

## Rethinking Bilingualism: François Grosjean's Four Decades of Insight

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### Abstract:

*On Bilinguals and Bilingualism* brings together 40 years of research on bilingualism by researcher and scholar François Grosjean. Written from a personal perspective and in a reflective tone, the volume aims to challenge enduring prejudices about bilingual speakers and promote a holistic view of bilingualism. This review outlines the book's autobiographical structure and summarizes Grosjean's major theories, empirical contributions, and their relevance for contemporary bilingualism research.

Bilingualität neu denken: Erkenntnisse aus vier Jahrzehnten Forschung von François Grosjean

### German Abstract:

*On Bilinguals and Bilingualism* vereint 40 Jahre Forschung zum Thema Bilingualität von Wissenschaftler und Professor François Grosjean. Aus einer persönlichen Perspektive und in reflektierendem Ton, zielt das Werk darauf ab, hartnäckige Vorurteile gegenüber zweisprachigen Menschen zu hinterfragen und eine ganzheitliche Sichtweise auf Bilingualität zu fördern. Diese Rezension skizziert die autobiografische Struktur des Buches und fasst Grosjeans wichtigste Theorien, empirische Beiträge und deren Relevanz für die aktuelle Forschung zur Zweisprachigkeit zusammen.

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François Grosjean is a highly regarded scholar in the field of bilingualism, with an extensive range of publications to his name. Over the last four decades, he has written broadly, though not exclusively, on bilingualism and successfully presents the trajectory of his works in *On Bilinguals and Bilingualism*. In this 2024 volume, the author shares his contributions to the field in a chronological and coherent manner, aiming to reflect on his academic career and legacy as a linguist. While maintaining a consistently personal tone, Grosjean offers a scientific overview of his main theories, arguments, and contributions to bilingualism research.

The book is organized chronologically and follows Grosjean's academic development over time. As his research progresses, each chapter builds on earlier findings and ideas, resulting in a cumulative structure. At the same time, his changing understanding of bilingualism, shaped by his own experiences as a bilingual speaker, becomes increasingly clear. This organization, therefore, reflects both his development as a researcher and his evolving position as a bilingual individual. Especially by opening the book with a lengthy account of his own bilingual history and the origins of his scholarly interest, the author creates an approachable atmosphere that makes reading his book engaging and easy. This narrative framing also enables him to present his theories, conceptual models, and empirical studies in an accessible way, supported by his explicit commitment to avoid "too much terminology" (p. 2). The subsequent 10 chapters follow a largely chronological order, each elaborating on one of his main theories or concepts and the related research, often accompanied by biographical references. The author consistently situates his theories within contemporary research, offering follow-up comments in the form of (new) reflections, opinions, and suggestions for future research where he deems necessary.

He maintains a critical distance throughout, also by engaging with reactions from scholarly colleagues after each chapter.

Grosjean's main motivation is to promote his holistic view of bilingualism. Within such, he criticizes the default comparison of bilinguals to two monolinguals in one person. Instead, he argues that bilinguals are dynamic yet fully competent communicators with their very own language system. The author is convinced that bilingual speakers "have developed competencies in their languages to the extent required by their needs and those of the environment [and that] they use the two languages – separately or together – for different purposes, in different domains of life, with different people" (p. 27). In his attempt to counteract the overemphasis on a bilingual's language fluency, Grosjean proposes two concepts that shape a bilingual's language use: language modes and "the complementarity principle" (p. 61). These theories, discussed in chapters three and four, provide valuable conceptual tools for explaining why a bilingual's linguistic performance depends on the languages s/he shares with the interlocutor and the context in which s/he speaks, leading to the reasonable conclusion that a bilingual's language proficiency should not be measured against that of a monolingual.

Due to their theoretical and technical complexity, chapters five and six proved to be the most challenging to read. Nevertheless, the concise treatments of spoken language processing and cross-linguistic influence, combined with the author's clear effort to simplify abstract concepts, ensured their comprehensibility. Grosjean succeeds in summarizing the most important elements of major studies while following a common thread and carefully giving credit to existing research where necessary. Hence, one can clearly remember that early bilinguals are more prone to learning and detecting gender markers than late bilinguals, that in mixed-language situations, base-language units (i.e., phonemes, syllables, and words of the L1) are preferred over those of the guest language (L2), and that bilinguals activate both of their languages at the same time while the brain uses the context of the conversation to decide which meaning of a certain word is correct when it can belong to both languages of the bilingual. All the while, linguistic influence can occur from the first to the second language or from the second to the first language, for instance, in scenarios where people immigrate to other countries and the need for their native language declines, as was the case for Grosjean himself.

As becomes clear, the volume's strongest asset is the author's ability to combine empirical findings with (his) real-life experiences. This makes engaging with his research feel grounded, practically relevant, and individually applicable. Especially in chapter seven on biculturalism, I could particularly relate to his insights on how biculturals can participate in two cultures simultaneously and adapt their language, behaviors, and attitudes accordingly yet, unlike bilinguals, are not always able to deactivate these traits in a monolingual or monocultural setting. Beyond bilingualism and biculturalism in spoken-language contexts, Grosjean unexpectedly extends these concepts to a less acknowledged group in chapter eight, namely, to deaf people. For them, bilingualism and biculturalism are more relevant issues than one might initially assume. This inclusion is not only encouraging to see, but it also highlights the largely overlooked truth that most deaf people are, in fact, bilingual and bicultural. Typically, they master a sign language alongside a dominant language (i.e., the official spoken language of their respective country) and move between the hearing and the deaf community.

By providing numerical insights into bilingualism in the US, Canada, Switzerland, and France, Grosjean illustrates in chapter nine that being bilingual is more the norm than the exception. His studies suggest that about half of the world's population is bilingual, which makes his field of research all the more relevant and valuable. In terms of value, chapter ten is dedicated to what the author calls "special bilinguals" (p. 148). These include bilingual writers, translators and interpreters, second-language teachers, sleeper agents, foreign correspondents, and pilots and air traffic controllers. Grosjean appreciatively explains what it is that makes these bilinguals so distinctive, for instance, when language interpreters have to activate both of their languages simultaneously, while one is solely used for perception and the other solely for production.

Arguing that many prejudices and negative opinions exist about bilinguals, Grosjean highlights some as particularly significant: the belief that bilinguals should be as proficient in their languages as monolinguals, that they have split or double personalities, that bilingualism delays language development in children, and that all bilinguals are necessarily also bicultural. In his final chapter, he therefore emphasizes the importance of the social role of the researcher and effective science communication. As a researcher himself, he "wanted to demystify bilingualism for a general readership [and] offer bilinguals a book about who they are" (p. 160). Based on

research conducted over the past forty years and summarized in this volume, Grosjean seeks to make research accessible and understandable to all.

To sum up, *On Bilinguals and Bilingualism* presents the work of an experienced and well-established scholar. It reads less as a textbook than as a reflective synthesis: a capstone from one of the field's most prominent scholars, bringing together decades of empirical work on bilingualism. The work under review is outstandingly personal, refreshingly timely, and fundamentally convincing. It will be a particularly engaging read for scholars and students interested in how researchers and their theories develop over time. It should be noted, however, that the author largely reiterates positions he has taken in the past, which may strike readers already familiar with Grosjean's work as repetitive. At the same time, those approaching Grosjean's work for the first time may find some parts of the volume too brief or lacking in depth. As a bicultural-bilingual myself, I found this volume both intellectually stimulating and personally affirming.