

Iwan has a way with words as well as with a football

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I'm jealous of Iwan Roberts.

Not because he was "one of the greatest goal scorers ever to pull on a Norwich City shirt". And not because he played international football as a striker for Wales.

No, I envy Iwan because he's bilingual. When he's doing football commentaries on Radio Cymru, he speaks Welsh, his native language. When he's being interviewed about Norwich City on Radio Norfolk, he speaks English, his native language. Iwan has two native languages. Like most people from his part of North Wales, he grew up in a bilingual environment; and he acquired two mother tongues effortlessly as a consequence.

Growing up bilingual is a wonderful thing. Learning a new language as an adolescent or adult is a formidable and daunting task. It can take a very long time, and is only very rarely entirely successful. Learning a language as an infant is a doddle. We all do it, easily, and in the space of a few years. Human infants are genetically programmed to learn perfectly any language they are sufficiently exposed to in early childhood. And they can readily



■ Peter Trudgill envies the way Iwan Roberts can speak two languages fluently.

learn two or three or even four languages in this way.

I only managed to acquire one language properly. In the environment I grew up in, everybody spoke Norfolk. I'm very happy to have our local dialect as my native tongue, but it would've been nice to be a mother-tongue speaker of another language as well.

And being bilingual seems to have other benefits, in addition to the practical one of being able to communicate with people who speak a particular language. Those who've grown up bilingual learn third and fourth languages better than the rest of us,

even as adults, perhaps because they are more sensitised to the nature of language.

And this sensitivity shows itself in other ways as well.

Just think of Richard Burton's amazing way with the English language. He was someone else who grew up bilingual in Welsh and English. He famously said that "the only thing in life is language. Not love. Not anything else."

But he also said "I would rather have played for Wales at Cardiff Arms Park than Hamlet at the Old Vic". To be honest, I wouldn't have minded scoring a few goals at Carrow Road, like Iwan, myself.