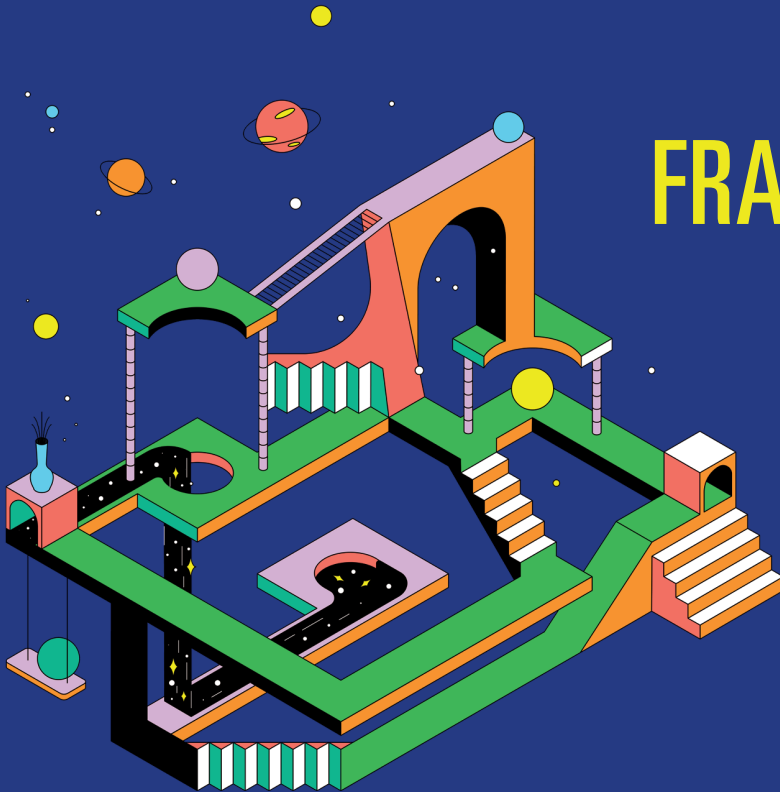


Grosjean, F. (2022). Who is Bilingual? In F. Grosjean, *The Mysteries of Bilingualism. Unresolved Issues*. Chichester UK: John Wiley & Sons

<https://www.wiley.com/en-us/The+Mysteries+of+Bilingualism%3A+Unresolved+Issues-p-9781119602378>

The MYSTERIES of BILINGUALISM

FRANÇOIS
GROSJEAN



WILEY Blackwell

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Who Is 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 don’t consider myself bilingual since I don’t know how to write my other language,” “I didn’t grow up with two languages, so I’m not bilingual,” and even, “I have an accent in Spanish so I can’t be considered bilingual.” 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). And, finally, if you ask linguists their definitions, you also find an assortment of responses, with a preponderance pulling towards the regular use of two or more languages.

Are things a bit more straightforward when you look at the questions in self-report questionnaires given to bilinguals in an attempt to describe their bilingualism? The answer leans towards the affirmative but there is still a lot of variety. Some ask about language dominance, whereas others do not; some include questions about the biculturalism of bilinguals, but others do not; some ask about the bilingual’s accent, whereas others refrain from doing so, and so on. In sum, diversity is found in both how we define bilinguals and how we describe them. This may be due, in large part at least, to the fact that the study of bilingualism is still a rather young science as compared to that of monolingualism.

In the first part of this chapter, we will spend time on how bilinguals and bilingualism have been characterized and how this has changed over time. We will begin by looking at responses from three surveys done with lay people, both monolinguals and bilinguals. Then we will examine the definitions given by dictionaries for the words “bilingual” and “bilingualism.” The entries were written by lexicographers many of whom have linguistics training, so it will be interesting to see if there are any differences with what lay people say. Finally, we will look at the definitions given by language scientists over a span of about one hundred years and examine their evolution.

In the second part, we will present important characteristics of bilingual people (language proficiency, language use, functions of languages, language mode, etc.) and will also examine how they evolve over time. We will end with a quick overview of three well known self-report questionnaires given to bilinguals and see what they have in common and where they differ.

Definitions and Their Evolution

What Lay People Say

When I wrote my first book on bilingualism some 40 years ago (Grosjean 1982), I conducted a short survey in order to uncover the lay person's understanding of the term "bilingual." I asked a number of monolingual college students to answer this question: "If someone told you that X was bilingual in English and French, what would you understand by that?" The most frequent response I found (36% of the answers) was that X speaks both languages *fluently*. This was followed by X *speaks* English and French (21%), and by X *understands and speaks* English and French (18%)? Note that the summed percentages of the two latter answers, which basically say the same thing, add up to 39%. The same question asked of a group of bilinguals gave very similar results: X speaks the two languages *fluently* (31%), and *speaks* the two languages (46%). Thus, just speaking both languages (which includes both production and perception), gets a bit less than half of the responses in the two groups, and speaking both languages *fluently* is only just behind, with 36% and 31% respectively. This shows the importance of fluency¹ in the participants' mind, be they monolingual or bilingual.

Both groups were then asked to rate the importance of a number of factors that had been mentioned in definitions of bilingualism, such as being fluent in two languages, having both speaking and writing fluency in them, using two languages regularly, etc. The scale used went from 1 "not important" to 5 "very important." The monolinguals gave a mean rating of 4.7 for being fluent in two languages, and the bilinguals gave it a rating of 4.4. Speaking and writing fluency in two languages was given a rating of 4.0 by the monolinguals and 3.6 by bilinguals, and equal fluency in two languages was rated 3.7 and 4.1 by the two groups, respectively. Thus, once again both monolinguals and bilinguals felt that fluency in two languages is an important factor in describing the bilingual person.

It is interesting to note that monolinguals differed most from bilinguals on the question of language use, a factor that we will evoke often in this chapter. For monolinguals, the factor labeled "regular use of two languages" received a mean rating of 3 (that is, it was not considered a very important factor), but the bilinguals gave it a mean rating of 4.1, just below "fluency in two languages" (4.4). So here, on language use, monolinguals and bilinguals diverged a bit, probably because bilinguals are more aware of the communicative aspect of being bilingual, that is, using two languages irrespective of your fluency in them.

Where do things stand now? Two surveys were conducted this century, one by Zubrzycki (2019) and one some 13 years before by Sia and Dewaele (2006). Zubrzycki wanted to replicate the Sia and Dewaele study, which asked speakers of at least two languages: "Are you bilingual?" According to the answer they gave, they were placed in the "bilingual" or "non-bilingual" group, and it was shown, among other things, that the self-assessment of second language (L2) proficiency was higher in the "bilingual" group than in the "non-bilingual" group. This was true overall, but also for the four basic skills: Speaking, listening, reading and writing. Zubrzycki conducted the same kind of study

¹ In this chapter, the reader will see a shift from the use of "fluency" in earlier research to "proficiency" in later research. The two are used synonymously here. In chapters that follow, though, we will report on the work of some researchers, as in Chapter 5, who use "fluency/fluent" to mean that a person speaks easily, clearly, and with few hesitations.

but with a slightly different question, “Do you consider yourself bilingual?” He found practically identical percentages to Sia and Dewaele for those who labeled themselves as bilingual or not, and very similar assessment results.

Interestingly, Zubrzycki (2019) added an open-ended question to his study: “How would you define the term bilingual?” It was very similar to Grosjean’s (1982) first question, and it is worth examining the answers more closely. As concerns those who self defined as “non-bilinguals,” nearly 80% formulated a restrictive definition of bilingualism. Zubrzycki does not give percentages but he reports that the main criterion put forward was equal proficiency in two languages, implying thereby a native-like command of the L2 with no traces of one language when using the other and, in particular, no traces of a foreign accent. Other elements which appeared in the definitions were items such as “native level,” “native speaker,” “mother tongue,” and “native language.” And some also said that the bilingual is required to have been raised in a bilingual family or to have had a long-term stay in the L2 environment.

Of those who self defined as “bilinguals,” however, over 70% were less restrictive in their answers. Among the criteria expressed, we find feeling comfortable when using the L2, and reaching a level at which communication becomes natural and effortless. There was also the ability to communicate effectively in all domains of language use and in a wide range of social contexts. Finally, a number of definitions underlined everyday use of two languages.

Thus, over a span of some 40 years, quite similar results have been obtained from lay people, with a slight difference between those who are, or who self define as, bilingual, and the others. Zubrzycki concludes that a monolingual view of bilingualism – the bilingual should be two monolinguals in one person (criticized by Grosjean 1985) – is still deeply entrenched in the lay person’s perception of what it means to be bilingual. Will a similar tendency be found in dictionary definitions? They reflect the meaning of words based on current usage but they are also the work of lexicographers many of whom have some linguistic training. We now turn to this.

What Dictionaries Say

We looked up the words “bilingual” and “bilingualism” in a number of dictionaries that can be found on the internet. Many of them are well established, such as Longman, Oxford Advanced Learner’s, Cambridge English, American Heritage, Collins COBUILD, Chambers, Merriam-Webster, etc. Others are newer, such as Dictionary.com and Wiktionary. For the word “bilingual,” we restricted ourselves to the meaning pertaining to the bilingual person, and did not include those pertaining to a bilingual activity, event, or item, as in bilingual education, bilingual conference, bilingual book, etc. Out of a total of 11 definitions we examined, ten underlined the ability to speak two languages *fluently*. Of these, seven indicated speaking two languages equally well (e.g., Cambridge English: “able to use two languages equally well”) or with nearly equal fluency (e.g., American Heritage: “using or able to use two languages, especially with equal or nearly equal fluency”), and three stressed speaking two languages fluently or extremely well (e.g., Macmillan: “able to speak two languages extremely well”). Only one definition of the 11 did not have fluency as a criterion. It was that of Wiktionary, a more recent dictionary, which stated: “having the ability to speak two languages.” We should note that no definition indicated using two languages on a regular basis, nor did any include more than two languages. In addition, none mentioned dialects in their definitions. Thus, dictionaries seem to reflect closely what lay people state, at least those who do not consider themselves to be bilingual (see the previous section).

We also looked up “bilingualism” in the same 11 dictionaries. Surprisingly, three of them (Oxford Advanced Learner’s, American Heritage, and Longman) did not have an entry for the word. Three of the eight that did underlined the ability to speak two languages, two of them adding equally well (e.g., Cambridge English: “the fact of being able to use two languages equally well”). This is proportionally less than for the meaning of “bilingual.” And five definitions mentioned language use. Two of these mentioned use by itself (e.g., Macmillan: “the use of two languages by a person or a group”); two mentioned ability and use (e.g., Merriam-Webster: “the ability to speak two languages,” as well as, “the frequent use... of two languages”); and one, Google dictionary, indicated the one or the other possibility: “fluency in or use of two languages.” Again, none indicated two or more languages, and none added dialects to languages. In sum, the definitions of “bilingualism” put much less emphasis on language fluency and made more room for language use. But overall, dictionary definitions follow the lay persons’ view of what “bilingual” and “bilingualism” mean. We can now turn to experts who study bilingualism.

What Language Scientists Say

Do language scientists have a different view of what it means to be bilingual? Some have indeed put the emphasis on language fluency (which they also term language proficiency or language knowledge), but over the years we have seen a gradual movement away from the very restrictive definition proposed by Bloomfield (1933) who stated that bilingualism is the “native-like control of two languages.” This stance was still present with Thiery (1978) who wrote that “a true bilingual is someone who is taken to be one of themselves by the members of two different linguistic communities, at roughly the same social and cultural level.” Movement away from this position can already be seen with Hakuta (1992) who simply talks of control of languages: “a bilingual individual is someone who controls two or more languages.” At the time, Haugen (1969) was one of the rare exceptions who stated that fluency did not need to be that high. He stated that bilingualism begins “at the point where the speaker of one language can produce complete, meaningful utterances in the other language.”

Since the turn of the century, those who use fluency or proficiency as the main criterion have been much less demanding of bilinguals. They are aware that the majority of bilinguals do not have equal proficiency in their languages, many have an accent in at least one of their languages, and many acquired their other language(s) at different points in life, and not just as children. They use their languages for different purposes, in different domains of life, to accomplish different things and so their level of proficiency in a language depends on their need for that language (Grosjean 2013).

This is starting to be reflected in the definitions proposed. For example, Luna, Ringberg, and Peracchio (2008) state that bilingualism is the “ability to communicate relatively well – including the ability to speak, understand, read, and write – in two different languages.” And De Houwer (2019) actually goes all the way to simply accepting an ability to comprehend two languages. She defines a bilingual interlocutor as “a person who is in principle able to understand two (or more) language varieties at levels that are minimally appropriate for a given life stage.” Finally, some researchers have decided to remain neutral on the topic of fluency. Thus, Li Wei (2007), states that a bilingual is “someone with the possession of two languages,” and similarly Dewaele, Housen and Li Wei (2003) write that bilingualism is “the presence of two or more languages.”

Various theoretical positions on bilingualism, such as Grosjean’s holistic view (Grosjean 1985, 1989) as well as Cook’s (1991) multi-competence of speakers of two or more languages, have left greater room for *language use* as a definitional factor. It had

started appearing in the last century with Weinreich (1953) who stated that bilingualism is “the practice of alternately using two languages,” and Mackey (1962) who proposed that it is “the alternate use of two or more languages by the same individual.” The language use definition took on more importance over the years, included more than two languages (already mentioned by Mackey (1962)), and became the standard academic definition. Thus, Appel and Muysken (1987) wrote that a bilingual is “somebody who regularly uses two or more languages in alternation,” Romaine (2013) stated that bilingualism is “the routine use of two or more languages in a community,” and de Bot (2019) proposed that multilingualism is “the daily use of two or more languages.”

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 though, since you cannot use a language if you do not know it to some extent. But the range of who can be considered bilingual increases considerably with this definition. As I wrote in *Bilingual: Life and Reality* (Grosjean 2010), at one end of the range we find the migrant worker who may speak with some difficulty the host country’s language and who does not read and write it. At the other end, we have the professional interpreter who is fully fluent in two languages. In between, we find the scientist who reads and writes articles in a second language but who rarely speaks it, the foreign-born spouse who interacts with friends in his first language, the member of a linguistic minority who uses the minority language only at home and the majority language in all other domains of life, the Deaf person who uses sign language with her friends but a spoken language (often in its written form) with a hearing person, and so on. Despite the great diversity among these people, they all share a common feature: They lead their lives with two or more languages.

I insist on *two or more* languages in my definition as some people use more than two languages regularly. If one wants to be specific regarding a particular person, one can specify exactly how many languages they use on a regular basis by using words like “trilingual,” “quadrilingual,” “quintilingual,” etc. As for the word, “multilingual,” many prefer to use “bilingual,” as “multilingual” is mainly used to characterize societies or countries (e.g., Switzerland is a multilingual country). In addition, at least in Western societies, the majority of bilinguals only use two languages regularly, reinforcing the *bi-* in bilingual even though they may know several others. For example, I know some Italian, Spanish, American Sign Language, and even Latin, but I only use English and French on a regular basis. Thus, in terms of language use, I am only bilingual. Finally, *dialects* is in the definition I propose, and it is starting to appear in others too, as in some parts of the world (e.g., Italy, Switzerland, Arabic-speaking countries, etc.), *dialects* are a linguistic reality and people can be bilingual in a majority language and a dialect. They can also be trilingual in a national language, and in two dialects, for example. A final point should be made regarding emphasizing language use in definitions. 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. This they could not do when fluency – often equal fluency – in two or more languages was the main criterion for identifying oneself as bilingual.

Describing Bilinguals

Definitions have never replaced a good description of a phenomenon, and this also true for what it means to be bilingual. In what follows, I will present some important characteristics of bilingual people, first at a particular point in time in their lives, and then over the years, as is revealed in their language history.

At a Particular Point in Time

Language proficiency and language use are probably the two foremost factors (variables) when describing bilinguals at a particular point in time. A third one, when they actually started to become bilingual, will be dealt with in their language history below. A grid approach proposed by Grosjean (2010) can help us visualize proficiency and use together (see Figure 1.1).

Language use is presented along the vertical axis (from Never used at the bottom all the way to Daily use at the top) and language proficiency is on the horizontal axis (from Low proficiency on the left to High proficiency on the right). These labels can be replaced with numerical values if necessary. An example allows us to see the three languages of Lucia, a bilingual, and where they stand in relation to one another. Her most used and most proficient language is La (French). Her other language, Lb (English), is used slightly less frequently and she is slightly less proficient in it, although the level is still very high. This explains why its position is just below and to the left of La in the figure. She also knows a third language, Lc (German), but not very well, and she uses it rarely. Hence its position in the lower left of the grid. Lucia is clearly bilingual in English and French, on both factors, and like many others, she also has some knowledge of another language but rarely uses it. Note that in this type of presentation, the position of each language can be based either on self-assessment ratings, as in this case, or on the results of more objective tests.

Separate grids can be used for each of the bilingual’s four language skills (speaking, listening, writing, and reading) since it is often the case that amount of use and degree of proficiency can be quite different in these skills in the different languages. Thus, some bilinguals may have very good oral comprehension of a language but may not speak it very well; others may know how to read and write one of their languages but not the other(s), and so on. A few years after the grid approach was proposed, two other researchers, Luk and Bialystok (2013), provided statistical evidence that bilingual experience does indeed involve at least two dimensions, language use (they call it bilingual usage) and language proficiency, and that these dimensions are not mutually exclusive. These variables are the first building blocks of the description of the bilingual to which others need to be added, as we will now see.

If one is interested in a bilingual’s language use, one will invariably be confronted with the functions of the person’s languages, that is which language is used, when, for what and with whom. More than half a century ago, Weinreich (1953) had already stated that

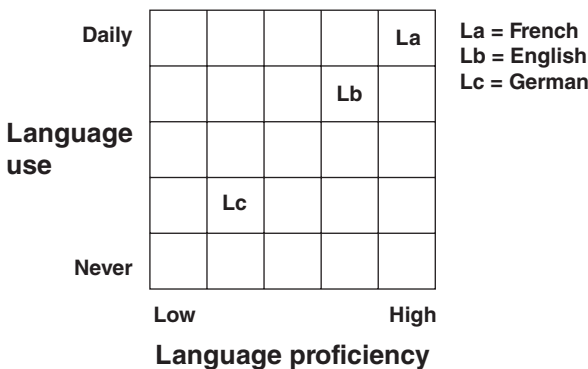


Figure 1.1 A visual representation of a bilingual’s language proficiency and language use.

many bilinguals are accustomed to discuss some topics in only one of their languages. Several years later, Mackey (1962) divided language functions into external functions (language use in various situations and domains) and internal functions (the non-communicative uses of language such as counting, praying, dreaming, etc.). Clearly not all facets of life in bilinguals require the same language, nor do they demand both languages. Based on this, Grosjean (1997, 2016) proposed the Complementarity Principle, which he defined as follows:

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 is discussed and illustrated in Chapter 8, so it suffices to say here that it 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. This is also true for the different language skills, such as reading and writing.

Language proficiency, language use, and functions of languages influence two other variables that are proposed when describing bilinguals. The first is language mode (Grosjean 2001), and the second is language dominance. Concerning language mode, which will be treated in more depth in Chapter 7, bilinguals have to ask themselves two questions when communicating with others: “Which language should be used?” and “Should the other language be brought in?” The answer to the first question leads to language choice, that is, choosing a base language for the exchange. As concerns the second question, bringing in or not the other language, if the answer is “no,” then the bilingual is in a monolingual mode. This is the mode when speaking to monolinguals, reading in a particular language, listening to just one language, etc. If, on the other hand, the answer is “yes,” as when the bilingual is speaking to another bilingual who shares his/her languages and who accepts to change base language from time to time and intermingle them (e.g., code-switch and borrow), then the bilingual is in a bilingual mode. Here, both languages are activated but the base language more so than the other language. Other examples of when the bilingual mode is required are listening to two bilinguals who are mixing languages, interpreting from one language to another, doing a study that requires the two languages, either overtly or covertly, and so on. In between these two endpoints of the continuum, bilinguals can find themselves in various intermediary modes, depending on the situation, the topic, the interlocutors, etc.

The other variable that is influenced by language proficiency, language use, and functions of languages, is language dominance. For a long time, researchers asked themselves whether dominance was based on just proficiency, or use, or both, or whether it depended on basic skills such as reading and writing a language, or even whether it concerned when the languages were acquired. Silva-Corvalán and Treffers-Daller (2016) studied dominance extensively and came to the conclusion that a dominant language is that in which a bilingual has attained an overall higher level of proficiency at a given age, and/or the language which s/he uses more frequently, and across a wider range of domains. As we see, all three factors are mentioned in their definition.

A final factor that needs to be included when describing bilinguals at a particular point in time concerns biculturalism. Are the bilinguals being described also bicultural and, if so, what impact does it have on their bilingualism (Grosjean 2015). Chapter 10 is dedicated to biculturalism but it worth mentioning here that bilingualism and biculturalism are not automatically coextensive. You can find bilinguals who are not bicultural (e.g., those bilinguals who have lived in just one culture, such as many Dutch people), biculturals who are not bilingual (e.g., British people who have migrated to the United States), as well as people who are both bicultural and bilingual. Biculturals can be characterized in the following way: They take part, to varying degrees, in the life of two or more cultures; they adapt, in part at least, their attitudes, behaviors, values, languages, etc., to these cultures; and they combine and blend aspects of the cultures involved. Being bicultural has a real impact on language knowledge and language use in bilinguals. One example that comes to mind concerns concepts in the bilingual lexicon. So called translation equivalents, such as French “pain” and English “bread” may share the same concept in bilinguals who are not bicultural, but certainly not if they are bicultural. The same is true of French “café” and English “coffee.”

Language History

One can describe a bilingual at a particular point in time, as we have just seen, but one also needs to describe that person’s bilingualism over time. We need to know which languages were acquired and when, whether the cultural context was the same or different, what the pattern of proficiency and use was over the years, how much language separation or language intermingling took place, which language(s) went through restructuring under the influence of another language, and whether some languages became dormant or even entered attrition. In addition, we need to find out about the bilingual’s moments of language stability and moments of language change where a language may suddenly acquire new importance, as when a person immigrates. These transition periods, which can last several years, are important in order to understand the evolution of a person’s bilingualism.

A crucial factor in language history is the age of acquisition of each language. We need to know whether the person acquired both languages simultaneously as an infant (something that is relatively rare; see Chapter 3), or whether one language was acquired first followed by another a few years later, or in adolescence, or even in adulthood. We also want to know about the context in which each language was acquired, such in the family, outside the home, in the classroom, etc. Information is also needed as to the age at which individual skills started to be acquired in each language (speaking, reading, etc.), how many years were spent in formal learning of a language, etc.

The question of language dominance is also something to examine in a person’s language history. One should be careful not to assume that a first language or “mother tongue” is automatically the dominant language. People’s personal language history may show quite different bilingual configurations at different moments in time. Thus, Grosjean (2010) describes how his dominance has changed four times over a stretch of some fifty years, with two periods, both some ten years long, where the second language was his dominant language.

Finally, information is needed on how people became bicultural, if that is the case. Did it happen in the family when they were young children, or when they came into contact with a second culture in school, or when, as adolescents, already anchored in a culture, they pursued their studies in another culture, or even when they emigrated as adults? And information on the evolution of their biculturalism over their lifespan will also be required.

Self-report Questionnaires

As the preceding section has shown, describing a bilingual fully, at a particular point in time, and over a life time, is particularly demanding. One approach that has been used is to ask bilinguals to fill in self-report questionnaires that aim at obtaining the kind of information we described. If used along with various verbal tasks, such as picture naming, word and sentence perception and production, etc., they allow us to have a good description of those who interest us (see de Bruin 2019, for a critical review). Three major self-report questionnaires are now available in the field for adults, while other, smaller ones, examine specific behaviors (e.g., language choice and code-switching), or are aimed at describing the bilingualism of children (these are filled in by parents or caretakers).

The three self-report questionnaires are the Language Experience and Proficiency Questionnaire (LEAP-Q) proposed by Marian, Blumenfeld, and Kaushanskaya (2007), the Language and Social Background Questionnaire (LSBQ) proposed by the York University Lifespan Cognition and Development Laboratory (Anderson et al. 2018), and the Language History Questionnaire (LHQ3) proposed by Li, Zhang, Yu, and Zhao (2020). Since they have very similar acronyms, and to facilitate reading, I will use Q-A for the LEAP-Q, Q-B for the LSBQ, and Q-C for the LHQ3. I examined each questionnaire keeping in mind the factors I discussed above, those pertaining to bilinguals at a particular point in time, and those that concern their language history, and will briefly summarize what I found. This is not meant to be a critical review but simply a way of illustrating how one goes about obtaining extensive biographical language data from bilinguals, and the diversity one can find among the tools available.

Concerning the first aspect – bilinguals at a particular point in time – all three questionnaires request some biographical information, and they all ask questions regarding the first three factors I outlined: Language proficiency, language use, and functions of languages. It should be noted though that Q-A does not ask about writing proficiency, nor does it ask many questions about the languages used in domains such as work, school, shopping, religion, etc. As concerns different language behaviors in different language modes (e.g., language switching or mixing in certain situations), both Q-B and Q-C ask at least one question whereas Q-A does not. The latter, however, is the only one to ask about language dominance. As for biculturalism, Q-B does not ask any questions, and both Q-A and Q-C ask about cultural identity but nothing on bicultural conduct, such as adapting ones behavior, attitudes, and even personality to different cultural situations. It should be noted that two of the three questionnaires (Q-A and Q-C) ask about the bilingual's degree of foreign accent whereas Q-B does not. Finally, Q-C is the only one to ask questions regarding the person's language learning skills, their results on standardized proficiency tests, as well as their use of dialects.

As for language history, all three questionnaires ask about the order of acquisition of each language, when they were acquired, and their manner of acquisition. Q-C also asks at which age each language started being used at home, with friends, at school, etc. Q-B is the only one to ask if there were periods when a language was not used, and if so, for how long. Finally, none ask about when the person became bicultural.

The three questionnaires reflect, in their own ways, where things stand concerning the description of bilinguals. They are strong on reported proficiency and use, age and manner of acquisition, and also do well, with one exception, on language functions. They may need to do more, though, on change of language behavior when in monolingual and in bilingual situations, on the evolution of the bilingual's languages over the years, and on biculturalism. Specific questionnaires already exist for language switching and mixing (e.g., Rodriguez-Fornells et al. 2012) so this may be the route they could take in the future for the elements that need to be investigated further.

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