Bonjour à toutes et à tous, it is my pleasure to have the opportunity to welcome you, although you have already spent a day thinking and learning – this reception is that opportunity to share your thoughts, your insights as you network with new acquaintances and well known colleagues. Our conference theme of Bilingual from Birth establishes the premise that we are already language focused, long before we begin to utter comprehensible words and sentences to communicate our needs and wants. We start by listening to those around us, and should they – those adults in charge – decide to utter their ideas and communicate with us in more than one language … then growing up bilingual is just our fate, our reality and we know no other way.

For us, we have a language for one parent and another for the other, we have our language for school, we have our language for a certain group of friends, and we have our language for work. So, on the one hand there is the language one learns in the womb. The one a child spends the first years of his/her life hearing. The one that has emotions attached to each meaning. The way certain words are pronounced because of the person who spoke them. “Words are the key to the heart” as goes the Chinese proverb. 

Et puis, il y a la langue qui nous aide à développer notre vie, à partager avec une communauté plus large et à apprendre de nouvelles choses. Les deux langues sont importantes et en grandissant, la richesse que je reçois de ces deux langues renforce mon identité. Throughout our lifetimes, there are certain words that will always have a special joy, importance, or sentimental value in the language in which you first learned them. Those words will hold a special place in our hearts because they were shared with friends, where I grew up, or in a place where my mother brought me. For me, growing up speaking more than one language has meant the freedom to move with ease from one community to another, to have friends that can share their thoughts as they come from their souls, with nothing lost in translation. Ce bilinguisme m'a donné un regard différent sur les gens, les coutumes, les expériences, les points de vue, parce que je comprends non seulement les mots que la personne prononce, mais aussi les situations et contextes d’où ils viennent. À un autre niveau, ces deux langues différentes m'ont donné un profond respect envers le patrimoine, les racines, les célébrations, la famille et la culture. Les langues sont des trésors.
qui nous enrichissent pour le reste de notre vie, qui promeuvent l'unité dans la diversité et
la compréhension internationale.

But there are the pitfalls to this bilingual from birth scenario. Where language mixing – code
switching – using elements from two languages in the same sentence – is frequent among
bilinguals. As bilingual parents we have set our children up for this – we did it and now they
reproduce it. And we must explain ourselves, especially when we attend parent teacher
interviews! But we provide good reasons for our mixing: For example, we borrow words from
the other language when there is no adequate translation – “débrouillardise”, “débrouille-toi!”
“Elle est débrouillarde” – there is no exact English word for this concept. We borrow words
when we were not sure of a specific word, or when the word is hard to pronounce … we want to
keep the flow of the conversation going, and so the word gets slotted in from that other language.
And sometimes, people mix on purpose because they like the word or phrase in the other
language better. What are your favorite words? … Let’s start with our love of the word pickle –
because you can’t physically say the pickle without smiling. Really, it is proven! But then,
cornichon is a fine word as well. But then there is débarbouillette – a far more wonderful and
fun word than the mere translation of facecloth. So boring, facecloth! But low and behold, I find
myself in a small hotel in France, asking for my débarbouillette only to have the housekeeping
staff staring at me like I have 4 heads. Ah, gant de toilette Madame … Or my story at
Versailles, ordering 2 hotdogs et 2 breuvages svp … and the utter shock – Mais madame, les
breuvages sont pour les animaux – d’un abreuvoir … Nous disons ‘boissons’ – oui, oui, we
do too. Urg, you know exactly what I meant, get over yourself, and just get me my drinks…

In the long run, one of the languages often tends to have a stronger influence on us than the
other. One language may be more prominent at home and the other in work contexts. You may
be skilled at speaking about technology only in English because you have never had the
opportunity to explore that topic in French. And so, when do we really acknowledge that we are
bilingual? We have so much self-doubt. Ah non, je peux parler l'autre langue, mais je ne suis
pas vraiment, complètement bilingue.

Donc, sommes-nous bilingues quand nous rêvons réellement dans l'autre langue? Est-ce à
ce moment-là, quand mes filles partageaient encore la même chambre, et je les ai retrouvé
endormi et en pleine période de rêve, une qui jasait dans son sommeil en anglais et l'autre
en français. Oh comme je voudrais avoir enregistré ces moments!
Or are we truly bilingual when we can actually understand the humour in the other language? Because I may use French regularly in and out of work, but I just haven’t learned all that many jokes along the way. If you speak more than one language, how easy or difficult do you find telling and understanding jokes in either language? Is it easier to be funnier in one language rather than the other? Comedians know that finding the cultural sweet spot where both French and English audiences can laugh at the same joke is a great accomplishment. Researchers actually study the effects of bilingual humour on the brain saying that you could argue that audience members are using more of their brains, or at least using different parts of their brains (Jyotsna Vaid, McGill trained psychology professor, studied the effects of bilingual humour on the brain). Being bilingual opens up a whole new dimension of what can be made amusing. You have a whole new category both in what is funny and how it’s funny. It makes you more adept cognitively. It is tickling the part of the brain that interprets things like double meanings, puns, irony and other comedic staples. Alors, ce soir, nous disons un sincère merci à nos chercheurs dans le domaine des langues qui nous aident à mieux nous connaître nous-mêmes et l'importance de l'apprentissage des langues dans le développement de l'expérience humaine complète – les connexions avec les autres, l'ouverture d'esprit et l'esprit à des différences, tout en reconnaissant les similarités, et de saisir les opportunités culturelles. This evening, take the opportunity to share the richness of words and humour in our daily experiences. I wish you a wonderful end to the reception … Merci.