or be lost altogether. The father's dominance does not appear to imbalance language use. In fact, the minority-language-speaking mothers are making great efforts to preserve their languages in spite of the dominance of the father's language or the local language. The study was carried out mainly in Europe where the prestigious nature of the local language, i.e. French or German, should also be taken into account for some families as prestige value can threaten the survival of a parental language as well. This 'double' threat to a minority language in a trilingual family probably accounts for the failure of many parents aiming to achieve child trilingualism.

### 5.1.3 The child's age related to the choice of the mother's, the father's or the local language

The child's age can affect language use since older children could use the local language more proficiently because of a greater exposure to it. As my sample spanned children from pre-school to primary age it was necessary to relate age to language usage. Three children aged from 2 to 3.5 years used the **mother's** language. Over the age of 3 or 4 years two

children used the **father's** language as their L1. In the primary age group (6 years and older), four out of five children used the language of the **country** as their first language.

There are some exceptions - two families have children aged around 3 years who use the local language as their L1, which is due to early childcare in the local language. Another nine-year-old child has his father's language (Italian) as his L1, but he attended school until age six in Italy.

The initial use of the mother's language is probably due to the child still being at home with the mother or having less peer-group interaction in the community. The use of the local language by the older children is the result of the importance of the school, the peer group, or contacts from the community who perhaps speak only the local language. Why some pre-school children are using the father's language as their L1 is not so easy to explain. It may be that after the mother has established her language in the early years (from birth to the emergence of speech), the father then steps in to provide the child with a good exposure to his language.

On the other hand, the child may have acquired a receptive knowledge of the father's language in his/her early years. As all parents spoke their own language to the child the children had heard both from birth, and possibly after a certain age the child is able to activate and control both languages at the same time. The father's language then needs practice and 'catching-up', which could lead to its promotion to the child's L1. Another factor is the high number of English-speaking fathers who have the benefit of the availability of English-language media in nearly all countries; their children may well become aware of the 'usefulness' of this language early on.

Although there is lack of background information on whether all children in this study passed through the same stages, I think it is possible to posit a trend in the trilingual family for the child to use the father's language in the pre-school years. This could be the child practising being **bilingual** before moving on to becoming **trilingual**. This critical stage could be around the age of 3 or 4 years depending on the child and the input. Some researchers propose an earlier critical age for bilingual *language awareness* (Saunders, 1982; Fantini, 1985; Grosjean, 1982) They estimate that at the age of two years a child has an awareness of the two language systems. One might speculate that the trilingual child who is exposed to three languages from birth may be slightly delayed in reaching language awareness. At present, there are no studies available which describe trilingual language awareness, and anecdotal evidence from my study appears to suggest that most trilingual children begin to talk later than bilinguals or monolinguals. This is not to say that they are retarded in any way, but they do need time to decide which language is appropriate to each situation. The trilingual children may have an awareness of the three systems at a much earlier stage than a bilingual child, but she/he perhaps chooses to activate each language one by one.

## 5.2. Education of the child in a trilingual family

### 5.2.1 Choice of language for the child's education



Table 3 shows the current choice of school language for the child and the parental languages in the family. Most of the parents live in large cities such as Brussels or Zurich, where many bilingual or international schools (i.e. using English) are available. The families could have chosen a school using at least one of the parental languages.

**Table 3 : Choice of language for the children's education**

Family	Country	School Language	Father L1	Mother L1
one	Belgium	French	English	German
two	Belgium	French	English	Spanish
three	Belgium	French/English	English	Swiss German
four	France	French	English	Catalan
five	Switzerland	French	Hungarian	Bulgarian
six	Switzerland	Swiss-German	Dutch	English
seven	Switzerland	Swiss-German	French	English
eight	Germany	German	English	Polish
nine	UK	English	Italian	Czech
ten	Nepal	English	Dutch	French

Possibly the *local-language dominated* families want to prepare their children for permanent residency and integration in the country's society. The *family-language dominated* parents may have decided to make use of what is available for the short-term in the community, with the tacit understanding that the child will continue or finish his or her education in one of the parent's languages in the future. Several case studies have shown that the parents usually choose the local language for their children's education (Hoffmann, 1985; Harding and Riley, 1986; Arnberg, 1987; Widdicombe, 1997).

### 5.2.2 Type of school chosen for the child

A local school was perhaps the only option for some parents who lived outside of the capital cities or who were unable to afford private international education. The good local education system in countries such as Switzerland or Belgium may have affected the choice as 'prestigious' languages are used in their schools. All parents had reached the level of college education, with 18 out of 20 studying at university; but only two of the parents had had a bilingual education themselves. The typical trend was for two parents having been educated in their first language, with some university studies having occurred in a second or third language. All monolingually educated parents chose local schools, which are more community-centred and perhaps similar to the school in their own educational background.

Three families had children attending 'European Schools' (described in detail by Baetens-Beardsmore, 1993)<sup>2</sup>. In addition to the child's first language, these schools encourage the use of the local language as an option for L2 or L3 learning. European schools are usually located in countries with prestige languages and pose no risk to the child losing his or her first language; they also have unique ways of teaching in several languages. In my survey the parents who are most satisfied with their choice of school usually have children who are attending a European School. They are certainly a better option for the child than a monolingual environment. Although no child appears to be *semilingual* (see Skutnabb-Kangas, 1984) we cannot ignore the fact that many children have been, so to speak, thrown in

at the deep end of the linguistic pool when they attend a local school. They are potentially in danger of losing one or more parental languages due to lack of practice or support from the schools and the teachers.

### 5.3 Mixing languages

#### 5.3.1 Children's mixing languages and code-switching

When asked how often children mixed languages the data show equal numbers of children being rated as doing so 'often' or 'rarely'. The absence of children who 'always' mix languages goes against my assumption that trilingual children would frequently code-switch or borrow words. There was no correlation between mixing languages and age (i.e. younger children mixing languages more often because they have not differentiated them as yet, or older children using more of the school language at home). However, in general, children going to a bilingual school mixed their languages more often than those who attended a local school.

In a bilingual school, the diversity of nationalities probably supplies a sense of normalcy to occurrences of mixing languages for communication. Modelling by teachers and friends is a strong factor in language acquisition and usage. On the other hand, the local school children are exposed to only one language and are discouraged from mixing languages, especially with people who do not understand the trilingual child's other languages. Another factor could be that the local children have parents who are stricter about the separation of languages and 'proper' usage. Parents who have had some experience of bilingual education may feel that language-mixing is not a problem and may even encourage it at home as a way to communicate

There are six families living in areas of 'territorial bilingualism' or politically designated bilingualism - Switzerland and Belgium. In theory, a family living in an area of territorial bilingualism should be able to speak at least two of the country's languages. The children would be more prone to language-mixing as it is a part of daily life. However, no children speak the two or three languages *of the country of residence*. It appears that the territorially bilingual areas of Switzerland and Belgium are linguistically separate language zones. In Switzerland, French, German and Italian display very strong regional differences, and it could be hypothesised that the families are trying to 'fit in' with the locals rather than taking advantage of a dual-language system. In some situations a neutral language, such as English, is preferred. A multi-language country could be an ideal environment for a trilingual, but in Switzerland and Belgium monolingual preferences appear to prevail.

#### 5.3.2 Naming of the languages

With three languages, labelling each language is necessary. Half the sample of children used the 'proper' name (i.e. 'French' or 'English') while the other half used personalised labels such as '*Mummy's/ Daddy's*'{language}, '*Mama spricht Deutsch*' [Mama speaks German] or '*Papa dit ca en Francais*' [Papa says it in French]. Some parents reminded the child of the location of a language: '*A l'ecole on parle le francais*' [at school we speak French], or that English is '*Australia's language*' (as they previously lived in Australia). I assumed that the use of the

more formal proper names would produce less mixing, but there was no relationship between this choice of label and the extent of language-mixing by the child. There was a correlation with age, however, as a younger child would say 'Mummy's language' and an older one 'English'.

Families may use a personalised label when the child begins to talk, such as '*Mummy says...*' to help the child understand that the mother and father speak differently. At around age two, when the child has a more or less fused lexical knowledge, the child needs a concrete reference to explain why there are two (or three) words for the same object or concept. Later, when the child has mastered two languages, use of the proper name is more appropriate.

### 5.3.3 Language use in the home

All parents employ a '*one-person-one-language*' approach (see Romaine, 1997), and they were asked to choose a statement to represent their reaction when their children used the 'wrong' language in the home, such as talking to the mother in the father's language. The parent's responses to this issue are listed in Table 4:

	Mother	Father	Total
Correct the child	0	0	0
Translate the word for the child	1	1	2
Ignore it, but repeat it in the correct language	6	8	14
Ignore it, and continue the conversation	3	1	4

In 90% of families the 'error' is not corrected, and the parents react by giving the child the repetition of the 'right' word or continuing the conversation. This shows that they noticed the error, but accept it as normal. Children learn the right word from context, or if they have forgotten it, they get a gentle memory jog from the parent. This shows a high level of linguistic knowledge in parents to know the replacement word, especially with older children who have an extensive vocabulary.

### 5.3.4 Using languages with visitors

With visitors the balance of two or three languages in the home can change in favour of one parent or the local language. Parents were asked to choose a statement from a list of possible options of what they do when visitors are present as shown in Table 5:

	Mother	Father	Total
Each person speaks his/herr own language	2	2	4
One or some people translate	1	0	1
The language of the visitor is used	3	3	6
A language which everyone knows is used	4	5	9

45% chose a 'lingua franca' which everyone knows, a diplomatic response as long as conversation can be sustained in some participants' second, third or even fourth language. The 30% response for choosing the language of the visitor is appropriate for a short visit, but



longer stays may cause one parent (or child) to feel isolated and excluded. Each person speaking his or her own language requires a good linguistic knowledge of at least three languages by the visitor and the family. This type of linguistic balancing act is probably quite typical of the trilingual family, and shows the constant linguistic realignment that each person must make.

The '*one-person-one-language*' approach was criticised by parents in daily life as it is considered strange and unnatural by visitors when each parent speaks his or her own language, especially if they do not understand one of the languages. This is an issue rarely mentioned in advice books for parents, and the data suggests that parents prefer a *lingua franca* to excluding or translating for the visitor. As children get older, the '*one-person-one language*' approach may be frustrating for the trilingual child who would rather use a *lingua franca* to being addressed differently by each person.

## 5.4 Parental first languages and cultures

### 5.4.1 Use of first language by the parents

Parents often use their first languages, with 65% answering 'every day', at home, work or with friends and family speaking their language. There is a danger of language shift in *anglo-ethnic* marriages (see Clyne, 1982) that form 70% of this sample (English-speaking father or mother). However, it seems unlikely that first languages are being lost, and the frequent usage reflects parents who are 'linguistically marooned', but resourceful enough to keep their language alive against the linguistic pressure from the partner's language and the local language. The parents also do not appear to show signs of 'alienation, insecurity or worthlessness' (Gordon, 1966). On the contrary, both parents seem proud of their first language and use it as much as possible in their country of residence and go back to their home country.

### 5.4.2 Use of the local language by the parents

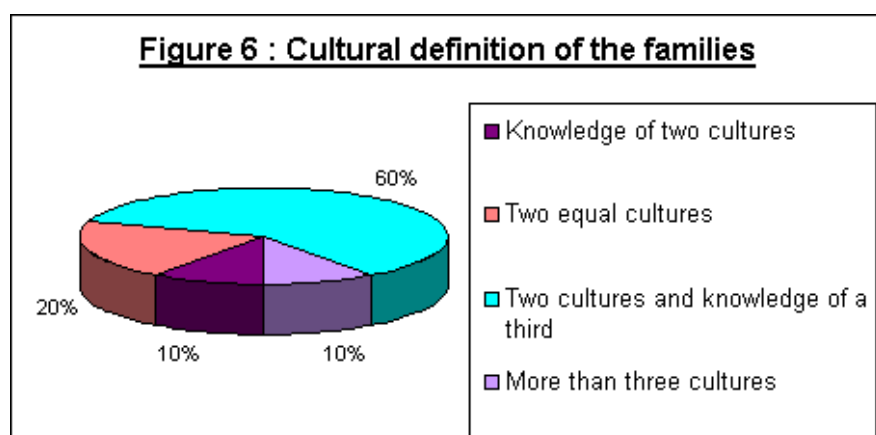
The parents were asked to rate their usage of the local language. 90% of mothers and 65% of fathers replied with 'every day'. This shows a high proportion of parents using the language of their country of residence on a daily basis. The slightly higher figure of mothers is probably linked to mothers using the local language while taking or collecting children from (local language) schools. Although the data is limited, one can assume the parents are not leading an isolated existence in the community.

In the home, 40% of fathers and 20% of mothers never use the local language. I assumed that *family-language dominated* parents would totally exclude the local language from the home, but this did not appear to be the overall trend. This finding shows that the children from the *family-language dominated* group could hear their parents using the local language in the home. The local language appears to play a mixed role in the trilingual families; parents who use it as a third language use it regularly, but *local-language dominated* families who seem to have shifted language allegiances often do not use it extensively in the home. There does not appear to be any language shift from the local language that is displacing the parental

languages. This is probably due to the expatriate status of the sample population as opposed to a situation in which immigrants would find themselves. They can return 'home' when they want to, and many do have a time frame for leaving the country. Therefore the local language is not a threat to their languages.

### 5.4.3 Cultural issues

As Figure 6 shows, most families are juggling two cultures (the parental cultures) and the culture of the country of their residence. I asked the parents to comment on their cultural heritage and the importance of 'passing on' their culture. Both parents were equally determined to do so.



The construction of a cultural identity is seen as a way to pass on a personal identity, but it was stressed that passing on a culture should not be an effort, but that it is something that happens naturally. Families have made efforts to keep cultures 'alive' alongside the other parent's culture and the local culture. As the trilingual family is potentially at risk of losing one or more parental cultures to the local culture, efforts are always being made to sustain them. The parents seem to be asserting their language (and culture) in more or less equal doses. This could give rise to future cultural alienation or *anomie* for the children, but as all the children are under 12 years of age they could be too young to have experienced any strong pull of *dual-allegiance* (see Lambert and Gardner, 1972, 1977). Nevertheless there are strong, high-prestige as well as minority languages involved in the family and in the community; they expect a full understanding of social subtleties, and most likely *triple-allegiance* will be expected. Monolingual and 'monocultural' parents are literally competing to keep their languages alive and are pushing their children to have allegiance to at least two cultures.

## 6. Conclusions

1. There is a difference in the language use of children who use the local language as a first language as opposed to those children who use a parental language as their first language. This dichotomy can be related to the age of the child, the language in which education is received, and to the relative value of one parent's language as a 'prestigious' or a minority

language. Within this sample of European families there is also a double threat to the language configuration in trilingual families in that a minority language might be displaced by the other parent's language *and* the local language. There is also a pattern of very young children using the mother's language as their first language while three to four-year olds use the father's language; the older children prefer the local language. This development displays stages of initial **monolingual** language use, **bilingual** language use at pre-school age, and full **trilingualism** at school age.

2. The findings on the relationship between education and language use showed one major trend: most parents chose a school using the *local* language. The 'European School' was rated as an ideal school for a trilingual child. The parent's own educational background was a factor, too, in the choice of the school; monolingually educated parents were more likely to choose a local monolingual school and vice versa for bilingually educated parents.

3. The family's attitudes towards mixing and the parent's choice of a name for each language shows parental efforts to deal with the situation in a manner appropriate to the child's age or understanding. Gentle and appropriate correction showed considerate attention to both parental languages and the local language in the family. Language-mixing and code-switching are certainly prevalent, but are seen as part of the normal developmental process which a trilingual child is undergoing.

4. The parents' daily extensive use of their first language and the local language give strong support to each parent's first language, even with minority language speakers. All parents agreed on the importance of cultural identity and made strong efforts to pass their culture on to the children. However, parents need advice, such as a '*one-parent -two (or more) languages*'- approach, which is applicable to trilingual families.

Although there is currently little research on trilingualism, it is evident that trilingual families are a thematically relevant group to study, and further research is required. The fact that the children do not simply 'pick up' three languages, but acquire them with the help of great effort from parents, schools and cultural contexts, shows the link between languages and the environment. Trilingual families offer an opportunity to study language use and social behaviour beyond the context of two languages or 'alternating usage'. The overlapping nature of the languages combined with the changing order of first through to third language gives an insight into how acquisition works and how children evolve linguistically.

All parents are trying to bring up their children trilingually, with varying degrees of success. The parents are extremely motivated to keep their languages and cultures alive alongside the local language. However, the families involved in the study are not representative of all trilingual families, as the parents agreed to complete the questionnaire because they themselves were very interested in trilingualism. The study was mainly carried out in Switzerland, a trilingual country, and surrounding European countries where families use mostly European languages. This makes them a select group not mirrored in trilingualism globally. Other kinds of trilingual families, such as those who live in actively trilingual countries, parents using a third language as their language of communication, and families who have permanently emigrated should be included in future research.

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I conclude by noting that trilingualism becomes more evident as the number of families living or working abroad and the number of linguistically mixed marriages increases. These families and their children need appropriate advice and education to suit not only trilingual but tricultural children. Therefore trilingual acquisition patterns, education, attitudes within the family and tricultural social aspects require more research and the investigation of trilingualism as a subject which is distinct from bilingualism but is connected to it by the theme of multilingual language use.

### NOTES

1. In this paper, the languages of the children are described in the order of mother's language, father's language, and the language of the country of residence (henceforth "local language"). For example, a child with an English mother and a French father who lives in Germany is listed as "English/French/German".
2. He notes that the schools encourage multiculturalism.

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## Appendix

### Summary of the families involved in the study



<b>Family</b>	<b>Mother's L1/Father's L1/Local language</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Age of the children</b>
1	German/ English/ French	<i>Belgium</i>	3 years
2	Spanish/ English/ French	<i>Belgium</i>	3 years
3	Swiss German/ English/ French	<i>Belgium</i>	4 years
4	Catalan/Spanish/ English/ French	<i>France</i>	3.5 years
5	Bulgarian/ Hungarian/ French	<i>Switzerland</i>	10 years
6	English/ Dutch/ German	<i>Switzerland</i>	3.5 years
7	English/ Swiss French/ German	<i>Switzerland</i>	10 years
8	Polish/ English/ German	<i>Germany</i>	8 years & 6 years
9	Czech/ Italian/ English	<i>England</i>	9.5 years & 3 years
10	French/ Dutch/ Nepalese/English	<i>Nepal</i>	2.5 years

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