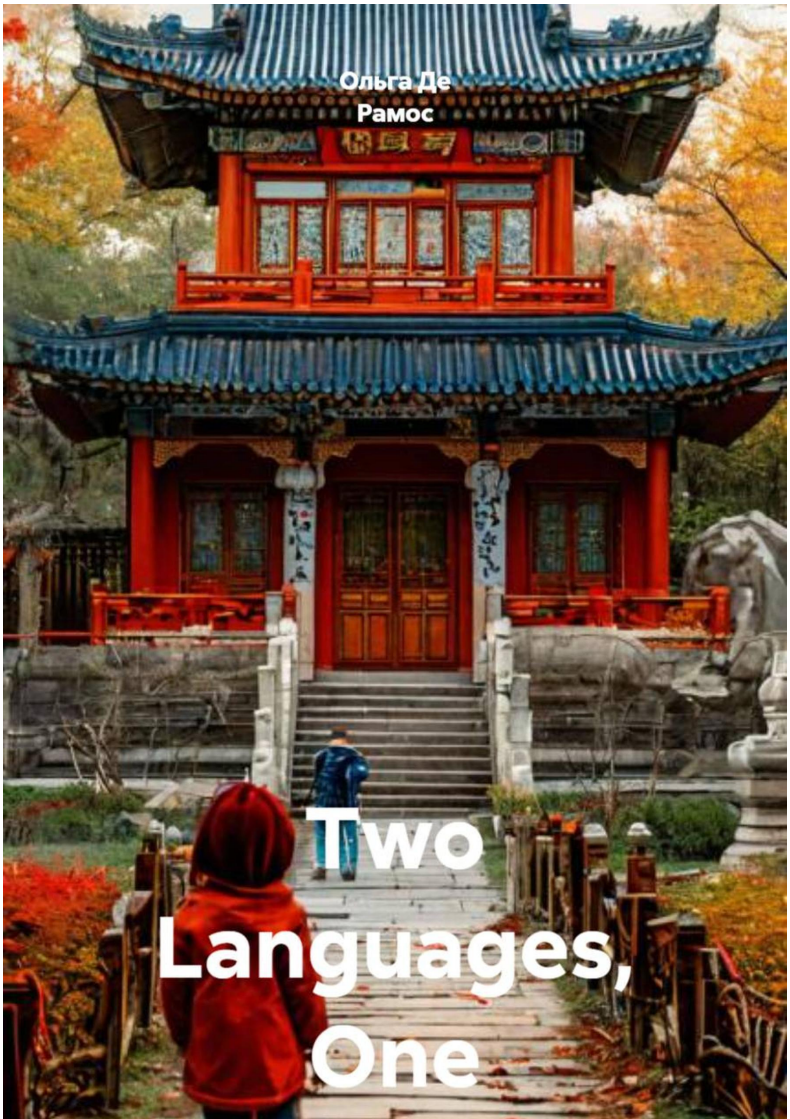
Ольга Де
Рамос
Two
Languages,
One

Ольга Рамос

Two Languages, One Childhood

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Аннотация

Your child answers you in another language. You begin a sentence — they finish it in Chinese. And one day the thought arrives: what if my child stops speaking Russian altogether?

If you live in China, you know how it happens. Russian fades quietly — word by word, day by day. The environment is stronger: school, friends, cartoons — all in another language.

This book is for parents who want to preserve Russian in the family without pressure, conflict, or guilt. The author — a linguist and the mother of a child growing up in four languages in China — brings together academic knowledge of bilingualism with real, lived parenting experience.

You will learn why children "forget" Russian (and why this is not a catastrophe), how the bilingual brain works, how Chinese shapes Russian speech, how to build family rituals that keep a language alive, and what truly helps a child speak Russian — not a rule, but love.

Содержание

Ольга Де Рамос
Two Languages, One Childhood

TWO LANGUAGES, ONE CHILDHOOD

How to Keep Your Child's Russian Alive in China

This book is a work of nonfiction. The stories and examples shared are based on real-life experiences; however, some names and identifying details have been changed to protect privacy.

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First Edition

For my Valeria, a girl of four languages and one heart, who taught me that language lives not in words, but in people

From the Author

One day, my daughter Valeria asked me: "Mama, what language do I think in?"

She was six. At home, we spoke English. With friends, Chinese. With me, sometimes Russian. Over video calls with her father's family, Spanish. She was growing up in four languages at once, and the question she asked was the most honest question about bilingualism I had ever heard. I couldn't answer right away. Though by all accounts, I should have been able to. I'm a linguist—a language teacher with multiple academic degrees and years of practice.

However, it was Valeria, a Russian-Mexican child growing up in China, with English as her primary language, who became my greatest teacher, because she showed me: language isn't what you know. It's what you live.

This book grew out of our lives. Many of the stories in it are her stories. Everything I've put into these pages is a blend of academic knowledge and the lived experience of a parent who is herself inside this multilingual world every single day. I wrote it for Russian-speaking families in China because I know this context from the inside, and because no book like this existed. If it helps even one parent, then it was worth writing.

Who This Book Is For

This book is for you if:

— You live in China and speak Russian at home

— Your child attends a Chinese school or kindergarten

— You notice Russian slipping away from their speech

— You want to preserve it, without pressure, schedules, or guilt

— One parent in your family is a non-Russian speaker, and you are looking for a balance between languages

— You teach Russian to bilingual children and want to understand your students better

This book is written at the intersection of linguistics and parenting experience. There are no strict instructions here, just stories, observations, and an understanding of how childhood bilingualism actually works.

Introduction

Your child answers you in the wrong language. You start a sentence, and they finish it in Chinese. You ask, "How was your day?" — kak dela? — and you hear an answer, but not in the language you asked the question in, and at some point, a thought appears that tightens something inside you: what if one day they stop speaking Russian entirely?

If you live in China, you know how it happens. Not suddenly. Not in a single day. Russian slips away quietly. First, individual words disappear, replaced by Chinese ones. Then answers get shorter. Then conversations in Russian almost vanish altogether. One day, you realize the last real conversation in Russian was a week ago, or two, or you can't even remember when.

This is not your fault. The environment is simply stronger: the Chinese school, friends, teachers, cartoons, street signs, the entire enormous world beyond your front door. All of it speaks to your child in another language, eight to ten hours a day, and you have one evening of exhaustion, and the feeling that you're slowly losing.

However, here's what matters: between "the language is disappearing" and "the language stays," there is no chasm. There's a fork in the road, quiet and almost invisible, and you're standing at it right now.

This book began with a story I overheard. Five-year-old Misha

came home from kindergarten in Shanghai one day and said, very seriously:

– Mama, today I was the most well-behaved.

– Really? — She was surprised. — What did you do?

– I didn't speak Russian. Not once. Not a single time. The teacher said I was a good boy.

He stood before her, proud, beaming, and she felt as though someone had quietly closed a door in their home: the door behind which Russian lived. Still, that evening, as they were reading before bed, Misha pressed close to her and whispered:

– Mom, can I speak Russian tomorrow? Just with you. So I don't forget.

That little phrase — "so I don't forget" — became a turning point. The child wasn't choosing a language. He was choosing the person who made him feel warm.

This book is for parents who want to keep Russian alive in their family but are tired of pressure and guilt. There will be no perfect methods here. What you will find is an understanding of how language lives inside a child and what truly helps it stay.

We'll talk about how speech develops, why children sometimes "forget" Russian even though they understand everything, and how to bring the language back home gently, without conflict. We'll discuss how to read, speak, play, and build family rituals that create an emotional bond with the mother tongue.

Two languages are not a burden. They are two windows into

the world and one childhood that can be made richer and brighter.

Welcome to this story.

Chapter 1. What Is Bilingualism and Why It Doesn't Start with Language

If it seems like your child is "losing" a language, in most cases, they're perfectly fine. What you're seeing isn't a loss. It's a natural stage in bilingual development. And before you try to fix anything, it's important to understand how it actually works.

One day, four-year-old Masha from Shenzhen was playing with her dolls. Her mother listened from the next room and froze: Masha was speaking Russian to one doll and Chinese to another. She switched on her own, didn't mix them up, just felt instinctively, this one gets Russian, that one gets Chinese. Her mother thought about it for a long time afterward: who taught her that? Nobody. She simply lived in two languages, and her brain figured it out.

This is where we'll begin, not with rules or methods, but with understanding what happens inside a child who grows up in two languages at once. When we say "bilingualism," most parents picture a child who speaks both languages fluently, but bilingualism begins much earlier, long before the first words. It starts with how a child hears the world, how they distinguish intonations, and how they connect emotions to the language spoken to them.

Bilingualism Is Not Rare

Throughout history, people have almost always lived in multiple languages: one at home, another at work, a third in public life. Multilingualism has historically been and remains the norm rather than the exception. Our children are not anomalies. They are part of this tradition.

How a Child's Brain Works with Two Languages

Modern research shows that a bilingual child's brain doesn't separate languages into "Russian" and "Chinese." Instead, it stores them as two parallel systems in constant interaction. When a child hears a word, their brain activates both languages at once — and only then selects the right one. This is why children sometimes say things like:

"Mama, I'm already ## (hǎo le), finished — *mixing Russian with Chinese for "done."*

"He's my ## (tóngxué), well... classmate" — *reaching for the Chinese word first*

"I want to drink ## (rèshuǐ), hot water" — *inserting Chinese naturally*

These aren't mistakes. They're traces of how their thinking works: fast, flexible, and efficient.

What Happens Inside a Child's Head: Age Matters

Bilingualism develops differently at different stages of life. What a parent observes in a three-year-old is structured very differently from what happens in a seven-year-old.

From birth to three, a child's brain works like a sponge. It absorbs both languages simultaneously, without separating them into "first" and "second." For a toddler, mama's Russian and papa's Chinese are simply two streams of sound, each connected to a specific person, a specific warmth, a specific rhythm. At this age, a child may stay silent longer than monolingual peers. This isn't a speech delay; it's accumulation. They're building two vocabularies instead of one, and when they finally speak, they may surprise everyone in both languages at once.

From three to six, separation begins. The child understands that two languages exist and starts experimenting: who gets which language, when to switch, what to borrow from where. This is the age of the most vivid mixing, and it's what most often frightens parents. But it's not chaos. It's a system the child is building on the fly.

From six to ten, school changes everything. The school language becomes dominant, and if the school is Chinese, Russian inevitably takes a back seat. This doesn't mean it disappears. It goes deeper: the child may speak less Russian, but continues to understand everything. The active vocabulary

narrows while the passive one remains. And it's up to the parent whether Russian returns from passive to active.

After ten, the child begins to see languages as part of their identity. They may feel embarrassed about Russian or, conversely, proud of it. Adolescent bilingualism is no longer about words. It's about who the child believes they are.

One mother in Guangzhou told me her daughter stopped answering in Russian at age four. The mother panicked for three months. Then, on a trip back to Russia, the girl started speaking fluently, confidently, as if the silence had simply been a pause before a long sentence. The language hadn't gone anywhere. It was waiting for its moment.

Myths That Hold Parents Back

Most parental anxieties about bilingualism are born not from reality, but from myths, and it's these very myths that most often prevent families from preserving the language.

Myth 1: "Two languages are too much for a child."

The truth: a child's brain doesn't just cope with two languages, it thrives. Bilingual children switch between tasks more easily, concentrate better, and absorb new information faster.

When adults say "it's too hard," they're looking at bilingualism through the eyes of someone who learns a language through effort. A child doesn't learn a language; they live in it. Two languages are as natural to them as air: normal, familiar,

effortless.

Myth 2: "You need to choose one language so the child isn't confused."

The truth: children don't get confused. Adults do. For a child, two languages are not competitors; they're two tools, two ways of expressing a thought, two channels of connection with different people. Russian becomes the language of home and closeness. Chinese is the language of school and everyday discovery.

Myth 3: "If a child mixes languages, it means they don't know either one well."

The truth: mixing is a sign of strength, not weakness. When a child mixes languages, they're showing that both are active and available at any moment. The child's brain stores them as two overlapping systems. The child isn't "confused," they're simply choosing the fastest way to express a thought.

Language mixing is a normal stage that every bilingual child goes through. It resolves itself when the child begins to sort languages by situation and person, not through prohibitions, but through experience and internal maturity. For example, our daughter's first long sentence looked like this: "Мама, ##, sit down and ###какой большой (kakoj bol'shoj - how big) this слон (elephant) is, muy bonito." She was three and a half.

What Science Says: Concrete Facts

It can be hard for parents to believe that two languages aren't

an overload. Here are some facts that help.

A 2012 study at York University (Canada) showed that bilingual children perform 20% better on tasks requiring attention-switching. Their brains are accustomed to constantly choosing between two systems, and this skill transfers to every other domain.

A 2015 study by the U.S. National Institutes of Health confirmed that bilingual children have denser white matter, the neural connections responsible for information processing. Two languages literally make the brain stronger.

And a large-scale 2018 Cambridge University study showed that bilinguals initially read more slowly in their second language than monolingual children. Still, by age ten, they catch up and often surpass them, because they develop metalinguistic awareness: the ability to think about language as a system.

When a parent knows these facts, it's easier to endure those months when it feels like "nothing is working." It is working. Just invisibly.

Why Russian-Chinese Bilingualism Is Special

Russian and Chinese are two worlds that differ in nearly everything: sentence structure, the logic of meaning, and ways of expressing emotion. Which is why Russian-Chinese children often say things like:

"Мама, я тебя #" (Мама, ya tebya xiǎng) because in Chinese,

"to miss" and "to think" are the same word

"Я не хочу ##" (Ya ne khochu chī yào) because in their world, you always "eat" medicine

"He's older than me by two years" — a calque from Chinese, but perfectly logical for the child

These are small windows into how a child connects two worlds inside themselves.

Why Understanding Bilingualism Matters Before Teaching Language

Parents often start with practice: read more, speak more, turn on cartoons. But before you build a house, you need to understand the ground it stands on. Bilingualism isn't about the number of words. It's about the emotional connection to a language, the sense of safety, family habits, rituals, and communication patterns.

If a child feels warm in a language, they'll keep it. If the language is connected to love, play, and laughter, it will live. That's why we begin this book not with exercises, but with understanding.

"I Have Two Homes — One Inside the Other"

Ten-year-old Nikita from Beijing once wrote an essay titled "My Home":

"I have two homes. One is where I live. The other is the one that lives inside me. The first is in China. The second is in the

Russian language. Sometimes they argue about who's in charge, but I know: they're just friends who split me in half so I can be twice as warm."

His teacher showed the essay to his parents. His mother cried. His father was silent, then said, "This is what we're doing it for."

Key Takeaways

- Comprehension always comes before speech
- The child isn't confused; they're learning
- Language mixing is a normal stage

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.