

# Bilingual children refusing to speak the home language

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When my daughter was five years old, she one day solemnly informed me that, from now on, she was no longer going to speak German because it was not good for her health. “German hurts my throat”, she explained. The statement showed astute phonetic and psychological judgement. She had identified the kind of argument that would carry weight with her parents (in a way that “I don’t like German” or “Everyone else speaks English” might not have).



Dr Sabine Little during her guest lecture at Macquarie University

My response was to explain the basics of articulation to her and to conclude my explanation with the assertion that, because German is more guttural than English, German-speaking kids get to eat more lollies than English-speaking kids do. For the time being, that was the end of that attempt to change our family language.

For bilingual children, the early primary years are a common point of linguistic rebellion. At that time the dominant language starts to make its weight felt through the school and children begin to see their family from the outside for the first time in their lives. The combined discovery of a stronger language and of social difference may lead them to reject the home language.

For parents, children’s linguistic rebellion can be profoundly confusing and challenging.

A common experience is for bilingual children to ask their parents not to speak the home language in public, in the school or in front of their friends. For many parents such a request can be deeply hurtful. It may feel like a rejection not only of the language but also of the parent who speaks the language.

As a parent, how do you respond to that? Do you respect your child's wishes, even if it may come at the cost of language loss? Do you insist on the home language because you know that eventually the child will be grateful for the bilingual proficiencies you have instilled in them? Do you force them to follow your choices because you believe that the home language is an important aspect of your identity and their identity? Do you give in sometimes and stand firm on other occasions?

There are probably as many variations on the answer to these questions as there are families, and it is always helpful to learn from the experiences of other families.



How would you feel about inheriting this vase?  
(Source: veniceclayartists.com)

Great-Aunt Edna.

It is easy to see that a vase can be a complicated inheritance. Now imagine how complicated things can get when the inheritance is not an object but a language.

In her [research with 212 bilingual families in the UK](#), Dr Little found that parents often failed to talk about these complicated feelings with their children. If conflicting emotions around language choice were left to fester, this could easily turn language into a battleground for the family and a source of tensions between parents and children.

The research of [Dr Sabine Little](#) (Sheffield University, UK) addresses precisely such questions and asks how bilingual parents and children jointly negotiate language policies in the family. As part of the [Lectures in Linguistic Diversity](#) series at Macquarie University, Dr Little conceptualized the home language as heritage language and likened it to "Great Aunt Edna's vase".

When Great-Aunt Edna passes on and leaves her treasured vase to her nephew, all kinds of scenarios are possible. He may have exactly the same taste and love the vase because it is a fantastic vase. He may not care much for the vase but treasure it because it reminds him of his love for Great-Aunt Edna. He may care neither for the vase nor Great-Aunt Edna, and therefore let the vase gather dust in a corner. Or he may find the vase so atrocious that he wants nothing to do with it and gives it away. A further complicating factor may be other members of his family who have their own views and preferences about the vase.

In short, the inherited vase may be a source of pride, guilt, conflict or disregard. Not all of these emotions may be talked about openly: some people love kitschy vases but may be ashamed to admit that; others may hate them but are afraid to be judged disrespectful of

In fact, attempting to raise children bilingually may not only impact on the parent-child relationship but also put a strain on the couple relationship, as Livia Gerber and I found in [new research just published](#) in the *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*.

In data from an online discussion forum about bilingual parenting, we found that mothers were much more invested in their children's bilingualism than fathers. Mothers often perceived fathers as uncooperative or incompetent obstacles to enacting a bilingual family policy.

Taken together, both pieces of research warn of the dangers of letting language choice become a source of tension in the family.

One way to overcome such problems is to keep renegotiating language choice with children as they grow up. Dr Little recommends talking as much **about** language choice and the home language as **in** the home language.

That is certainly sound advice.

Connecting this research with the [research about linguistic habit formation by Professor Maite Puigdevall we heard about in a previous lecture in the series](#) suggests that there is another possibility, too: the transition to primary school is a key moment when linguistic habits are subject to change. What may seem like rebellion on the part of the child may in fact be the overwhelming influence of a new world with its new habits. It is not so much that they rebel against the home language but that the dominant language is taking them over.

Acknowledging the force of habit can be another way to escape the impossible choice of letting go of the home language or turning the home language into an ongoing source of tension. As so often in life, the road to success is through the formation of good habits.

Instilling good bilingual habits in their children is, of course, not something parents can do on their own. In addition to strong home language habits in the family, they will need the support of the community. Home language support in the school is ideal and lobbying for home language support in the school may be one of the most effective ways in which parents can support their children's bilingualism.

Where school support for the home language is not feasible, it is important to seek out other forms of community support. After all, it takes a village to raise a child. Parenting cannot be done alone but needs community support, and this is even more so the case when it comes to bilingual parenting.

## References



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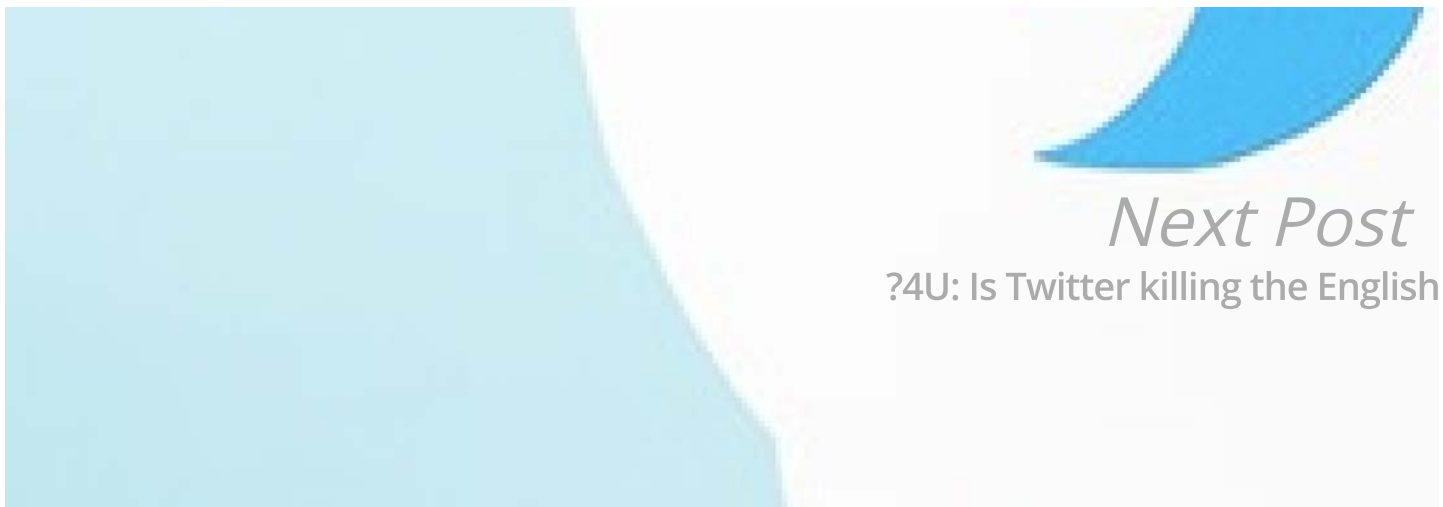
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