

Grandpa shouts, "Dinner's ready" in Danish. My mother asks me in English to lay the table. As I do so, I catch the theme tune of the Brazilian soap opera on TV in the living room, where my sister is relaxing. She speaks perfect Portuguese. My father asks her to record the program in his native Spanish, and we take our places at the table. And what's on the menu? Italian meatballs. We know we aren't a normal family. At any moment, you might hear conversations in four different languages, and almost everyone understands almost everything. But what is normal these days? My mother is half-Danish, half-English, and my father, who is from Bolivia, speaks Spanish and Guarani. Because of my mother's work (she's now retired), we lived in Brazil, Italy and Germany, so we picked up three more languages. Now as adults, my sister and I both speak six languages. Being bilingual, or in our case multilingual, has so many advantages. All the recent research suggests we benefit in many ways: social, cultural, economic, academic, and intellectual. The research has also destroyed some of those persistent myths. One of the myths is that bilingualism is uncommon, as if we bilinguals are like rare, exotic birds. The truth is that around fifty percent of the world's inhabitants are bilingual. The continents with the most linguistic diversity are Asia and Africa. In Nigeria alone, 500 languages are spoken, in India 400. Some people believe that you have to learn both languages as a child to be truly bilingual. My sister and I are fortunate in this respect, but we know countless people who have mastered a second language as adults. They may not have such perfect pronunciation as those who acquire their second language as children, but they are still completely fluent and accurate. Another myth about bilinguals concerns identity. Some people think we have split personalities. As kids, my sister and I were often asked "But where are you really from? Don't you get confused?" Not at all. I am me, the product of many cultures. I can switch languages easily, according to where I am and who I'm with, and this seems completely natural to me. As for the benefits, bilinguals do better on certain tests, are better protected against mental illnesses such as Alzheimer's, gain insights into other cultures, have access to more of the world's information, and are in some contexts more employable. Being bilingual has made me who I am, and for that I'm grateful.