

# **Issues in the Assessment of Bilinguals**

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# Issues in the Assessment of Bilinguals

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# Preface and Acknowledgments

The purpose of these volumes is to raise awareness of the issues involved in the assessment of bilingual children and adults, to suggest potential solutions, and to identify both theoretical and practical ways of approaching those issues in an informed, evidence-based manner. These volumes arise out of multiple links across the globe between researchers working with bilinguals from a variety of standpoints – theoreticians, clinicians, speech practitioners and educators. Many of these interactions were fostered in recent years by conferences sponsored by the ESRC Centre for Research on Bilingualism in Theory and Practice at Bangor University, its visiting researcher program, and other similar support.

Many people have assisted in various capacities in the preparation of this work. This includes participants at a workshop on the assessment of bilinguals at Gregynog, Wales, and the reviewers of these chapters, whose expert advice and insightful feedback helped to shape these works. In particular, beyond the authors of the chapters themselves (some of whom also acted in a reviewing capacity), I wish to thank the following reviewers and members of the Centre: Fraibet Aveledo, Isabelle Barriere, Dermot Bergin, Marketa Caravolas, Angela Fawcett, Tess Fitzpatrick, Bryn Jones, Rhonwen Jones, Manuela Julien, Debbie Mills, Simona Montanari, Betty Mousikou, María Carmen Parafita Couto, Ann Rivera, Seren Roberts, Kathryn Sharp, Elin Thordardottir and Mari Williams. Thank you also to an anonymous reviewer of the books here – your helpful comments and advice have served to strengthen and improve the volumes immensely. I am also very grateful to Kleanthes Grohmann for his generous help with technical computer issues.

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of our work in the Centre over the last five years. Thank you to Rocío Pérez-Tattam, Hans Stadthagen-González, Enlli Môn Thomas and Kathryn Sharp. I also wish to thank researchers who have helped on several projects that have contributed to our work on assessment – in particular, Emma K. Hughes, Emily J. Roberts and Catrin O. Hughes, and two graduate students at FIU, Emily Byers and Erica Verde, who assisted in the preparation of the indices for the volumes.

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# 1 Assessment of Multi-tasking Wonders: Music, Olympics and Language

Virginia C. Mueller Gathercole

*You don't get harmony when everybody sings the same note.*

Doug Floyd (Guthrie, 2003: 41)

*Imagine a world in which we saw beyond the lines that divide us, and celebrated our differences, instead of hiding from them.*

Wesley Clark, speech, Jan. 20, 2004

(from [http://www.notable-quotes.com/d/differences\\_quotes.html](http://www.notable-quotes.com/d/differences_quotes.html))

*If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away.*

Henry David Thoreau

(from <http://shell.cas.usf.edu/~mccolm/Dquotes.html>)

These volumes address an expanding area of interest and concern in the 21st century – the assessment of bilingual speakers, both adults and children. There is a rapidly growing body of research and proposals concerning the issues surrounding the evaluation of language abilities and proficiency in multilingual speakers, and, by extension, the evaluation of any cognitive or academic abilities in such speakers. Bilingual speakers' acquisition and knowledge of their two languages are necessarily different from acquisition and knowledge of a single language. This has ramifications for how bilingual speakers perform in a variety of tasks. If we wish to gain accurate evaluations of bilingual children's and adults' proficiency and abilities, we must necessarily take into account facts concerning the processes of learning, speaking, and understanding two

languages. The authors in these volumes explore issues and solutions for the assessment of bilinguals. The research here comes from a variety of particular bilingual populations from around the world. The concerns expressed and the proposed solutions are relevant and applicable to bilingual populations everywhere.

## Introduction

Some accomplishments in life are so remarkable that we glory in them and celebrate them. For example, we are in awe of people who show excellence in more than one aspect of a given talent at the same time. Some obvious examples come from the fields of music and athletics. We have great admiration for musicians such as Stevie Wonder, who not only wrote, produced, arranged and sang ‘Superstition’, but also played the drum, the clavinet, and the Moog bass synthesizer for it. We applaud the accomplishments of composers such as Georg Telleman, who played multiple instruments – violin, viola da gamba, recorder, flauto traverso, oboe, shawm, sackbut and double bass – and Paul McCartney, who plays the guitar, bass guitar, piano, harmonica, recorder, banjo, mandolin and drums.

We are equally awed by athletes that excel in not only one sport but two or three. Jackie Robinson, the first African American to play in major league baseball (for the Dodgers), had an illustrious career in baseball (e.g. winning the MVP award in 1949), but he also excelled in football, track and basketball while he was enrolled at UCLA (see <http://www.toptenz.net/top-10-multi-sport-athletes.php#ixzz1rjaZWaIf>). Jim Thorpe won gold medals in the pentathlon and the decathlon in the 1912 Olympics, and then he went on to play baseball for the New York Giants, the Brewers and the White Sox. He also played professional football and professional basketball (<http://www.toptenz.net/top-10-multi-sport-athletes.php#ixzz1rjaZWaIf>). We rightly applaud such multi-accomplishing individuals. It never crosses our minds that playing the drums in addition to the guitar might detract from the musician’s accomplishments on the guitar, or that the athlete who excels in two sports might be inferior to someone who excels in only one of those sports.

We sometimes celebrate similar accomplishments in relation to language. We find it a surprise – but a delightful surprise – that Jodie Foster speaks fluent French in addition to English ([http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c3TvLSvvKMc&feature=player\\_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c3TvLSvvKMc&feature=player_embedded)); that Salma Hayek speaks Spanish, Portuguese and Arabic; that Charlize Theron speaks Afrikaans natively ([http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2fYB9s0Nyzk&feature=player\\_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2fYB9s0Nyzk&feature=player_embedded)); that Natalie Portman speaks Hebrew ([http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nPDArBZrz8&feature=player\\_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nPDArBZrz8&feature=player_embedded)); that Sandra Bullock speaks fluent

German ([http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s10x38SMb-g&feature=player\\_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s10x38SMb-g&feature=player_embedded)); and that Gwyneth Paltrow speaks Spanish fluently.

The majority of the world's population are just like these celebrities – they speak more than one language, and they often do so fluently. But somehow the delight and awe we experience in relation to celebrities who we discover are bilingual sometimes gets diminished or turned to caution in relation to others who are bilingual, especially in relation to children who are growing up bilingually. Why might this be? It probably boils down to two things: the important role that language plays in all aspects of our lives, combined with fear associated with a lack of knowledge about how bilingual language develops.

The way in which we view the multi-tasking accomplishments and evaluate the abilities of such multi-tasking persons hinges in large part on our appreciation of the steps one takes towards those accomplishments. Although we readily acknowledge those steps in the cases of musical and athletic advances, the steps in relation to language are perhaps more covert and less well understood. As we gain a fuller understanding of what it means to be a child growing up as a bilingual or an adult who has become bilingual, our understanding of how assessments of such individuals need to take those facts into consideration is also growing.

## Step by Step

We tend to forget that people who end up being fluent bilinguals do not, of course, start out as fluent bilinguals – just as competent multi-instrumentalists or athletes who excel in multiple sports do not start life at the top of their art or their game. Everyone has to start from scratch. This means that budding musicians, athletes, and language learners all must go through multiple stages on the path towards coming to full mastery of their art. Those multiple stages involve multiple steps and periods when performance appears less than optimal. The emergent musician, athlete and language learner alike must, as a natural course of events, pass through moments at which errors are made and during which the prognosis for the ultimate success of the endeavor may seem uncertain.

To help the budding musician, athlete, or language learner and to gauge the level of his or her progress, we have ways of assessing whether that progress is commensurate with expectations, or whether, at points along the way, an emergent musician, athlete or language learner may need a little extra assistance along the way. There are exams and competitions children undergo in each of these realms, exams and competitions that entail expectations at a level that is determined by our knowledge of *how similar children or learners at similar stages of development have been able to perform*. Knowledge of that normal level of progress at each stage is determined by years, even centuries, of experience of observing thousands upon thousands of children passing