Learning that awful foreign language: a Brooklyn linguist looks at how we acquire languages

"I hate people who know how to do things." This may sound like a quote from Pol Pot, who, upon seizing power in Cambodia, executed 100% of that country's intellectuals. But, in actuality, this quote was an epitaph that I carved in my mahogany desk, with a rather large Bowie knife, after listening to the network guy at my company drone on for two hours about Internet spiders and search-network-megabytes, giga, hard drive, external, USP....

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My Internet wasn't working. I just wanted it fixed, but this person, who knew how to do things, just babbled on in a techno language I don't speak. At the end, we were both frustrated, and my Internet still didn't work.

For people who already know how to do something, it is often so apparent to them how it is done, that they find it impossible to teach others how to do it. Ask your fifteen-year-old nephew to teach you to do tricks on a skateboard or how to play the latest computer game, and you will both end the session in frustration.

You can't learn it. And he can't teach it to you because he has no idea what you don't get.

That said, I have a confession to make. There is one thing I know how to do speak foreign languages. On a range of conversant to fluent, I speak about ten languages. The most common questions I am asked is: "How do you learn so many languages? And how do you keep them all straight?"

I personally couldn't imagine confusing Italian and Chinese, or Spanish words slipping out when I am speaking Korean. Since childhood I had taken this belief for granted, but now I am realizing it isn't that simple for most people.

I was lucky enough to have attended one of the best universities in the world for applied linguistics, The University of Mainz, in Germersheim, Germany. We had to major in a three language combination, and do translations into and out of them. Four years of this intellectual boot camp certainly gave us a huge leg-up in the knowing-how-to-speak-languages department, but there is apparently some component to linguistic expertise beyond what you learn in school. At Germersheim there were African students who spoke as many as eight or nine tribal languages, French and English at native speaker level, and of course German, in which we were all expected to
be perfect. The eastern Europeans were often absolutely amazing, with their linguistic skills representing a mosaic, a roadmap of the history of Europe. Because of changes in the local political climate, there were Czechs, who during their life had had the language of instruction at public schools changed from Czech, to German, to Russian and back to Czech. Their first foreign language would often be French and then if they were interested in languages they would learn English or some other European language. Poles and Hungarians had similar stories. With Hungarians it was more extreme, since they had been taught from birth that no one in the world speaks Hungarian so they absolutely had to master a foreign language if they ever wanted to leave Hungary.

One of the most extreme cases was a Sicilian playboy, who led a life of leisure traveling around the world studying languages. When he arrived in Germersheim, he already spoke about ten and had enrolled to learn four more. There was an Estonian who was at native speaker level in twelve languages. He fell in love with a German girl and began sending her poetry he wrote in French. He also began following her and hiding under cars, and sending letters to her parents. He spent several months sleeping in the library without bathing and killed the smell by drinking.

I guess there is a tradeoff to being an exceptional linguist.

I don't think I am a great linguist, but I still remember the exact day that I discovered I was different from the other children. After I learned that somewhere on the order of 70% of Koreans had one of four last names, I asked my friend Kim Byun how so many Kim families would know who is related to whom.

"We all pronounce Kim the same, but the Chinese character is different." He explained.

To me it made perfect sense. Before the Choson Dynasty, Korea had used the Chinese writing system. Chinese is a tonal language. So, there could be any number of Chinese characters which in English transliteration would simply be Kim. But in Chinese, they would be completely unrelated, and written with different Chinese characters. Although Chinese characters are slowly disappearing from Korean culture, every family knows the characters for their name.

It was when I was explaining this to a bag-lady on the bus that I began to suspect that I was odd.

So, where does it come from? What are these people who seem to be able to absorb and juggle so many languages actually doing?

At university I was employed as a research assistant, exploring the way children learn their mother tongue. We learned that there are non-linguistic triggers for language. This means that something, other than the words coming out of someone's mouth, will trigger a response in your brain.

If you talk to therapists who counsel troubled married couples, they will often tell you that communication is mostly non-verbal. In fact some experts say we get more than 70% of the meaning of a conversation from something other than words. For example, body language can convey meaning. Someone says, "No, I am having a great time." And then immediately looks at their watch. You know they are bored. "This food is great," she says, as she pushes the plate away and grabs another dinner role.

"You are so smart, you don't need to take advice from people who know what they are talking about." With the right tone of voice this statement not only has the opposite meaning of what the words are saying, but it is quite insulting.
In addition to body language, tone of voice and facial expressions, we derive meaning from expectations.

It is a brutally hot day, someone comes in your home dripping sweat, obviously succumbing to heat exhaustion, and you say, "Would you like a cold glass of water?" You are already filling the glass. You didn't even listen to this person's response; you just assumed he said yes.

A friend makes an appointment to meet you for drinks. You heard him say "six o'clock," but you didn't hear if he said AM or PM. You just assumed it was PM, and you were right.

Not only is meaning conveyed with these non-linguistic elements, but linguistic structures, stored in your brain, are triggered and released, involuntarily, by these stimuli. For example, a mother and a child are looking at a stray dog, the child flinches as if he is about to pet the dog, and the mother shouts, "Don't you dare!" The don't you dare structure stored in her brain was triggered by the child's non-verbal communication. The child also has linguistic structures stored in his brain, which are set to trigger automatically. So, when the mother shouts "Don't you dare," the child instantly protests, "I wasn't going to."

The child could already have done it and his response would still be, "I wasn't going to."

Children learning a foreign language seem to take all of these non-verbal clues with them. Most adults, for whatever reason, do not. So, you make an appointment to meet your Chinese friend at 3:00 and he becomes flustered because he didn't hear if you said AM or PM.

By the same token, an English native speaker walks into a room in his home country. Co-workers grunt a polite but quick and unintelligible greeting. There are a million ways to greet someone in English: hello, how are you, what's up, hey, howdy, how you doin'? The English native speaker doesn't care which of these phrases were said to him. He assumes he is being greeted, and just grunts an equally unintelligible greeting back. But, the same English native speaker, studying in Beijing, walks into a room and hears something he doesn't understand and gets flustered, asking, "What, what did they say?"

One of my theories about what makes one person more adept at speaking a foreign language than another person, is not a superior ability to learn the language, but a superior ability to apply the language. If more than 70% of communication is non-verbal, then this should mean that with only 30% of the vocabulary, you could function as well as a native speaker. If you continue to apply the same non-linguistic techniques in a foreign country you will appear to be fluent, because all of your communication will be effective.

There are some other tricks to applying a foreign language. Foreign language teachers say I am the most annoying student they have ever taught. One of the reasons for this is that I refuse to learn things I think are unimportant in lieu of those structures and vocabulary that I need. My first priority is to learn to speak and function within a few months of arriving in the country. Later, I can go back and learn the language on an academic level.

So, for example, when we get to the chapter on identifying foods, I choose to learn only basic food groups, such as meat, fish, vegetables and bread. The rest, pages and pages of different vegetable and fruit names, I leave for some undisclosed time in the future. As for verb tenses, I learn present tense, polite form only. I don't need the intimate form of address since I am new in the country and I don't have any friends yet. And with my attitude I am unlikely to make any.
For verb tenses, I learn one past and one future. With those basic tenses I can express any idea I need to. Geography - I only learn the major countries which I will need to talk about. I have never learned the names of the provinces and cities of my host country, and this has saved me chapters and chapters of useless reading. The local names will be acquired as you need them, as they come up in conversation.

I eliminate chapters which talk about local first and last names. I learn those as I meet people. As for chapters about the calendar, I learn today, yesterday and tomorrow. I refuse to learn expressions such as two days ago and the day after tomorrow. If you know your ordinal numbers you can express these concepts without memorizing them. If you don't have time to learn ordinal numbers you can just say, "tomorrow, tomorrow," to express "two days from now."

There is always a chapter called "At the airport." You just arrived in your foreign country. You aren't going to be leaving for a while, so you don't need these words. Skip the chapter. If the book is stupid enough a chapters called "on the farm," or ‘at the zoo," rip them out. You may want to learn the words zoo, farmer, and farmer. But, the only animals you need are dogs, cats and animals you eat.

The only intensifier you need is "very," so you can just forget about "extremely" or "exceptionally." In Asian languages there are separate words for father's younger brother, father's older brother, mother's younger brother's son...Just choose one basic word for uncle, aunt, and cousin. Or, if you are in a real hurry, chose one word which means "relative" and skip the whole chapter.

When learning to tell time, just forget about AM and PM. Most Asian languages and even Spanish and some European languages divide the day into six or more parts, morning, early morning, before noon, noon, after noon, evening, night, middle of the night, midnight... leave it alone. Just learn day and night, and let context express the rest.

Again, these are all tricks to getting yourself speaking and surviving as quickly as possible. You can only learn so much in a given time period. So, actively reject everything that is non-essential. But don't burn your books! To be truly fluent you will have to go back later and learn these structures.

People often have a misconception that total immersion is the quickest way to learn a language. This is false. When you hear a language which you don't understand, your brain just blocks it out and it becomes background noise. Once this happens, you no longer are "absorbing." There is a linguistic theory dealing with "Chinese radio." The theory says that if you were locked in a cell for ten years with a Chinese radio playing in the background, at the end of ten years you wouldn't be able to speak even a word of Chinese. You need a certain basis in the language to benefit from this type of input.

I have known countless people living in China, Hong Kong, Thailand, Korea, who after ten years residence are still waiting to just "pick up" the language. After three months of study, I had already passed them.

Attempting to learn by conversation and interaction when you don't have the ability to make a sentence is also pointless. So, the best method is to combine academic/book study, with immersion and interaction. You need to talk to people as much as possible. You need to create situations where you are immersed in the language. This is one reason why I do martial arts: I am usually the only foreigner there, and martial art is a sport where you need to talk to and listen to your teacher. This forces you to use your new language. Joining a chess club may be less effective.

But the question still remains, how do you really learn a language?
I remember coming home from high school French class and telling my father, "French is so hard; they have something called comparative and superlative." Comparative and superlative simply refer to structures such as big, bigger, biggest, or good, better, best. Obviously English, like every language on earth, has comparative and superlative. But since most of us never do academic study of our native tongue, we find it harder to learn a foreign language. In fact most American linguists will tell you they first learned English grammar when they were learning a foreign language.

I came home with a similar complaint about French containing ordinal numbers, verb tenses, and grammatical moods, all of which are also common to English, but which I was unaware of.

Later, when I was studying Spanish, I thought I had gotten off easy because the pronunciation was so much easier for me. But, I nearly quit when I found out Spanish also had comparative, superlative, ordinal numbers, verb tenses and grammatical moods.

By the time I began studying German, I anticipated these and other structures. And when they came up, I was ready for them. I was unaware of it at the time, but I had built boxes in my brain that were labeled with various grammatical structures. Learning German was the turning point in my linguistic development. It was then they I completed my warehouse of linguistic structure boxes. Now when I approach a brand new language, I simply imagine that my structure boxes are empty and need to be filled. I approach language learning with the idea that I already know language; I just don't know the vocabulary for this particular language. Once I clear that single hurdle then I will be speaking language better than eighty percent of foreigners.

Now when I enter a foreign language class, I have a list of questions that I ask my teacher on the first day, so I can begin to fill my structure boxes.

1. Is this language tonal?
2. Does it have articles?
3. Tell me a list of pronouns.
4. Tell me the particles used for ordinal numbers.
5. Are there verb conjugations?
6. Are future and past made with a conjugation or with the addition of a simple particle (in some languages to make past or future you just add one syllable to the verb. If you learn this one syllable early on, you will suddenly be able to speak in past and future. You will astound your friends!)
7. Do men and women have different registers of speech?
8. Tell me the comparative and superlative?

Next I have a list of basic phrases and ideas that I find are needed on a daily basis.

Remember, you are the boss in your lessons. You are paying the bills. And, you call the shots. Some teachers want to teach you on a ridiculously theoretical level which is inappropriate for someone just starting out or who wants to be able to function in a foreign country. Other teachers will talk a lot because they want to practice their English.

I tell my teachers straight up, on day one: "I paid for an hour and a half of language lessons. Ninety minutes from now, if I don't know hello, how are you, my name is, how much is it, and the numbers one through ten, you are fired."

So, now you know twenty languages; how do you keep them straight?
In our research we discovered a very interesting phenomenon. Children raised bi or tri-lingually knew what language to speak to whom. For example, one of our neighbors in Germany was a Chinese family and the husband and wife were both studying translation. Their four year old daughter knew that when she talked to her parents, she should speak Chinese, and when she talked to Caucasian people she should speak German. But when a Japanese lecturer came from the United States, she became confused. He looked Asian, but didn't understand Chinese. He wasn't Caucasian, so in her mind speaking to him in German would make no sense. In the end, she just refused to talk to him. Other children knew to speak French to the mother and German to the father, for example; those children would always have to wait for outsiders to talk first, before knowing how to talk to them. One of my neighbors spoke Arabic to his son. His wife was Italian, so she spoke that language to him. The little boy anticipated that he should speak German to everyone else. Occasionally, the mother would talk to him German, and he would just get confused.

The appearance of the conversation partner will trigger a language for interaction. It would be hard to kook at a Latino friend and speak Korean. Given this concept, it is nearly impossible for me to accidentally speak German to my Asian friends. Their faces, the sites, sounds, smells and tastes of the country we are in, trigger Asian and not European languages.

In my brain, my warehouse of boxes, labeled with grammatical structures became a honeycomb. The warehouse has various doors, labeled German, Spanish, Korean, Chinese, Khmer, French, Italian, Thai, English and Russian. Once you open the appropriate language door, inside is a series of structure boxes, comparative, superlatives, ordinal numbers, recent past, improbably future, words for addressing monks and royalty... For languages such as Chinese, Korean, Khmer, Russian and Thai, the labels are written in the local scrip. The Korean boxes are labeled in both Korean and Chinese.

I can't have interference from another language because I have opened the door labeled with the language I wish to speak.

Communication is both physical and mental. Language learning is the same way. To learn languages, to really master them, physical changes must occur in your brain. You must build the appropriate storage facility for each of your languages, and create new, blank storage facilities for your next language.

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