

Language Assembly

I would like, this morning, to think about the study of languages, specifically those languages which are not our own. The study of language is, essentially, the study of humanity. That is a large claim, but arguably the moment in history when we discovered language and the capacity to communicate our thoughts and ideas to others was the moment in history that we became fully human. Language is the most effective way for each of us to extract a thought from our own mind and place it in the mind of another. A shared language is also a shared enterprise, a common endeavour which unites the tribe or group under a single flag. Of course, this means that language also has the capacity to divide. One recalls the Biblical story in chapter 12 of the Book of Judges. It records that over three thousand years ago, the inhabitants of Gilead inflicted a military defeat upon the invading tribe of Ephraim.

The surviving Ephraimites tried to cross the River Jordan to escape back into their home territory. The Gileadites put guards on the river's fords to stop them. But how should the Gileadites know their enemy, who had taken the trouble to disguise themselves? To identify and kill the Ephraimites, the Gileadites told everyone trying to cross the fords to say the word shibboleth. The Ephraimite pronunciation of the Hebrew word sounded like "sibboleth." Those that got it wrong were killed. This is the first example we know where getting your accent right really counted. Remember that next time you are trying for accuracy in French, German or Spanish classes.

Shibboleth is a Hebrew word, a language closely linked to Arabic. Now I do not speak Arabic, but what I know of the language is fascinating. Arabic shares with Hebrew a common characteristic – both languages are based around groups of three consonants that act as a root to link associated words or concepts. These combinations of three letters form a key connection which acts as a sort of ‘father figure’ to an extended linguistic family of words and meanings. In Arabic, the root letters of everything to do with writing, for instance, are ktb (Ka-Ta-Ba).

By small variations on these root letters, adding vowels, one can derive the words for document, bookseller, Koranic school, book or booklet, penmanship, Biblical revelation, desk, office, library, bookshop, correspondence, registration, dictation, novelist, typewriter, secretary, newspaper reporter, predestination (what is written as one’s fate), subscriber, and, obscurely, cavalry detachment. Arabic is a fascinating language of inherent, logical ambiguity. Behind every word one uses lie the ranked shadows all the other words in its family, crowding insistently in to give body and depth to the most casual utterance. It also provides the opportunity for sharp and mordant comment.

For example, it is instructive to look up the word for child in Arabic and reflect upon its impact as a root word. The word for ‘child’ is ‘tifl’ (tuf-lun), and it derives from the root letters tfl (Da-Fa-La), which has various interesting associated meanings: to intrude, impose upon, to sponge, live at other people’s expense, to arrive uninvited or at an inconvenient time, to disturb. The tfl (Da-Fa-La) linguistic family, around the word ‘child’, also includes the words for softness, potter’s clay, parasites, sycophants, initial stages and dawn. Perhaps no richer or more sceptical definition of childhood has ever been made. The word for ‘mother’ is similarly charged. The root word for mother includes the meanings ‘origin’ and ‘source’. So far so good. Unfortunately, it goes on to include ‘illiteracy’ and ‘ignorance’.

So the study of languages allows a fascinating insight into humanity, and the ways in which we divide up the world or associate different concepts. Everyone should study another language, as part of our process of becoming more civilised and more engaged with each other. Of course, some go further than others.

This is Luis Miguel Rojas-Berscia; he is a doctoral candidate at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, in the Dutch city of Nijmegen (Ny-meg-chen). He is a hyperpolyglot, with a command of twenty-two living languages (Spanish, Italian, Piedmontese, English, Mandarin, French, Esperanto, Portuguese, Romanian, Quechua, Shawi, Aymara, German, Dutch, Catalan, Russian, Hakka Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Guarani, Farsi, and Serbian), thirteen of which he speaks fluently. He also knows six classical or endangered languages: Latin, Ancient Greek, Biblical Hebrew, Shiwilu, Muniche, and Selk'nam, an indigenous tongue of Tierra del Fuego, which was the subject of his master's thesis.

Superlative feats like this are thrilling to us average mortals: they redefine the humanly possible. If Rojas-Berscia can speak twenty-two languages, perhaps we can manage a few words when we are on holiday. Such is the promise of online language-learning programs: we dream that in our brain there is a dormant polyglot—a genie—who, with some brisk mental exercise, can be woken up.

The phenomenon of mastering multiple languages is ancient. In the New Testament, Christ's disciples rather cheated when they were said to have received the Holy Spirit and could suddenly “speak in tongues”, preaching in the languages of “every nation under heaven.” According to Pliny the Elder, the Persian king Mithridates VI, who ruled twenty-two nations in the first century B.C., “administered their laws in as many languages, and could harangue in each of them.” Plutarch claimed that Cleopatra “very seldom had need of an interpreter,” and was the only monarch of her Greek dynasty fluent in Egyptian. Our own Elizabeth I also allegedly mastered ten languages: the tongues of her realm—Welsh, Cornish, Scottish, and Irish, plus six others.

With a mere ten languages, Queen Elizabeth I does not qualify as a hyperpolyglot; the threshold is eleven. The greatest ever hyperpolyglot was Giuseppe Mezzofanti, born in 1774. He was an Italian cardinal. He was fluent in at least thirty languages and studied another forty-two. Lord Byron, who is said to have spoken Greek, French, Italian, German, Latin, and some Armenian, in addition to his immortal English, admiringly called him a “monster” after losing a cursing contest with the Cardinal.

We might find it hard, but speaking two or three languages is the norm in most parts of the world. People who live at a crossroads of cultures - South Asians, Latin-Americans, Central Europeans, sub-Saharan Africans, plus millions of others, acquire multiple languages without considering it a noteworthy achievement.

Consider Adul Sam-on. He was an ordinary young man, before he hit the news as one of the teen-age soccer players rescued last July from the cave in Thailand. Here he is, pictured in that cave. Adul grew up in poverty on the Thai border with Myanmar and Laos, where diverse populations intersect. His family belongs to an ethnic minority, the Wa, who speak their own language. In addition to speaking Wa, Adul is “proficient” in Thai, Burmese, Mandarin, and English—which enabled him to interpret for the two British divers who discovered the trapped team. Five languages by the age of 14 – and he saved his friends, trapped underground, in one of them.

Most of us in the room are native speakers of English: as such, we are vastly outnumbered by those who want to be proficient in our language. Nearly two billion people are currently studying English as a foreign language—about four times the number of native speakers.

Now I am, of course, not suggesting that we all become hyperpolyglots. It is a rare, Herculean feat. There are only about twenty hyperpolyglots in Europe. But they have much to teach us about the limits of what is humanly possible. They are also an encouragement to aspire to greater things. They refocus us upon what must be one of the greatest things we can do – that is, to communicate with another person.

To share our thoughts and feelings, to pool our wisdom and to honour the identity of another by having the courtesy to reach out to them in their own language. We should never take the wonder of language for granted – and we should give its study the highest of honours.

Many thanks for material from Jonathan Rabin “Arabia” and “The Mystery of People who Speak Dozens of Languages” by Judith Thurman