

Moving into the polyglot age

Acquiring a range of different languages is easier than you might think, writes Neil Madden

If someone said to you *'flisni me mua'*, would you know what it meant, or even which language was being spoken? With some 225 indigenous languages, Europe's linguistic heritage is rich and diverse; a fact to be celebrated. But how good are Europeans at learning the languages of their near (and not so near) neighbours?

Many Europeans may think that a monolingual way of life is the norm. But between a half and two-thirds of the world's population is bilingual to some degree, and a significant number are 'plurilingual', that is, they have some level of competence in a range of languages. Plurilingualism is much more the normal human condition than monolingualism.

There are millions of people who think they know no language other than their mother tongue; however many of them know some level of another language. And yet the opportunities to learn a new language are today greater than ever. To emphasise the value of language learning, the Council of Europe established the European Day of Languages (EDL), which is celebrated each year on 26 September.

The idea behind the EDL is to encourage 'plurilingualism'. This is neither new nor obscure. It is a fact of everyday life among many peoples in Africa and Asia, and is the norm in parts of Europe, particularly Benelux and Scandinavia and also around the Mediterranean.

And it doesn't mean frightening people into thinking they have to aspire to 'native speaker' level. The object is to be able to communicate, and be understood, according to your own needs and requirements.

The international spread of English seems irresistible, and surveys bear out the impression that acquiring some level of English is a priority for the largest number of language learners (one in three claim they can converse in it, according to Eurobarometer). Yet, once this has been achieved there is no reason to stop at English. Many other languages are also valuable tools to get the most from life's experiences, whether for work or just travelling.

One of the ironies of a globalised world is that the marginal value of English could decline. As more and more people become proficient in today's *'lingua franca'*, what will make a difference is the ability to speak additional languages. In the worlds of work and education native English speakers will have to compete with candidates who already have their mother tongue, plus English and, increasingly, a reasonable knowledge of a third or fourth language under their belts.

And language ability brings more than just economic benefits. It encourages us to become more open to others, their cultures and attitudes, and also promotes greater mental flexibility by allowing us to operate different systems of representation and a flexibility of perspective.

We should not underestimate the value of language learning in giving us insight into the people, culture and traditions of other countries. People who can communicate confidently with those of other cultures are likely to be more tolerant. And remember that to be monolingual is to be dependent on the linguistic competence, and goodwill, of others. Learning to use another language is about more than the acquisition of a useful skill – it reflects an attitude, of respect for the identity and culture of others and tolerance of diversity.

The Council of Europe pioneered a programme to enable people to gauge their level of proficiency in a foreign language. The European Language Portfolio project aims to motivate learners by acknowledging their efforts to extend and diversify their language skills at all levels; and to provide a record of the skills they have acquired which can be consulted, for example, when they are moving to a higher learning level or looking for a job at home or abroad.

Based on a grid system language learners can assess their abilities – understanding, reading, speaking, and writing - and grade these according to six European levels. These standards have been adopted by the main certification bodies in Europe, by many member states and by the EU, in particular as part of its *Europass* scheme, a system designed to make individual abilities more transparent and comparable across member states.

One of the central planks of the European Day of Languages is to reinforce the idea of language learning as a lifelong process. Many adults believe that having missed (or even wasted) the opportunity to acquire a new language during their years of formal education, it is too late to restart the process. It isn't. All over Europe, classes, programmes and techniques (from books to CD-ROMs) are available to improve language abilities. What's often missing is the personal motivation to overcome the 'language fear factor'.

Many people develop their language skills after leaving school or university. This is not so surprising; language learning in school is often seen as an obligation rather than an opportunity. It is only when we begin to explore the world outside, whether for work or leisure, that we come to learn the value of other languages. And for some words of encouragement, each additional language learned becomes progressively easier. So when you have cleared the first hurdle, and you fancy a stab at Hungarian, or Cantonese, just give it a try.

If you want to develop your language skills, and find out more about the European Day of Languages, the following websites offer useful information:

www.coe.int/edl - the European Day of Languages including a section to register events and a game to test your knowledge of different European languages
www.coe.int/portfolio - the European Language Portfolio
www.ecml.at - the European Centre for Modern Languages (Graz, Austria);
www.europass.cedefop.eu.int – The EU's Europass site
www.coe.int/minlang - European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages

Incidentally, the answer to the opening question is '*talk to me*', in Albanian.

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