

Bilingual: Life and Reality

by François Grosjean

Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010
(ISBN 978-0-674-04887-4). 276 pp.

Nicole L. Sweeney (University of Glasgow)

François Grosjean's *Bilingual: Life and Reality* sets out to debunk the many myths that surround bilingualism and bilinguals. In nineteen short, eminently readable chapters, Grosjean guides the reader through the various experiences and emotions that many bilinguals will encounter in the course of a life straddling two or more linguistic spheres. In doing so, he reveals as illusory the hackneyed tropes of bilinguals as having split personalities, as being lazy or as being destined to forever mix their languages. An Emeritus Professor of psycholinguistics and an avowed champion of bilinguals and bilingualism, Grosjean's enthusiasm for, and enchantment with, his chosen subject is evident throughout the book.

At first blush, it would be easy to dismiss Grosjean's work as lacking in depth – certainly the inclusion of a section on 'well-known bilinguals' featuring such illustrious names as Eva Longoria and Thierry Henry is somewhat surprising – but any attempt to evaluate Grosjean's contribution must be understood in the context of its intended readership. From the outset, Grosjean states unequivocally that his book is intended for a 'very general readership' (p.xv) and, although the work will doubtlessly be of interest to students and practitioners of socio-linguists, psychology, translation and interpretation, it is written with a far less expert audience in mind. Indeed, the author envisages a broad-based audience, comprising both those who are personally or professionally

involved with bilinguals, and bilinguals themselves. He hopes to help bilinguals understand and ‘accept who they are’ (p.xvi) and, in this, he is highly successful.

But who are these bilinguals to whom Grosjean refers? For Grosjean, contrary to popular belief, bilinguals are not just those who have ‘an equal and perfect knowledge of their languages’ (p.20) but, rather, those ‘who use two or more languages...in their everyday lives’ (p.4). Thus, far from forming an elite group, bilinguals, in reality, account for at least half of the world’s population (p.xiv). However, although Grosjean clearly aspires to write for and about all bilinguals, a heavy Western slant pervades the book. While attempts are made to discuss lesser-known languages, the majority of the anecdotes that punctuate his writing involve highly-educated bilingual Westerners – be they fellow academics, students, writers or media personalities. Given that Grosjean’s book occasionally borders on memoir, this is perhaps unsurprising; however, it remains true that the book is consequently less inclusive than intended.

Despite this, there is much to commend Grosjean’s work. As an introductory text, the author necessarily revisits certain topics that have already been the subject of considerable academic commentary (accents, interference, fluency etc.), and rightly so. However, he also addresses some issues that tend to receive less attention. For example, rather than merely focusing on how bilinguals acquire their languages, Grosjean also considers how they can lose some of their languages. Similarly, he challenges our preconceived ideas about bilingualism by including extensive discussion of those who are bilingual not just in two spoken languages, but in spoken and sign language. Finally, he devotes an entire chapter to biculturalism, discussing both the interplay between bilingualism and biculturalism

and the ways in which bicultural individuals navigate the different facets of their identity. It is these forays into less well-charted territory that allow the author to offer a fresh perspective on his subject.

Committed to reaching a general readership, Grosjean sheds the strictures of scholarly writing and includes a host of effective, humorous anecdotes and personal observations. Few biculturals will fail to recognize their own experiences in his descriptions of botched greeting behaviour – who to kiss and how many times – or errors in the appropriate form of address – when is the familiar French *tu* too familiar? His writing also excels when he acts as a filter between the academic world and the layperson, skillfully distilling scientific and sociological studies on bilinguals and rendering them accessible to his audience. It is in this role as an interpreter between two different worlds – be they academic and lay or monolingual and bilingual – that Grosjean is at his best, and he occupies this territory for much of the book. Occasionally, he misses the mark and veers too far back into academia: while his descriptions of the finer points of code-switching or neurolinguistics are doubtlessly of interest to students in those fields, they are probably too specialist for the general reader. At the other end of the spectrum, only a very generous reader would accept that knowing the language profile of Hollywood celebrities in any way contributes to our understanding of life as a bilingual.

In such instances, it is tempting to argue that Grosjean should have instead turned his attention to other issues. A prime example – and one which receives only fleeting consideration – is the socio-political context of bilingualism. Grosjean rightly observes that bilinguals of a lower socioeconomic status tend to be more negatively viewed than those of a higher socioeconomic status, who

are admired by monolinguals for their language skills (p.105). As he himself acknowledges that this bias underpins many of the myths discussed in the book, it is regretful that it is not explored further. Nevertheless, it is perhaps inevitable that a book with such a general remit will shortchange at least some topics.

The second part of the book is devoted to bilingual children and is, to an extent, akin to a reference manual on how to raise bilingual children. It clearly aims to allay the concerns that many parents of bilingual children experience and, by explaining the available research, Grosjean succeeds in laying to rest numerous pernicious myths, such as the belief that bilingualism will have a negative effect on a child's linguistic and cognitive development (p.218). The reality, he explains, is far more nuanced: where differences between bilinguals and monolinguals exist, they are often 'specific to a particular task and sometimes rather subtle' (p.223). Furthermore, sometimes the difference is that bilinguals perform better than monolinguals (p.225). Part II also includes extensive discussion both of the strategies that can be used to support bilingual children in the home and of the options that are available to parents in terms of schooling (immersion, bilingual, etc.). All of this will undoubtedly assist parents who choose to embark on what Grosjean terms, with his characteristic enthusiasm, 'the joyful journey into languages and cultures' (p.217).

Grosjean has, above all, written a book for bilinguals. His is a rallying cry, urging his readers to embrace their bilingualism and their biculturalism, and seeking to reassure them that, in doing so, the rewards they reap will outweigh any minor inconveniences.

www.gla.ac.uk/tkr