

OPINION

## A mother's tongue: The complexity of raising multilingual children

**MALWINA GUDOWSKA**

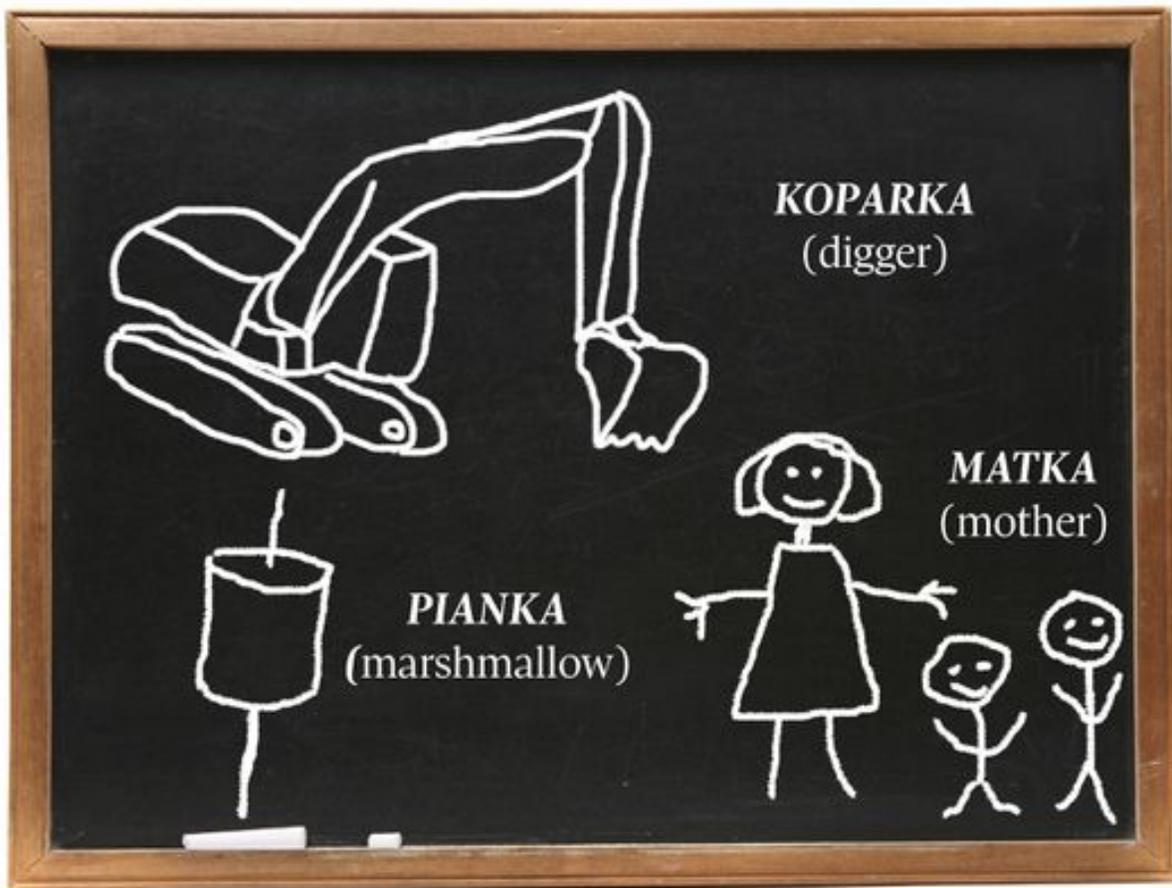
SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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*Malwina Gudowska is a Canadian journalist living in London.*

One of my son's first words was *koparka*, digger in Polish. As a two-year-old, his interest in all things construction meant that he would point to images of cement trucks, crane trucks and bulldozers and ask me what they were called. I knew how to answer in English, my dominant language, but as the sole parent who also speaks Polish, a language my husband and I want our children to learn, Google Translate was never far. More recently, while baking cookies, my son, now 4½ years old, asked me what marshmallows and sprinkles are in Polish. Again, I was stumped. Construction-site vocabulary and confectionery items were not part of my everyday lexicon growing up. I texted my mom, the more personal version of a translation app, and she responded: "I have no idea; We did not have sprinkles or marshmallows in my day."

Rewind to 2011, as a child-free young journalist, I wrote an award-winning story on raising multilingual children. At the time, I could only draw on my upbringing in a Polish-speaking home growing up in Saskatoon, while also attending a French-immersion program, as first-hand experience. I interviewed several linguists and parents including a woman who was, back then, in a similar plight to my current one: Her first language was Swedish, but after living and being socialized in Canada for decades, English became her dominant language. She tried to teach her children her mother tongue, but in the end, after excessive resistance from her daughter and not enough support, she gave up.

I remember silently judging her during our interview. Multilingualism is the greatest gift a parent can give a child; how could she give up, I thought, genuinely dumbfounded.

Today, I know unerringly why she did not persevere. I think of that interview often and regret my unspoken judgment. After having two children of my own, I now know what an uphill battle it is to raise bilingual children, especially in a home with only one multilingual parent speaking the minority language. It is an anxiety-ridden, often soul-crushing, arduous feat not for the faint of heart. There are monumental highs and colossal lows, tears, frustrations and small victories that would, to an outsider, seem inconsequential, but are everything to me. There are also harsh defeats after so much effort that often leave me feeling spent.

I have, embarrassingly, cried tears of frustration, stomping out of the room like a toddler, when my son asks for my husband to read a bedtime story instead of me because he knows that means *Toy Story* will be read in English. I have lost my cool when I am frustrated with other normal parenting issues and have yelled at my children, "Don't speak to me in English!" Within the same breath, I am overjoyed when I hear my son say something in Polish, only to be disheartened on the exhale when he looks at me blankly, searching for a word he should know.

Forget Google Translate – parents raising multilingual children need a virtual therapist on-hand.





My daughter is nearly 2, responds to both languages and, as my son did at her age, has started to say words in each language. The trickier part is later when words are strung together to make sentences. My son also understands everything in Polish but as to be expected, English is his dominant language. It is the language his father speaks to him, the language his father and his mother speak to each other and the language of his peer group in London, where we reside. Even though most of our close friends speak second languages – Icelandic, Spanish, Swedish, Portuguese, French – the common one among most of us is English. If prompted, my son will say a short sentence in Polish, but more often will code-switch, substituting one English word for a Polish one in an otherwise English sentence.

The potential benefits – cognitive, social, academic – of multilingualism have been emphasized since my childhood but now, as a linguist, I also know too much and with that knowledge comes an added pressure of ensuring my children get the most exposure to multiple languages as early as possible. The popular one parent, one language method is what my husband and I are using with our children. While I was writing my thesis on multilingualism and empathy last year, I found a 2007 study by Annick De Houwer that concluded that families where both parents spoke the same home language had a much larger success rate of the child speaking the minority language. “The ‘one parent–one language’ strategy did not provide a necessary nor sufficient input condition,” Dr. De Houwer writes. The predominant reason is that exposure is crucial and when only one parent speaks the minority language, when the child also spends most of his day in an English-speaking setting such as daycare or school, it is often not enough.

A fellow linguist put it this way: The child will always pick up the language of his or her peer group, even as young as preschool age; it is a form of survival of the fittest. (This is the main reason it always pains me to hear parents say they are worried their child will be confused once they go to an English-language school if they speak a different language at home.)

Making learning fun is also instrumental for a child to acquire another language and I must tread carefully to not make it feel like I am forcing it, even though I mostly am. After one too many eye rolls and protests reading Polish books at bedtime, we have imposed a rule that we read both English and Polish books every night. Last year, I spent a small fortune on Polish books with my son’s favourite characters – Lightning McQueen, the Paw Patrol pups, Thomas

most upsetting. The irony of the term mother tongue is not lost on me. Polish is my mother tongue but English is my dominant language. I, the mother, the immigrant, a Polish-Canadian living in Britain, so desperately want my children to be multilingual that I straddle an unconscious divide between two languages, and in some way, two worlds. And yet, as much as I want them to be citizens of the world, culturally and linguistically, I also want them to feel a sense of belonging I never truly did.

As a parent, I feel like an outcast in each language, a sentiment I never felt before having children. I have a mastery of English and it comes naturally to me, but I want to use it as little as possible in front of my kids to maximize their exposure to Polish. As my minority language, Polish, on the other hand, takes more effort. The mental strength I draw upon when speaking or reading in Polish makes the language feel artificial and that is a problem when you are trying to parent, to discipline, to comfort and to ensure you are passing on a language and also life lessons. For a long time with my son, I was using Polish diminutives when referring to things such as milk or items of clothing as it came naturally to me to speak that way to a child. I saw it as a form of endearment. It was only when my mom, annoyingly yet rightfully, pointed out that I should teach my children the augmentative form from the start, I had to become more aware of what I was saying.

This hyperawareness of ensuring I am using the proper grammar and vocabulary sometimes overshadows other linguistic cues and I question whether my son understands that I am, for example, disciplining or that what I am saying is not to be taken lightly. My husband and I try not to raise our voices in either language but at times, when something serious happens, I fear my expression of disappointment or anger in my minority language comes across as inauthentic. Discussing feelings with my kids, a vital part of my ideal parenting style, is another linguistic minefield when I am using my minority language. And yet, ironically in our home, *kocham cie*, the Polish translation for “I love you,” is the more genuine and common term of endearment. My husband and I began saying it long before our kids arrived and whether it is out of habit or something encoded, it feels erroneous to say it in English.

The idea of feeling different when using a foreign language has been studied by several linguists. In a 2006 study by Aneta Pavlenko, professor at the Center for Multilingualism in Society across the Lifespan, University of Oslo, participants were asked if they feel like a different person when they use their different languages. Sixty-five per cent of the participants

answered yes, adding that when they use their dominant language they felt more real or natural. Multilinguals described their minority language as one being more detached or more distant than their majority language. Studies have also suggested that emotion words in a minority language are less deeply encoded in the mind.

“Emotions that seem key in some cultures may be linguistically non-existent in others,” writes Alexia Panayiotou, assistant professor at the Department of Public and Business Administration at the University of Cyprus, in *Bilingual Minds*. “Certain emotion terms may have translation equivalents, but these equivalents are inadequate given the varying importance and meaning they carry in different cultural contexts.” For me, words such as kindness, remorse, frustration all carry different emotional weight in each of my languages. I do not feel a connection to the Polish translations of these words when I am trying to parent my children the way I want, instilling moral values and the things I believe are important for a child to learn.

the Train – only to find a few of the books to have a vocabulary that was unfamiliar or too complicated even for me.

Psi Patrol Polska | Piosenka Czołówkowa (Muzyka) | Nick Jr.



What does the Paw Patrol theme sound like in Polish? Have a listen.

In *How Language Works*, author David Crystal writes that when speakers cannot express themselves adequately in one language, they may switch to the other to make up for the deficiency. “This tends to happen a great deal when the speaker is upset, tired or otherwise distracted,” Mr. Crystal writes. So pretty much the entire baby and toddler years.

“The switch between languages can signal the speaker’s attitude towards the listener ... if two bilinguals normally talk to each other in language X, the choice of Y is bound to create a special effect,” Mr. Crystal writes. “A common example is for a mother to tell her child to do something in one language, and then, if the child fails to obey, to switch to another language, thereby showing her stronger emphasis or displeasure.” For me, every second of exposure to the minority language matters more than getting my child to do something on the first or second try. There are other situations I am always unsure how to navigate: play dates with English-speaking children, conversations with my kids in front of my husband that I want him to understand in the moment, phonics and math assignments. My default is to say everything twice: once in Polish and once in English.

But beyond the more obvious hurdles of trying to teach my child my heritage, and my minority language, it is the emotion of language I find the most problematic and often the

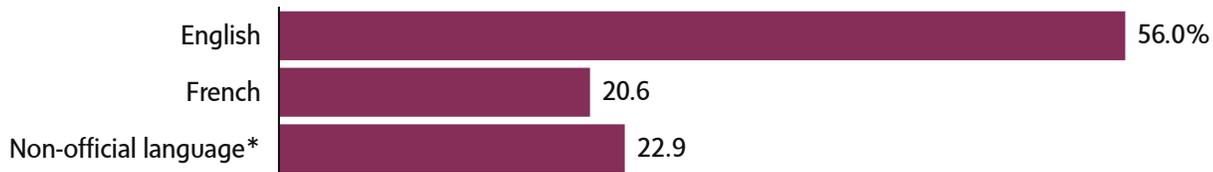
In *The Sparrow Garden*, poet Peter Skrzynecki poignantly writes about his family's immigrant experience and within that, the symbolism of the Polish word *zal*. "Literally, it means 'sadness' or 'sorrow' or 'grief', but it has a depth to it that no English word can capture, certainly not in three letters. *Zal* is more than a description of a physical feeling; it is a heartfelt reaction, carrying the notion of profound loss and yearning at the same time; it belongs to the language of the spirit or the soul, to an Absolute that is intangible," Mr. Skrzynecki writes.

Like all matters of parenthood, I am not alone. I have a friend who speaks Spanish to her daughter, her husband speaks Italian and yet, the child only responds in English. Another French friend says she feels like the language police at home even though both she and her partner speak French to their son. It is, as I know it was for my parents, still a struggle even when both parents speak the minority language.

Even those parents who do not speak a second language at home, but who want their children to be bilingual, face obstacles. As a recent study by the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages outlined, the mounting demand for French immersion has created a shortage of French-as-a-second-language teachers. Parents in parts of B.C. have lined up outside of schools in hopes of getting a place for their child. In Ontario, some boards are using a lottery system to allocate places in highly coveted French-immersion programs. The report also states because of the lack of linguistically skilled teachers, some positions are being filled with less-than-qualified candidates.

According to the 2016 census from Statistics Canada, 7.6 million Canadians speak a language other than French or English at home and 22.9 per cent of Canadians have a non-official language as their mother tongue. Almost 18 per cent of Canadians say they are bilingual in English and French – a historic high. More young Indigenous Canadians are learning their native tongue as a second language and 228,770 Canadians speak Indigenous languages at home, more than the number who say an Indigenous language is their mother tongue. However, the census also reported that 69.9 per cent of Canadians with a non-official language as their mother tongue speak English or French at home. I commiserate.

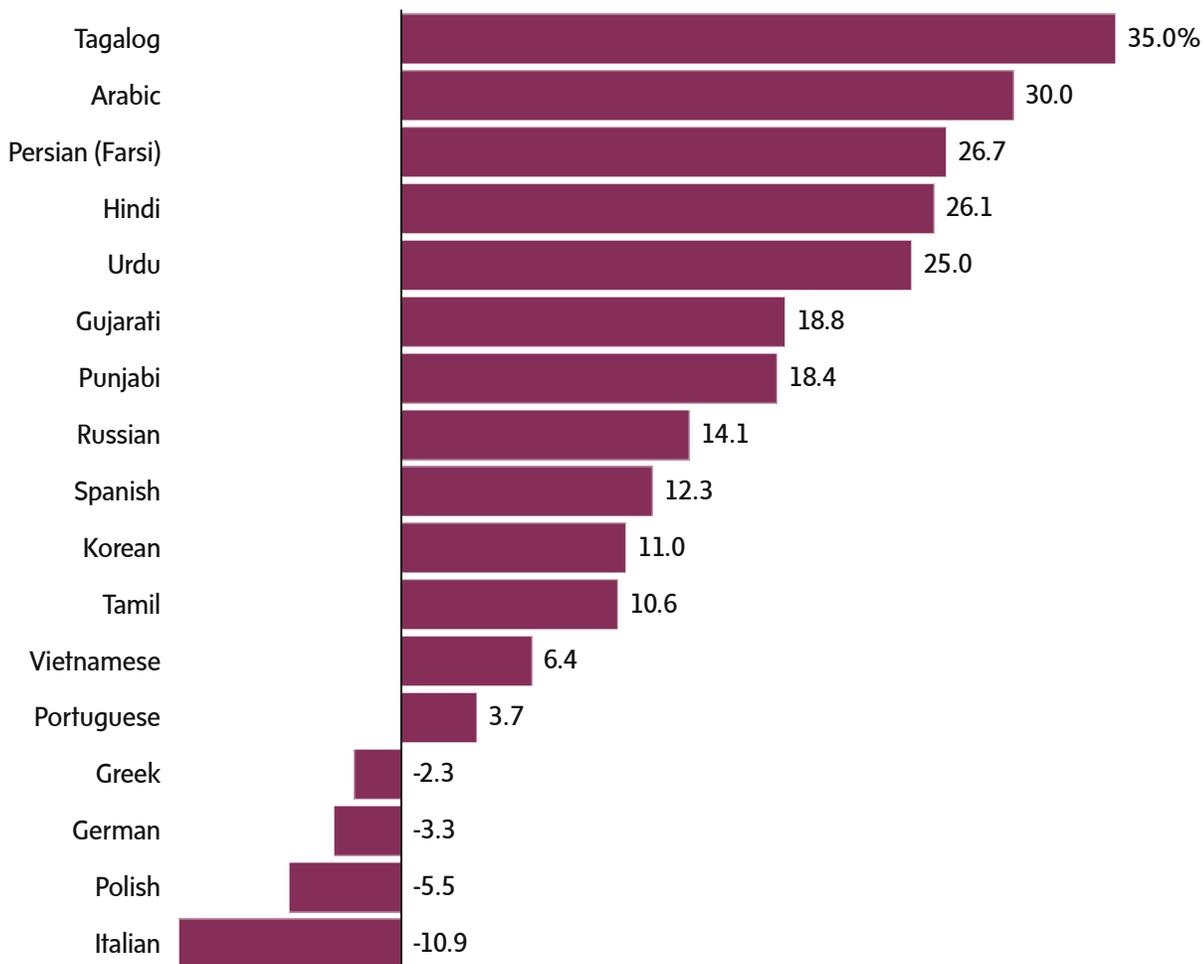
### Mother tongue by percentage of population, 2016



THE GLOBE AND MAIL, SOURCE: STATSCAN (\*INCLUDES RESPONDENTS WHO ALSO REPORTED ENGLISH, FRENCH OR BOTH AS MOTHER TONGUES IN ADDITION TO A NON-OFFICIAL LANGUAGE)

DATA SHARE

### Change in percentage of population who reported speaking certain immigrant languages, 2011 vs. 2016



THE GLOBE AND MAIL, SOURCE: STATSCAN

There may be lows, but there are also highs, all worth the tears and toddler-like adult tantrums. I am teaching my kids, but my kids are also teaching me. Because I read to my son every night in Polish, my reading has improved, I have learned new words in my mother tongue I would have never looked up otherwise (superhero cape, hook and laser are the latest). Studies have shown that multilingualism can delay the onset of dementia, but regular use is key, and since I am speaking Polish more often than I was before having children, I am hoping for the best.

On a day I was feeling particularly crushed recently, I said to my son, “I think we will have to start some sort of Polish school classes soon.”

“I can just learn Polish from you,” he replied in English.

“I don’t think I can do it alone any more,” I said, in Polish.

He paused for a moment and replied, “Tak mozesz, Mama.” (Yes, you can, Mama.) He has also started to ask me to sing a Polish song before bed every night. It is likely an excuse to prolong bedtime, but it gets me every time.

Not long ago, as I was lamenting about my struggles to get my son to speak Polish with another mom, also bilingual who speaks French to her sons, she told me a story about a family she recently met in London. French is the dominant language for both bilingual parents but their teenaged kids only speak English. One day, the children asked the parents why they had never taught them French. The parents conveyed the story of resistance and of how the kids, aged around 5 or 6 at the time, told them they only wanted to speak English at home. And so, the parents acquiesced, no longer forcing the French. The teenagers replied, “Since when do five-year-olds know what’s best for them?”

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