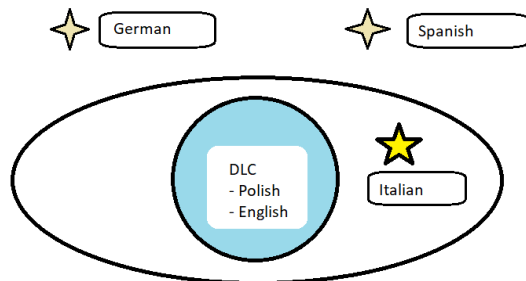


# Interview with a Multilingual Speaker: Two Perspectives

About

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Zuzanna's DLC model



Caren's multilingualism development model

## Interview questions:

1. *How would you describe yourself - bilingual, multilingual, poliglot?*

Zuzanna: I typically refer to myself as a bilingual - as for now Polish and English are the only languages I speak fluently, and I consider myself native-like in both.

Caren: As per definition I am a multilingual. I speak German, English and French. Although my French is not nearly as fluent as my English, I can converse comfortably, understand complex matters and hold the C1 certificate of my university's language institute.

2. *What are your L1, L2, L3 etc?*

Zuzanna: My L1 is Polish - both my parents are Polish and I grew up in a monolingual environment. My L2 is English - I have been learning it for 15 years in total, but the last 6 have been groundbreaking for me. I attended a linguistic high school, my skills sky-rocketed, I participated in plenty of student exchanges and I began to surround myself with foreign friends and culture. My L3 is Italian - I have been learning it for 3 years now, my level is lower-intermediate, I am able to sustain a conversation and I understand a lot. I spent a semester abroad in Italy and my hearing skills improved tremendously, but I still struggle with my confidence when speaking.

Caren: My L1 is German, I grew up in a monolingual German household/environment. My L2 is English - I have been learning it since kindergarten but only truly reached fluency during my stay in the United States during high school. My L3 is French, first poorly acquired in middle school and then drastically improved to comfortable fluency during my voluntary service in France. Finally, my L4 is Russian. I started learning it with my entry into university and have only ever taken university courses to acquire it, the reason why I have not yet surpassed the A2 level.

3. *Where do you use your languages?*

Zuzanna: I speak Polish and English daily - Polish at home, English at the university and with most of my friends. I would dare to say that in fact I speak more English than Polish on a day-to-day basis. I do not use Italian often, but I try to listen to Italian podcasts or read Italian bloggers as often as I can.

Caren: Similarly, I speak German and English daily - German at home, English at university and with most of my friends (although with them the language I speak is more accurately described by “Denglish”). On a regular (university) day I speak equally as much German as English. I speak a lot less French than I would like to. Even though Freiburg is very close to France and the French population/influence is therefore quite high in Freiburg, I do not have French friends who prefer to speak French with me over using English. Thus, I make sure to consume French media (news, articles, podcasts, shows, sometimes a book) to make up for the lack of my French speaking practice. I speak Russian exclusively in Russian class/with my tandem-partner, since my current competency does not allow me to engage in regular conversations yet.

4. *How proficient are you in your foreign languages?*

Zuzanna: Polish is my native language, English is certified as C1/C2 in CEFR levels, and A2/B1 in Italian. As for my L2 and L3, my hearing and reading skills are somewhat higher than reading and writing ones (especially for Italian).

Caren: I am a German native speaker, my latest English TOEFL score was 112/120, I have a French C1 certification (that I would interpret as B2 in real life competency though) and a Russian A2 certification (that I would interpret as A1 in real life competency though).

5. *Would you describe yourself as a balanced or as a dominant bilingual (considering the two languages you speak most)?*

Zuzanna: I would definitely describe myself as a dominant bilingual - I am fully aware that English, despite being my L2 in case of chronology, might be easier for me to use than Polish, especially when it comes to writing. I would dare to say that my university studies are to blame - I read, write, and speak in English everyday for 5-8 hours, and later I entertain myself while being exposed to English, rather than Polish forms. Considering the fact that I study translation, this might be a very unfortunate turn of events, and I do my best to retain my Polish language skills everyday.

Caren: Dominant and balanced are difficult categories to consider because it is nearly impossible to be a truly balanced bilingual. Nonetheless, I consider myself a balanced bilingual of German and English because I speak both languages for a similar amount of time on a daily basis and simply feel equally competent/confident speaking them.

6. *What was your language learning journey?*

Zuzanna: I am certainly a sequential bilingual (understood as a full acquisition of the L1 followed by the start of L2 acquisition), I have not been exposed to English until primary school, when I was six. I have not paid much attention to my proficiency for a while. I have been focusing on the language learning process for 6 years now.

Caren: When considering German and English I am also a sequential bilingual (as I started learning English at around 4), even though I only achieved true English competency far later in my life. That would make me a mixed bilingual, and a mixed multilingual too.

7. *With the process of acquisition, did you see any influences of your languages on one another? How does it influence your code switching?*

Zuzanna: I lost some of my abilities to write and speak elegantly in my native language. Occasionally I struggle with the translation from English into Polish, I end up making calques, and I have to use some Polish collocation dictionaries to aid me with that. For that reason, I codeswitch very often. Most of my friends, even the Polish ones, speak English, which makes it easier for me to just switch whenever I feel too lazy to bother myself with Polish. I also experience the fact that I find it easier to talk about certain topics, like e.g. my feelings, in English.

Caren: Of course, I also experience a certain loss of my German academic register, given that I study in English. However, I also took one or the other German-taught course and I discovered that I have no trouble remembering that German academic register in no time. I experience more trouble in day-to-day situations remembering the words in the right language. Here my university friends are a negative influence (especially when they also speak both English and French) because their ability to understand me in several languages encourages my random and weird code switching habits. This definitely does not improve my switch control and my ability to find the right word when my conversation partner(s) rely on me to find it.

8. *What does your language learning process look like?*

Zuzanna: As for English my language learning process was quite standard, because I was taught with the help of a language book for school students. It consists of units that introduce new grammar and vocabulary fields. Later on, I learned that listening to music and watching movies in a foreign language accelerates the speed of learning for me. That was the strategy I resorted to when I began learning Italian - it started with songs and YouTube videos. Flashcards are also a big help for me. When it comes to grammar - endless written exercises and then trying to use the newly learned forms as often as I can. Last but not least, the immersion environment experience is priceless.

Caren: My preferred learning process is moving to a country where the language is spoken and to immerse myself in the community. Of course, I also like to use learning books and sticky notes e.g. to remember words, but I have found out that the most successful and rewarding process for me is to blindly jump into both the language and the culture connected to it. I also enjoy using music as learning material, as I can practice my comprehension, translating, pronunciation and interpretation skills with it. However, I learned my secondary languages (that I speak fluently) with a combination of institutional education, immersion into the culture/country and targeted media consumption.

9. *What are some typical characteristics of a polyglot? Is it something you are born with, or is it just a matter of perseverance?*

Zuzanna: To my mind, perseverance is the most important thing when it comes to language learning. Of course, it helps if you have been exposed to many languages from birth, or if you grow up in a multilingual environment. Only time and hard work can take you where you want to be - and that was certainly the case for me.

Caren: As far as my current knowledge about polyglots allows me to assess, it is a combination of both. Perseverance and dedication to the learning process are key, but to achieve language competency in more than say 10 languages I believe there must be a difference in neural composition which enhances the abilities of understanding, remembering, and maintaining so many different language systems.

10. *According to the Geschwind-Galaburda hypothesis - do you have any predispositions to become a hyperpolyglot?*

Zuzanna: From the characteristics enumerated in the video, I can only say I possess some musical abilities, and I do not have problems with mathematics. There might be something about tearing the language into pieces, like songs into notes and mathematical problems into numbers, and going from the bottom up. However, like with every skill, it takes time to learn to play an instrument, figure out math problems, and learn some vocabulary.

Caren: I am left-handed and I have an artistic affinity (that includes music as a component of dance), but I am not sure these characteristics would/could help my language acquisition abilities.

11. *How would you respond to the fact that most hyperpolyglots are men?*

Zuzanna: I think that is a curious point to make. As it was numerously underlined in the video, learning a language takes time - so you need to have time or make time for that. One of the hyperpolyglots in the video admitted that after his 9-to-5 job he studies languages for 8 to 10 hours. Maybe the answer would be that many women, apart from their daily jobs, perform most of the household tasks and take care of children. It is typically a norm, especially in Poland. Maybe it is not about the difference in male and female brains, but rather the societal reality - women do not make time to learn so many languages.

Caren: I was equally surprised by the fact that most polyglots are male. The point about women not making the time to learn languages is a good one, however I believe there must be more to it. The men featured in the video studied so much because they wanted to be fluent in ~20 languages. Surely, a female polyglot, who does not take extra time to study languages must be able to easily acquire comfortable fluency in ~5-10 languages, or not? I do not believe that the female and male brain are inherently different and that such a difference would prompt the ability to become a polyglot. Nonetheless, I do not think that it is a purely social matter, something (maybe hormones) must be at play that we cannot consciously influence.

## Joint conclusion:

As it turned out, despite being born in different countries, we have surprisingly a lot in common - especially when it comes to our background. We were both born into monolingual families and for the first years of our lives we lived in a monolingual environment. Our language journey started when we began attending state schools. The language immediately introduced was English, and we both attained it as our L2. What is interesting, our primary experience with learning was similar as well, as we both

gained fluency only after having studied abroad - in the shape of student exchanges for Zuzanna, and a year abroad in the US for Caren. Consequently, we understand the importance of immersion, and both of us resorted to the learning of our L3 aided by moving to the country of the language we study - France and Italy. Furthermore, we admit that one of the reasons behind our multilingualism is the fact that our families have the financial capabilities to send us to study abroad. It is a well-established fact that the immersion environment allows for a quicker language learning process. However, not everyone can afford to travel, especially for leisure. Apart from the immersion process, we both sustain our abilities thanks to studying foreign languages at university and regularly exposing ourselves to foreign language media.

However, we also discovered that our multilingualism profiles are quite different. While Zuzanna studies Italian as L3, Caren is learning French as L3 and Russian as L4. Further, the frequency with which we speak our L1 and L2 differs. While it is a similarity that both of us use our L1 and L2 most on a daily basis, English is dominant for Zuzanna (as opposed to Polish), while Caren uses German and English in a more balanced way. Equally, when we are immersing ourselves into a language and culture we noted certain personal preferences. Caren for example, prefers to move to a foreign country and jump head on into the language learning process, while Zuzanna prefers to immerse herself into a language and culture while staying at home, engaging in what could be called a local immersion. Finally, we discussed polyglots and found that we approach the phenomenon from different perspectives. To Zuzanna, being and becoming a polyglot is about perseverance, hard work and the right social circumstances that allow you to dedicate your time to studying languages. While Caren agrees that those are important factors, she believes that polyglots must also possess a neural advantage that allows them to learn, retain and use so many languages at once.