

# The Linguist

A Personal Guide to Language Learning

By Steve Kaufmann

A Personal Guide to Language Learning

All rights reserved  
Copyright 2003 by Steve Kaufmann

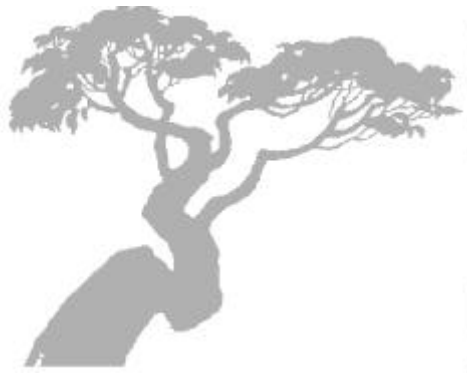
The Linguist is a trademark of Steve Kaufmann

This book, or parts thereof, may not be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from Steve Kaufmann, except by a reviewer, who may quote brief passages in a review.

First edition July 2003  
Printed in Canada

ISBN 0-9733394-0-3

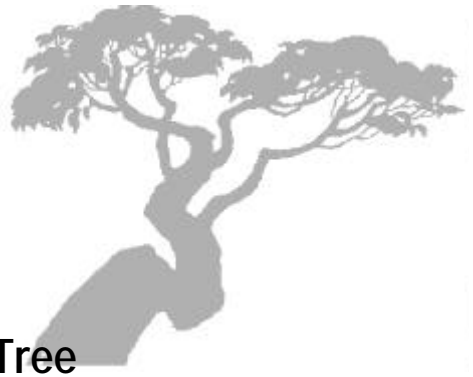
Published in Canada by Steve Kaufmann  
Book design by Tracey Martinsen



# Table of Contents

Zhuangzi's Crooked Tree . . . . .	v
<b>INTRODUCTION . . . . .</b>	<b>1</b>
Are You a Linguist? . . . . .	1
About Learning English . . . . .	5
About this Book . . . . .	7
<b>A LANGUAGE ADVENTURE . . . . .</b>	<b>9</b>
The Start of the Journey . . . . .	9
Two Solitudes in Montreal . . . . .	10
I Take Charge of My Learning . . . . .	14
Off to Europe . . . . .	17
My Adventure Begins . . . . .	17
"Sciences Po" . . . . .	20
Travel and Culture . . . . .	23
Hitchhiking in Europe . . . . .	26
Paris in the 1960s . . . . .	29
My First Real Job . . . . .	32
Discovering Asian Culture . . . . .	33
Creating An Opportunity, Ottawa 1967 . . . . .	33
Intensity, Hong Kong 1968 . . . . .	35
Reading and Vocabulary Growth . . . . .	38
The Importance of Phrases . . . . .	42
Pronunciation . . . . .	43
Crossing Into China, Canton 1969 . . . . .	46
Working and Learning in Japan . . . . .	51
Setting Language Goals, Tokyo 1971 . . . . .	52
Seeking Out Content . . . . .	53
Is Japanese Difficult? . . . . .	56
Polite Language . . . . .	58
Japan Incorporated . . . . .	61
Fitting In . . . . .	64

Exploring Languages at Home . . . . .	67
A World Apart . . . . .	68
German . . . . .	69
Italian . . . . .	71
Cantonese . . . . .	72
Language and International Business . . . . .	77
Opportunity . . . . .	77
Success. . . . .	81
<b>THE ATTITUDE OF A LINGUIST . . . . .</b>	<b>83</b>
Just Communicate . . . . .	83
Resistance to Language Learning . . . . .	85
Overcoming Resistance to Language Learning . . . . .	87
Communicate at Your Level. . . . .	90
Discover Language Naturally . . . . .	95
The Limits of Language Teaching . . . . .	96
Natural Learning . . . . .	101
Identity and Language . . . . .	105
The Fundamental Similarity of Human Beings . . . . .	108
Human Culture is Universal . . . . .	109
Individuals in a Shrinking World . . . . .	111
<b>HOW TO LEARN A LANGUAGE. . . . .</b>	<b>113</b>
Conviviality . . . . .	113
Focus On Input First . . . . .	115
Listening . . . . .	115
Reading . . . . .	118
Learning Words and Phrases. . . . .	119
Learn To Express Yourself . . . . .	123
Pronunciation . . . . .	123
Writing . . . . .	126
Conversation . . . . .	128
Create Intensity . . . . .	131
Invest in the Tools . . . . .	132
Set Clear Goals . . . . .	134
<b>A Final Word . . . . .</b>	<b>137</b>
<b>APPENDIX . . . . .</b>	<b>139</b>
For Immigrants and Potential Immigrants to Canada . . . . .	139
A History of English Speaking Canada. . . . .	139
The Immigrant Experience. . . . .	141
Job Opportunities . . . . .	144



## Zhuangzi's Crooked Tree

*Huizi said to Zhuangzi, "This old tree is so crooked and rough that it is useless for lumber. In the same way, your teachings have no practical use."*

*Zhuangzi replied, "This tree may be useless as lumber, but you could rest in the gentle shade of its big branches or admire its rustic character. It only seems useless to you because you want to turn it into something else and don't know how to appreciate it for what it is. My teachings are like this."*

Zhuangzi, the Taoist philosopher, is supposed to have lived in China over 2,300 years ago. He encouraged people to achieve their potential through effortlessness, by not resisting their own natures.

His famous story about the crooked tree appeals to me for many reasons. Being in the forest industry, I know that a crooked tree is not suitable for making standard commodity lumber products, but it can make high quality decorative products which feature its natural beauty and individuality.

Such a tree has grown to a ripe old age by adapting itself to its environment. Whereas the trees in the industrial forest are straight and look alike, the crooked tree grew alone, or with a mixture of other trees of different ages and species. This kind

of tree will resist wind and disease better than the more uniform trees of the plantation forest.

And so it is with people who follow their natures and pursue their own path to self-fulfillment. They are more independent and more secure. A true language learner must be like this crooked tree of Zhuangzi.

That is why we chose a crooked tree as the logo for our new language learning system called The Linguist™.

Visit us at [www.thelinguist.com](http://www.thelinguist.com)!

*Respect gods before demi-gods, heroes  
before men, and first among men your parents,  
but respect yourself most of all.*  
-Pythagoras, 6th century BC



## INTRODUCTION

### Are You a Linguist?

As I see it, everyone is a potential linguist. By that, I mean that everyone can be fluent in another language. You do not have to be an intellectual or an academic. After all, a linguist is defined by the Concise Oxford Dictionary in very simple terms:

*Linguist: n. Person skilled in foreign languages.*

Even speaking one foreign language qualifies a person as a linguist. To become a linguist is a matter of choice, and requires a certain state of mind. A linguist enjoys foreign languages and appreciates the different ways that ideas are organized and expressed in different cultures. A linguist is at ease with people of another language and confident when learning new languages.

The first step towards becoming a linguist, towards learning a second language, is to realize that success depends not on the teacher but on the learner. Each learner must discover the language gradually in his or her own way. The teacher can only stimulate and inspire. Enrolling in a language school or taking a course will not ensure fluency. If the learner does not accept this simple fact, time and money spent on language programs

will be wasted. Language schools and language learning systems may teach, but only the learner can learn.

Growing up in the English-speaking area of Montreal, a predominantly French-speaking city, I remember that until the age of seventeen, I only spoke English. I was not interested in learning another language, although I had been taught French at school from the second grade and was surrounded by the French language. Yet today I can speak nine languages and have derived immense satisfaction and reward from being able to speak Mandarin Chinese, French, Japanese, Spanish, German, Swedish, Cantonese and Italian.

In order to try to understand why this happened, I began writing down the history of my own language learning. I realized that it was only when I had a genuine desire to communicate or learn something meaningful in a new language that I was able to learn. When the subject of study was based on the details of the language itself, I resisted. When teachers tried to impose abstract principles of grammar and then test me on them, I remained passive. But once I decided that I needed the language to connect with real people or a new culture, I would throw myself into the study of the language with passion and commitment. And I needed passion, because for me language learning was very hard work.

It was while learning Cantonese at the age of fifty-five that I became aware that language learning had become easier. Modern electronic technology and the Internet have revolutionized language study. First of all, the Internet provides a vast range of interesting and authentic second language content for learners to choose from, in both audio and electronic text formats. Second, content in electronic format



allows the reader to access instant dictionary software and link to new context based learning systems. Finally, the Internet can serve as the hub for a community of learners and native speakers.

As I wrote my own story, I decided that I should try to develop a new approach to language learning based on the principles that worked for me, but taking advantage of modern technology to ensure that a new generation of language learners can learn more easily than I did. Under my direction, a small group of language learners and computer programmers immediately started developing these ideas into a comprehensive new language learning system. The more we worked on this project, the more excited we became about our potential to increase the number of real linguists worldwide, by making language learning affordable, enjoyable and effective.

The word “globalization” is commonly used to describe the intensity of international exchange that we are experiencing today. Some people declare themselves in favour of globalization, and others are against it. To me, globalization is an irresistible trend, an inevitable direction of the evolution of our world. It is somewhat pointless to be “for” or “against” something that is inevitable. It is more useful to invest time and energy in being able to enjoy and profit from globalization, by becoming a linguist.

I do not think globalization needs to lead to the domination of one language, such as English. Rather I see it as an opportunity for all people, including English speakers, to become better acquainted with other cultures. Paradoxically, now that the world seems a much smaller place, we are seeing a general renewal of interest in regional languages and identities. There is

an increasing demand for effective methods of language learning, not only for dominant languages like English, but also for languages spoken by fewer people. The cost of preparing learning materials for these languages and the effort needed to learn them can be dramatically reduced by using The Linguist approach.

I am confident that this book and the methods described in it can help people to become linguists. I will be working hard to make it happen.

## About Learning English

English is well established as the most useful world language. The largest demand for second language instruction in the world is for English. Whether we like it or not, English dominates in business, science, travel and popular culture, not to mention the Internet. English is a rather clumsy language, combining the influences of Old English, Latin, Norman French and natural evolution. As a result, English has all kinds of inconsistencies of grammar and spelling to frustrate the learner. Yet English dominates, whereas artificial international languages like Esperanto have never had any following.

Two thousand years ago, or even five hundred years ago, it would have seemed ridiculous to suppose that the language spoken on a small damp North Atlantic island would one day be the world's most widely used language. Certainly Chinese, Latin, Greek, Arabic, or even Mongolian would, at various times in history, have seemed more likely candidates. Who knows what languages will be spoken in another five hundred years? As Spencer Wells explains in *The Journey of Man, A Genetic Odyssey* (Princeton University Press) “[Although] Sogdian was once the lingua franca of the Silk Road – in much the same way that English is the language of commerce today, by the twentieth century all dialects were extinct but one.”

If you are not a native speaker of English, then I encourage you to read this book in English. This may be the first book that you read in English, but you can do it. Perhaps most of the English content you have read up until now has consisted of short texts or articles. Perhaps the thought of reading a whole book in English is intimidating to you. It should not be.

This book, which contains over 4,000 of the most common English words, is presented in a mixed media format that is at the core of a language learning system we call The Linguist. By reading this book in conjunction with our system, you can be sure that these 4,000 words will become part of your active vocabulary.

This book is printed on paper, the most comfortable and intimate format. Books are portable and convenient. But I have also recorded the contents on a CD so that you can hear the language and allow it to stimulate those neural networks in your brain which respond to the spoken language. Finally, the book is available in electronic format so you can look up words using dictionary software and take advantage of the many functions you will find at our web site, [www.thelinguist.com](http://www.thelinguist.com).

## About this Book

This book is divided into three sections that may be read in any order.

- **A LANGUAGE ADVENTURE** describes my experience in acquiring eight languages in a variety of environments and at different stages of my life. I include personal observations reflecting my curiosity about culture and history. These observations may seem unrelated to language learning, but they are not. A linguist needs to be a curious adventurer.
- **THE ATTITUDE OF A LINGUIST** describes the attitudes that are essential to successful language study. More than any other factor, your attitude will determine your success in language learning. The description of these attitudes will reinforce conclusions that the reader will make in reading the autobiographical section.
- **HOW TO LEARN LANGUAGES** is about the nuts and bolts of how to learn languages. You may wish to read this section first; however, you should still read the whole book to fully understand what is required to become a linguist.

All languages are equally worthy of our attention. At The Linguist we hope to continue to expand the number of languages we offer. We are confident that when you see how easy and enjoyable it is to learn one language, you will want to learn another.

Once you are a member at The Linguist, you can use our site to learn as many languages as you want. Commit yourself to becoming a linguist!



*Happy the man who, like Ulysses, has made a fine voyage,  
or has won the Golden Fleece,  
and then returns, experienced and knowledgeable,  
to spend the rest of his life among his family!*  
– Joachim du Bellay (1522-60), French poet



## A LANGUAGE ADVENTURE

### The Start of the Journey

Language learning is a form of travel, a journey of discovery. I started traveling when I was very young and have always found travel stimulating. A true linguist needs to be adventurous and to overcome the fear of the unknown. To illustrate this, let me tell you my story.

I was born in Sweden in 1945 and emigrated to Montreal, Canada as a five year old with my parents and older brother Tom. My memories begin in Canada. I have no recollection of having spoken any language other than English as a child, although I know that I spoke Swedish first. It is possible that having to learn a second language as a child helped me to become a better language learner as an adult. However, I know other people who emigrated to Canada as children and did not become linguists. I also know people who were born in Canada and grew up only in English but have become excellent linguists. I attribute my success in language learning to a spirit of adventure and a willingness to study with a great deal of intensity. I believe others can do the same if they are prepared to embark on the exciting journey of language discovery.

One of my earliest memories of Montreal is an incident in 1952. A group of us six-year-olds had a favorite hiding place for our

baseball bat. After school we always retrieved the bat and played baseball. One day the bat was gone. Immediately we deduced that it was the new boy from Estonia who had stolen the bat. It was obvious to us that it was him. He did not speak English well. He was the outsider. The only problem was that he had not taken the bat. He probably did not even know what a baseball bat was used for. In the end it was all settled amicably. I guess that I, after one year in Canada, was already accepted into the in group. Thereafter the boy from Estonia was too. This incident has always remained with me as an example of how people can unthinkingly stick together and resist the participation of an outsider.

But acceptance is a two way street. Insiders may initially resist a newcomer, but it is also up to the outsider to be adventurous and make the effort to be accepted. In most cases, when I have overcome my apprehensions and made the effort to be accepted by a different language group, the response has been more welcoming than I could have imagined. I think there are far more examples of newcomers hesitating or not making the effort to join and thereby losing opportunities, than of newcomers being rejected. A language learner is by definition an outsider, coming from a different language group. You must take risks in order to be accepted. This is a major principle of language learning: be adventurous. It worked for me, and French was my first language adventure.

## **Two Solitudes in Montreal**

The life of an English speaking Montrealer growing up in the Western part of the city in the 1950s was not very different from the life of English speaking North Americans elsewhere on the continent. To show their commitment to our new homeland, my parents decided that they would speak only



English with my brother and me. I went to English school, had only English friends, listened to English radio and watched English television. As a result, by the time I turned seventeen in 1962, I was effectively a unilingual English speaker.

Of course we had French at school. I passed all my French classes with good marks, but I could not function in French in the real world. Most of the one million English speaking Montrealers of that day were not interested in communicating with their two million French speaking fellow citizens in French. English was the language of business and the dominant language of the North American continent. I was no exception to this general attitude. We were hardly aware of the larger French speaking city surrounding us. This all seems extraordinary now, but in those days it was quite accurate to talk of “two solitudes” in Montreal.

I should point out that the reality of Montreal has changed in the last forty years. English speaking Montrealers are now among the most bilingual people in Canada. French has been made important and meaningful to them because of political changes in the Province of Quebec. As a result, Montreal is a vibrant city with a unique atmosphere of its own.

There is an important point here. Obviously it is an advantage for a language learner to live in an environment where the second language is spoken. However, this does not guarantee language acquisition. You must have a positive attitude towards the language and culture you are trying to learn. You cannot learn to communicate if you rely on a classroom where the focus is on trying to pass tests. Only a genuine desire to communicate with another culture can ensure language learning success.

At age seventeen, I entered McGill University. One of my courses was on French civilization. It was an awakening. I found the course fascinating. I suddenly became interested in French literature and theatre. With that came an interest in French singers, French food and the *ambiance* of French culture. I was suddenly dealing with the real language and real people. Our teacher was really French, not an English speaking person teaching French, as in high school. The texts we read were real books, not French text books specially prepared for language learners.

Perhaps because it was new to me, French culture seemed more free and spontaneous than the English speaking North American culture I had grown up with. It was an exotic new world. I suddenly wanted to learn French. I went to French theatre, made French speaking friends and started reading the French newspapers and listening to French radio. I became aware of the issues that concerned my French speaking fellow citizens and, through attending meetings and discussions, my French language skills improved naturally. I also gained an understanding of the aspirations and grievances of the French speaking Quebeckers.



The six million or so French speaking Quebeckers, descendants of a few tens of thousands of French settlers in the 17th century, had developed into a conservative and inward looking society as a means of self-protection against the growing influence of English speaking North America. The French language and the Catholic religion were the pillars of their identity.

Their conservative attitudes towards education and modern society had left them at a disadvantage in competing with

English speaking Canadians, even within their own province of Quebec. Of course the English speaking minority in Quebec was only too glad to take advantage of this weakness to dominate in all areas of economic activity. Even though they controlled the politics, the French speakers were second class citizens in their own home.

A major sore point was the low status of the French language. Starting in 1960, a growing nationalist movement based on French language rights and a constructive program of secularization, modernization and political activism brought about significant change in the province. Most of this change has been positive, even if there are examples of excess in defense of the French language. The French speaking society of Canada, and Quebec in particular, has its own specific characteristics. Efforts to preserve its cultural identity are justified. New immigrants are joining this French language community and bringing fresh influences as the nature of that society continues to evolve, just as immigrants are joining and redefining English Canada.

---

French was the first language I started to study seriously. I was not sure of just how fluent I could become. I cannot say that I was confident that I could succeed in speaking almost like a native speaker. That confidence would come later. Much later, when I started to learn other languages, I always had the confidence that I could learn to be as fluent as I wanted. Once you have mastered one new language you gain the confidence necessary to master other languages. You build up your confidence as you learn.

I became fluent in French by giving up the traditional approach of trying to perfect my grammar. Perfection did not matter anymore, only communicating did. I no longer disliked

language learning. I read what I liked even if I did not understand all of it. I spoke with people who interested me, struggling to understand and to make myself understood. I was mostly interested in connecting with the culture. I also started to appreciate the sound and structure of the new language. When you move from an attitude of resisting the strangeness of a language to an attitude of appreciating its unique ways of expression and turns of phrase, you are on your way to becoming a linguist.

### **I Take Charge of My Learning**

I took charge of my learning, and stopped relying on my teachers. The teacher was only one of many resources available to me in a city like Montreal. All of a sudden, with no tests, no questions from teachers, and no grammar drills, my French skills took a great leap forward! I had achieved my first language breakthrough. I could feel the improvements in fluency, comprehension and pronunciation. This made language learning exciting. I was speaking and listening to French in situations that interested me. I spoke to myself in French, imitating proper pronunciation as much as I could. Even when I did not understand what was said or had trouble expressing myself, it did not frustrate me. I was committed and I was enjoying the experience of communicating. There was no turning back. By taking my language learning out of the classroom, I had made it real.

I have held onto this central principle: learning done in real situations is always far superior to artificial contexts such as exercises, drills, or material specially designed for learners. Time spent in genuine and interesting conversation is a better learning environment than the formal classroom. I also discovered another important principle of language learning:

the learner has to be in charge, seeking out the language, the people, the content. As the learner, I have to discover the words and the phrases that I am going to need. All too often it is the teacher or text books who decide which words you should learn. These words have no importance, and as a consequence are quickly forgotten.



# Off to Europe

## My Adventure Begins

The success of my efforts in Montreal made me more committed to mastering French and so I decided to go to France. Commitment leads to success and success reinforces commitment.

In June of 1962, I quit my summer construction job and went to the Montreal docks to look for a working trip to Europe. For three days I climbed on board oceangoing freighters, asked to see the Captain and then offered to work in exchange for passage to Europe. On the third day I got lucky. A small German tramp steamer, the *Gerda Schell* out of Flensburg, had lost a sailor in Quebec City and needed a crewman for the return voyage. I was on my way.

Aside from the hard work and constant tossing of the small tramp ship on the North Atlantic, the voyage was an opportunity to experience just how inaccurate cultural stereotypes can be. The crew was half German and half Spanish. Contrary to what I had been conditioned to expect, the supposedly industrious Germans were laid back and often drunk, whereas the supposedly temperamental Spanish were tremendously hard working and serious.

We arrived in London after ten days at sea. I ate as much as possible of the free food on the ship in the hope that I would save money by not having to eat for the next day. In fact, that strategy was not so wise and I ended up feeling ill.

London seemed an oddly exotic place to me, since everyone spoke English and yet it was so different from home. Speaker's

Corner in Hyde Park has stuck in my memory, as has the old money system of shillings and pence and quids and bobs and guineas. I also remember that I spent one night sleeping on a sidewalk to get tickets to see Laurence Olivier in Shakespeare's *Othello* but then had trouble staying awake during the performance. I stayed in London for one week and then pressed on for the continent to pursue my language learning adventure.

I took the ferry from Dover in the United Kingdom and arrived in Ostende in Belgium after nightfall. A Flemish Belgian on a motor scooter gave me a lift to the medieval city of Bruges. I was young and ignorant and had not read the history of Flanders during the Middle Ages. Nor did I realize that the same kinds of language tensions that existed in Quebec were also burning in Belgium between the Flemish speakers and the French speakers. I would return later to Bruges to explore the well preserved medieval atmosphere of that town. But I was a young man in a hurry then, and the following day I hitchhiked on to France.

The French have a reputation for being rude, but the people I met were friendly and hospitable. Outside of Lille in Northern France, I was picked up by two school teachers who allowed me to spend the night in a schoolroom, since this was the period of the summer vacation. Then they invited me out to dinner, where I met some people who drove me to Paris the next day. I can still remember the feeling as we drove down *l'Avenue de la Grande Armée* towards the *Arc de Triomphe*, which I had seen so often in film. I could not believe I was really there.

My French friends invited me to stay two weeks in their modest apartment in the 20th Arrondissement, a working-class district



of Paris. I was given a short term job in a travel bureau doing translations. I lived and ate with these people for two delightful weeks, as I explored the city on foot and via the Metro (subway). My new friends included me on picnics to chateaux outside Paris and other social occasions. I was sorry when I finally decided to move on south.

I realized very early in my stay in France that even my less than perfect French enabled me to make friends and deal with people in a relaxed manner. I was not self-conscious nor concerned about how I sounded, I just enjoyed being able to communicate. Of course, I occasionally met Frenchmen who were not so friendly. It is true that many public employees take a particular delight in saying “Non!” Often if you inquire whether some service is available, you are treated to a litany of rejection: “Ah non, alors là, non, mais sûrement pas, mais cela va pas, non!”

But the secret to survival in a foreign country or culture is to make light of the unpleasant and focus on the positive. My French was far from perfect, and it was sometimes an uneven struggle against the more arrogant and impatient French *fonctionnaires* (officials) and shopkeepers. But today I do not remember too many unpleasant incidents because I did not attach much importance to them. I do remember, however, a case when my lack of French got me into trouble.

At one point in my first year in France I had an American girlfriend whose parents were working in Alicante, Spain. We decided to hitchhike there during the Easter holidays. I brought along a gift, a record by Georges Brassens, a popular French *chansonnier*. Being a converted Francophile, I took great pleasure in listening to his songs even though I did not always

understand the words. Unfortunately, I did not realize that his words can be quite spicy, if not outright pornographic. When my hosts listened to the gift that I had brought, they were shocked. I think they were concerned about the kind of company their daughter was keeping.

I stayed in France for three years. My first year was in Grenoble, an industrial city in the French Alps. Unfortunately, I never had the time to ski. If I wasn't studying, I was working. At various times I pressed bales of waste paper and drove a delivery van for a printing shop, was busboy in the Park Hotel, hawked the *France Soir* newspaper in the major squares and cafés of Grenoble, and taught English. I even managed to play hockey for the Grenoble University hockey team. An added attraction of Grenoble was the presence of a large contingent of Swedish girls studying French. I was able to recover quite a bit of the Swedish I had learned and forgotten as a small child.

### **“Sciences Po”**

I was lucky enough to get a scholarship from the French government for my second two years and moved to Paris where I entered L'Institut d'Études Politiques (the School of Political Studies). “Sciences Po,” as this school is called, is located near St. Germain Cathedral in the heart of the medieval part of Paris, just off the Quartier Latin, or students' quarter. Sciences Po boasts many illustrious alumni, including former Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau.

The teaching culture at Sciences Po was different from North America. The emphasis was on learning facts and being able to organize them quickly according to a time-honored formula. I still remember when a Law Professor told me that “the form was more important than the content!”

The method for organizing your thoughts at Sciences Po was simple. Whatever you wanted to say had to fit into the following formula: Introduction, Part One, Part Two, Conclusion. It was important that Part One and Part Two were about the same length. Ideally, Part One presented one point of view or Thesis, Part Two presented a contrary position or Antithesis, and the Conclusion presented a resolution or Synthesis. Voilà!

This emphasis on a logical and balanced presentation of information is a useful discipline for communicating in any language. This technique helped me to organize my essays and oral presentations in French, which was after all still a foreign language to me. When writing or speaking in a foreign language it is particularly important to have a basic formula for organizing your thoughts, otherwise it is too easy to just ramble on because you lack control in the new language.

Obviously writing a business report, writing an essay on philosophy and writing an academic paper all require you to organize your information in different ways. You need to be more formal and structured than when you engage in casual conversation. The preferred structure for such writing will even vary from culture to culture. However, whenever I wrote in a foreign language, and French was my first, I felt that the individual sentences I wrote were the same as my spoken language. In my mind I made no distinction between the written and the spoken language, even though there undoubtedly was one. I always tried to make them both as similar as possible. I recommend this approach to all language learners as a way to improve the accuracy of both your written and spoken language.

The courses at Sciences Po were very stimulating. The most interesting lecturers, such as Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, spoke to overflowing audiences. We were taught plenty of facts and the professors were very definite in their views, often bristling with irony. They were not interested in the ideas of their students. Yet somehow I found this atmosphere more stimulating than the one I had left behind at McGill University. Canadian English speaking intellectual circles are less tolerant of genuine originality than the French. This is particularly the case in today's politically correct age. The reason for this, I believe, is the deeper tradition of learning and greater intellectual confidence of the French.

The French place importance on being able to express yourself with elegance and precision. The most important exam for students at Sciences Po was the Oral Exam, a spoken essay. Students were given a few minutes to organize a fifteen-minute presentation to a senior panel of professors on a subject selected at random. The students were judged as much on their ability to express their views in a balanced and logical way as on the actual content or information they were able to provide.

There is a tendency today to teach spoken language as different from written language. I disagree with this approach. Effective spoken language is similar to effective written language: clear, simple and elegant. While it is true that native speakers can be a little sloppy in their spoken language, I do not believe that this should be taught as a model to new learners. Slang and excessive colloquialisms do not suit the non-native speaker until he or she is comfortable in the language. Learners should try to speak the way they write. I have always tried to use the same clear sentences and phrases when I speak as when I write in a foreign language. I avoid a too casual spoken style or an overly

complicated written style. In this way regular writing practice can be a great help to learning to speak correctly.

## **Travel and Culture**

The French pride themselves on their logic. Whatever goes against their logic is wrong, and is attacked without pity. For this reason they are sometimes seen as unfriendly or arrogant. To me, however, France was not only a stimulating country but also a very hospitable one. I received a scholarship that enabled me to enjoy my last two years in France. I met kindness and generosity from French people of all walks of life. While hitchhiking in the countryside, I was often invited to meals and to stay at people's homes.

My commitment to the French language and culture helped create bridges with people. I am sure this would not have been possible had I remained a typical Anglophone North American. There are many English speaking North Americans who have been very successful at learning new languages. However, it is more commonly non-English speakers who make the effort to learn English. While this is unavoidable because of the unique international usefulness of English, it is a great loss to those English speakers who never experience the personal enrichment of learning a new language.

I delighted in visiting the countryside, seeing the historic villages and towns, and talking with people in French. As with most countries, France has regional accents. When you speak a foreign language you have to imitate the native speaker to acquire a native speaker accent. In my case, this meant that I spoke with a Parisian accent in Paris, a Southern accent on the Mediterranean, and so forth. This is hard to avoid, at least in the

early stages. But it is also a good sign, since it shows that you are listening carefully to the pronunciation of native speakers.

Nevertheless, I have always felt that it is best for a non-native speaker to adopt the most standard form of the language rather than a regional accent. In every country there is a form of the language that is considered the standard. It might be the French spoken in Tours, the Mandarin spoken in Beijing, or the Japanese spoken in Tokyo. It is always amusing to hear a foreigner speak in a regional accent, but the neutral feel of the standard pronunciation is usually the wiser course. Canadian English is such a standard or neutral form of English.

In a similar vein, a language learner is best to stay clear of idioms, slang and swear words. There is a lot of French slang, or *argot* as it is called, that I still do not understand. It does not bother me. I do not usually come across it in my reading, and I am not expected to be able to use it when I speak. Some language learners are in a hurry to use slang expressions before they know how to use them. I think a non-native speaker sounds best speaking in correct standard language.



The history of France is a history of the different people who have created Europe. Some of the earliest examples of human painting and sculpture are located in the caves of Southwestern France, dating back as far as 20,000 years ago. At the time of the Roman conquest over 2,000 years ago, the Celtic Gauls were dominant in France, although there were Greek colonies in the South, various other tribes in the North and the ancient Basques in the Southwest. The Romans brought with them their civilization, and created an engineering infrastructure that still survives in the amphitheaters, roads and aqueducts that tourists can visit

today, especially in the South of France. With the Romans came the staples of the Mediterranean culinary tradition: bread, olive oil, and wine.

So France is a melting pot, as most countries are if you go back far enough. This is reflected in the varying myths of origin of the French. Sometimes they emphasize their Gallic ancestry. At other times, the French are proud of their Latin roots and sympathize more with Mediterranean people than with Northern Europeans. Certainly their literature is dominated by references to the Classics of Roman and Greek antiquity. Yet the early heroes of France, including Clovis, Pepin le Bref, Charles Martel, and Charlemagne, were Germanic Franks.

---

A concern with food and drink is one of the dominant features of modern French culture, and the subject of conversation at all levels of society. The French recognize that elegantly and enthusiastically talking about a subject is a large part of the enjoyment.

Long after my studies in France were over, I had the opportunity to lead a group of Japanese wood industry executives on a tour of wood processing plants in France. I remember on one occasion we arrived at a modern door and window plant near Toulouse. For many minutes our delegation was kept waiting while our French hosts were engaged in an animated discussion. My Japanese tour members sat patiently, but eventually they wanted to know what the argument was all about. I explained that our French hosts were discussing what we were going to have for lunch. I still remember my meal of *salade tiède de gésiers* and *cassoulet*, eaten under the shade of pine trees outside an old Mediterranean Chateau. My memory of the factory we visited is less clear.

With French as with other languages, a familiarity with the food is an important part of learning the culture and the language. Conviviality around a meal table can be the best learning environment. Cicero, the Roman statesman and orator, defined *convivium* as “*To sit down to dinner with friends because they share one's life.*” This desire to communicate over food is common to all languages and cultures, and no doubt has an origin in the prehistoric sharing of the hunt. It reinforces a feeling of reciprocity between people. As a poor student, I did not often have the chance to enjoy haute cuisine. However, it was not uncommon when I was hitchhiking in Southern France for truck drivers to share with me a full course lunch, including wine. How they continued driving after that was a bit of a mystery to me. I understand that the control on drinking and driving in France has become more severe in recent years.

## Hitchhiking in Europe

I am sure I hitchhiked tens of thousands of miles in those years, criss-crossing Europe from Spain to Sweden to Italy through Germany and all countries in between. There was no better way to explore the history and geography, to meet people and practice languages. Unfortunately hitchhiking is no longer as easy as it used to be.

My accommodation varied a great deal. Mostly I stayed in youth hostels, which were great places to meet up with travelers from other countries. Often I met these same travelers standing on the roads leading out of town with their thumbs out, large rucksacks hidden beside the platane trees, as we all tried to hitch a ride to our next destination.

I have lain awake frozen on a windswept mountain side on the Route Napoleon on my way from the French Alps to the



Mediterranean, before being able to warm myself the next day by napping in the gentle sun of the lavender fields of Grasse just before reaching the sea at Nice. I have slept in parks, in ditches, on beaches and in hotels of every description. On two occasions, once in Boeblingen, Germany and once in Perpignan, France I checked into the local jail, where I was kindly accommodated until the morning. I had not committed a crime, but it was late and raining. The police seemed happy to have the company. I was the only guest in both establishments, which were basic but clean.

My usual routes took me through southern France, the Midi, with its quaint stone villages, dry Mediterranean vegetation, Roman ruins, historical cities like Avignon, Nimes and Arles and old men playing *boules* on the sandy town squares. The temperature could easily exceed forty degrees Celsius in the summer.

From there I would continue into Franco's Spain, a favorite holiday hitchhiking destination for me in the early 1960s. Spanish vocabulary and grammar is similar to French, since both languages can be considered dialects of Latin. With a little bit of study and reading in Spanish, and daily conversation with the friendly and talkative Spaniards, I was able to bring my Spanish up to an acceptable level. On my first visit to Barcelona, as I climbed aboard a crowded city bus, I was overwhelmed by the friendliness of the people. They helped me on with my rucksack, made sure I knew where the Youth Hostel was located, and then invited me for a drink at the local bar. We all drank out of a communal wine pitcher with a long spout which was held at arm's length so a long stream of wine could flow into your mouth.



With my interest in history and adventure, I found Spain to be as fascinating a mixture of peoples and cultures as France. Basques, Celts, Iberians, Greeks, Romans, Visigoths, Arabs, Berbers, Jews, and Gypsies (originally from India), have all contributed their genetic, cultural and linguistic influence.

Nowadays we often forget that it was the cosmopolitan Arab culture of Southern Spain, El Andalus, that was the great teacher of medieval Europe. As the Christians of Northern Spain reconquered the Muslim South, scholars from all countries of Europe flocked to Toledo and other centres to translate Arab documents on science and philosophy. The Arabs had surged out of the desert to conquer lands from India to Spain. In this way, they had come into contact with the learning of India, Persia, Babylon, Egypt and Greece, which they had absorbed into their culture. They also had significant trading contact with Tang China and knowledge of Chinese science and technology. Western science, mathematics, medicine, music, architecture and other fields of study were tremendously stimulated by contact with the advanced civilization of the Arabs. When I visited the graceful buildings and gardens of Andalusia, I tried to imagine El Andalus at the height of its brilliance.

---

In modern times, Spain has experienced an economic miracle and construction boom that make it a different place from the country I visited in the 1960s, but the older Spain I first encountered had an unspoiled charm that I enjoyed very much. I visited Pamplona during the Fiesta de San Fermin on July 7. The whole town was engaged in a three day party of drinking and singing and conviviality. I could practice my Spanish in every little bar and restaurant. It was all very safe despite the drinking and revelry. I was mostly attracted to the partying and

declined to risk my life running with the bulls. Besides, it required getting up very early in the morning.

Spain, especially in the South, is a country of strong impressions. The overpowering sun brings out the contrasts between sun and shade, between the dark tones of the trees and flowers, the brightness of the whitewashed houses and the stingy orange of the dry earth. As I was told in those days, “It is the sun which allows us to put up with Franco.” Everywhere people were proud and friendly. My ability to communicate in Spanish enabled me to walk into every bodega and tapas bar, make friends and explore the culture through the language.

### **Paris in the 1960s**

While I enjoyed travel, my main purpose was to study. Paris in the early 1960s was a magic place. I lived in a small unheated and uncomfortable flat on the Rue du Faubourg St. Honoré in a building that was built in 1789. I was on the sixth floor and the toilet was on the third floor. I always knew if my neighbor below me on the fifth floor was home because I took a bath by pouring hot water into a small tub in my kitchen. It was just impossible not to spill some water, a few drops of which found their way down to my neighbor, who then banged on his ceiling with a broom-handle.

It is remarkable that a building with such poor standards of accommodation was located in a uniquely fashionable area of Paris. The world headquarters of some of the leading fashion and perfume companies of the world are on the Rue du Faubourg St. Honoré. Estée Lauder was in my building, for example. The Elysée Palace, home of the French President, was just down the street. The Place de la Concorde, *la plus belle place*

*du monde*, was the next block over. And I lived in an unheated room that had not changed much since the French Revolution!

Within walking distance were the shops and eating places of the wealthy: Fauchon, the great caterer and food store on the Place de la Madeleine, the shops on the Grands Boulevards and Maxim's restaurant. This was the world of La Belle Époque, symbolizing to me the height of France's cultural influence preceding the tragic events of twentieth century Europe.

The Champs Elysées was just around the corner. I would often end my evenings strolling down this most beautiful boulevard. I would start in the Middle Ages at Notre Dame Cathedral, pass by the Renaissance at the Louvre, experience l'Ancien Régime as I walked through the Jardins des Tuileries designed by Louis XIV's gardener and then cross the Place de la Concorde where influences of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century come together in balance and harmony. Continuing from there, it is hard not to fix one's attention on Napoleon Bonaparte's heroic Arc du Triomphe which overlooks the surrounding districts from the heights of the Place de L'Étoile. Despite the intent of Napoleon in building this monument to his victories, the lasting power of any civilization is not its force of arms, but its contribution to world civilization.

My bicycle took me everywhere I needed to go: to school, to my part time jobs, and out on the town in the Quartier Latin. Negotiating the traffic on the Place de la Concorde or Place de L'Étoile with my bicycle was a daily challenge. On the other hand, there was no better way to really experience the feeling of living in Paris. It was also the easiest and fastest way to get from point to point without worrying about parking.

I had several part time jobs. One involved taking lunch with French families while offering English conversation in return. As a poor student used to the simpler university restaurant fare, I always took advantage of these lunches to eat plenty of good food and have a few glasses of wine, finishing with a strong espresso coffee so I would not fall asleep. My second job had me running an English language lab at the French Agricultural Institute. Every Thursday, a plentiful lunch with a “bourgeois family” was followed by a bicycle ride halfway across Paris to the Agricultural Institute, on a full stomach. I arrived sweating profusely just in time to turn on the central controls for the language lab.

It was at the Agricultural Institute that a student walked out of the lab in disgust at his inability to understand English. I remember that the material we prepared for these students was full of technical agricultural terms but was otherwise of no interest to the young students. It is impossible to just learn vocabulary in the hope that one day it will be useful.

These farm boys at the Agricultural Institute could not speak English. What was the point of giving them obscure technical terms that they would probably never use? As is so often the case in language instruction, there was too much emphasis on grammar and vocabulary in order to prepare students for exams, rather than on how to communicate.

We can only learn to use a language from interesting and meaningful content. We should have allowed the students to choose subjects that were familiar and of interest to them. Some may have chosen farming, but many would probably have preferred to listen to recordings of genuine conversations in English between young people talking about music, or going

to a party. The objective should have been to make English meaningful. Once these students were able to communicate, the technical vocabulary of agriculture could be learned quickly if necessary.

### **My First Real Job**

Returning on my bicycle from a late night bowl of onion soup at Les Halles, the produce market featured in the movie *Irma La Douce*, I found a letter in my mailbox advising me that I had been accepted into the Canadian Foreign Trade Service. A friend of mine had persuaded me to write the Foreign Service exam at the Canadian Embassy some months earlier, and here I was now with a job!

This same friend and I had been planning to travel around the world on Honda motorcycles if Honda would sponsor us. The Foreign Service opportunity looked more promising.

As wonderful as my stay in France was, I often felt homesick for Canada. Going abroad allowed me to better understand and even to better appreciate my own home and original culture. Learning another language and culture does not take away from the enjoyment of your own background, it only intensifies it.

Yet I was destined to live abroad for many more years in Asia before finally settling down in Vancouver.

# Discovering Asian Culture

## Creating An Opportunity, Ottawa 1967

---



*He who depends on himself will attain the greatest happiness.*

*– Yi Jing (Book of Changes), 2nd Millenium BC*

---

I did not know when I entered the Canadian Diplomatic Service that I would end up being immersed in the cultures of both China and Japan. My language adventure would soon confront me with the challenge of learning languages that previously had seemed strange and distant to me. To achieve fluency in these languages required commitment, intensity and good learning techniques. But I could not have succeeded without a strong interest in the people and the culture, and the confidence that I would become a fluent speaker of these languages.

In 1967 in the Canadian capital city of Ottawa, I began my first full time job as an Assistant Trade Commissioner. Most of our group of young and eager Trade Commissioners-in-training had visions of serving their country in interesting foreign postings. However, fully one third of all Trade Commission posts are in the United States. Everyone wanted to avoid an assignment to Cleveland or Buffalo.

When the Trade Service announced that they were going to appoint an officer to Hong Kong to learn Chinese in preparation for the expected establishment of diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China, I figured that this was my chance to avoid Buffalo.

I started taking Chinese lessons from an elderly Chinese man in Ottawa. While I did not learn much by merely taking lessons once a week, I let the Director of Personnel and other senior people know what I was doing. Given the opportunity, why would they not choose as a language student someone who was already committed to learning Chinese? Hong Kong was not my first choice as a posting; I was in fact more interested in getting to Rio de Janeiro or Rome or Madrid. But Hong Kong still sounded exotic.

I was very pleased when I was finally assigned to Hong Kong. I was obviously chosen because I had already made a commitment to learning the language. Commitment pays dividends in many ways. As to the choice of Hong Kong, in those days China was in the throes of the Cultural Revolution and Taiwan was not politically acceptable for a future Canadian representative to The People's Republic of China. Instead, Hong Kong with its Mandarin speaking émigré community was the most suitable place to learn Chinese.

I remember that a good friend questioned whether I should accept the assignment. "What if you cannot learn Chinese?" he asked. But after my experience in mastering French, I had no doubt that I could master Chinese, too. The reason linguists can master several languages is largely because of their increased confidence. Language learning becomes demystified. Also, the more languages you learn, the more you develop the ability to cope with new ways of saying things. It is a bit like sports. A person who has developed fitness in one sport can more easily learn another sport.

My kindly Chinese teacher back in Ottawa had warned me to be wary of the charms of the attractive girls in Hong Kong but I



did not heed his advice. I ended up finding my wife, Carmen, in Hong Kong and we are still happily married more than thirty years later, with two sons and five grandchildren. But I did not know that as I headed out to the exotic Far East for the first time.

### **Intensity, Hong Kong 1968**

I had visions of Hong Kong as a romantic city with curved Chinese roofs and weeping willow trees. I was looking forward to immersing myself in this exotic environment. It was in June 1968 at the age of twenty two that I headed out to Asia for the first time. I took holidays on my way to Hong Kong and I was able to experience parts of the world that I had previously visited only in my imagination: in Italy, the magnificence of Rome and its disorderly traffic; in Israel, the timelessness of a starlit summer night over the ancient city of Jerusalem and the tension of a country after a recent war; in Iran, the exoticism of the Teheran bazaar and its reckless taxis bedecked with Christmas lights in June; in India, the splendour of the Taj Mahal and the turmoil of life in New Delhi; and in Thailand, the bright colours of Bangkok and the elegance of its people and culture. My excitement about my new assignment in Hong Kong was building throughout my trip.

Finally I touched down in Hong Kong, where I was met by the official car of the Canadian High Commission. As we drove through congested Kowloon with its forest of drab, gray, high-rise apartment buildings, I was suddenly brought back to reality. Hong Kong was no Shangri-la. However, as our car got onto the vehicular ferry to cross over from Kowloon to Hong Kong Island, I was suddenly treated to a waterborne kaleidoscope of ocean freighters, barges, war ships, Chinese junks and pleasure craft against a backdrop of modern skyscrapers and stately

colonial buildings, all overlooked by Victoria Peak on the Hong Kong side.

Living in the Crown Colony of Hong Kong, as it was called in those days, I always felt a little hemmed in. Before you could go anywhere you had to fly out or take a boat. China was essentially closed, and this could be depressing. However, the least expensive way to cheer myself up was to pay ten or fifteen Hong Kong cents to cross the harbour on the Star Ferry. I never got tired of studying the skyline and the traffic on the water during this fifteen minute crossing.

For the first months I lived on the Hong Kong side near Stanley and Repulse Bay. I had an unobstructed view of a romantic little bay where I could satisfy my desire for the exotic by studying the Chinese transport junks plying up and down the sparkling turquoise waters of the South China Sea. This relatively sparsely populated part of the Crown Colony had beaches, leafy semi-tropical vegetation and a large European population. It was like a resort. I was expected to live there and attend the Hong Kong University where all previous diplomatic language students had studied. But after a few months I chose to live and study on the more densely populated Kowloon side, and I enrolled at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Just as I had wanted to immerse myself in French culture in order to learn French, I took the same attitude into my Chinese learning.

Hong Kong is Cantonese speaking, and therefore does not offer immersion in Mandarin. However, it is Chinese and did offer an intense exposure to Chinese culture. I was taken out of my comfortable Western cocoon and exposed daily to the sounds and smells of the busy streets and markets, the shops selling Chinese medicine and other exotic products, the energy

of so many people bustling in street-side workshops or peddling products they often carried balanced on a pole. Near my school or in the crowded Tsimshatsui district of Kowloon, I could eat inexpensive noodles or curry rice lunches with workers or enjoy sumptuous Cantonese meals in luxury restaurants. There were numerous restaurants representing the cuisine of many different parts of China: Beijing, Shandong, Sichuan, Chao Zhou and more, all squeezed into narrow, crowded streets. This was my daily living environment as I studied Chinese. Indirectly I was being conditioned to accept the language.

I still remember my lunch-time conversations in Mandarin with my teachers, over Hui Guo Rou (braised garlic pork), Man Tou (steamed bread) and eel soup. These informal gatherings were my most pleasant and relaxed learning experiences. The teachers would talk of their childhood in China or other interesting subjects. At a Chinese meal, everyone helps themselves from common serving dishes with their chopsticks. I have always had a good appetite, and as the only Canadian at the table I was quickly nicknamed “jia na da” (“Canada” in Mandarin) with the emphasis on “na da,” meaning “to reach and take a big piece.”

I made the right decision in choosing the Chinese University of Hong Kong. The Chinese Language School was run by one of the most effective language teachers I have met, Mr. Liu Ming. He welcomed people to the Chinese language and made foreigners feel that they could learn Mandarin. He insisted on hard work from the learner, because he himself was an energetic and hard-working man. He inspired me to commit to my new language challenge and was always flexible in

accommodating my requests. The staff of the language school were very friendly and encouraging.

At first I was dependent on my one-on-one sessions with the teachers. However, soon I began to find the classes were a strain. I was obliged to go to class for three hours every morning. Sometimes I was tired and hardly able to pay attention. The effectiveness of the teachers varied. Some teachers were intent on giving me explanations in English, which I found particularly irksome. The fashion in those days was to emphasize drills, which were often tiring and annoying. The best sessions were those when the teacher would just talk about some interesting subject. I did most of my learning at these more informal conversational sessions as well as when studying intensely at home.

It was the energy of the Director, Liu Ming, who watched over us and challenged us that really inspired me to work hard. The texts we used were from the Yale-in-China program. The first text was called *Chinese Dialogues* and was set in the China of the pre-Liberation period. The dialogues described a certain Mr. Smith living, working and traveling around in China from Shanghai to Nanking and Beiping (as it was called in the Kuomintang days). This context was divorced from the reality of late 1960s China, which was caught up in the Cultural Revolution. I remember very little of the content of this textbook, but I realize that an artificial text like this is probably necessary at the beginning stage of learning a language.

### **Reading and Vocabulary Growth**

The next reader we had was more interesting. I still recommend it. It was called *Twenty Lectures in Chinese Culture*. Developed at Yale in 1963 as an early reader, this book covered Chinese

history and culture, in simple straightforward language. I still occasionally read the book to refresh my Chinese. Although the book is written for learners in simple language, the subject is real: Chinese culture and history.

Graded reading material is inevitable for the beginner, since reading easier material helps to create confidence and develop fluency. However, these readers should be on subjects of interest and not resemble children's stories. Ideally there should be a selection for the learner to choose from. But as soon as possible, all learners should move on to real content.

After about four months, I read only authentic Chinese content, mostly using readers which had specially prepared vocabulary lists. The subjects varied, from history to politics to literature. Suddenly a fascinating world opened up to me in the original language: at first in books, and then as my Chinese improved, through the people I met.

I threw myself into the study of Chinese. I did not have the advantage of having studied Chinese in school for ten years, as had been the case for French. Still, I was determined to learn in as short a period of time as possible. I took charge of my learning.

I had my tape recorder on from the time I woke up, either in the background or at intensive sessions where I concentrated on pronunciation. I worked hard to learn Chinese characters, writing them down and reviewing them daily. I read as much as I could, and reread the same material frequently to improve my ability at reading Chinese writing. I studied the vocabulary lists that went with these texts. It always seemed as if I could never remember new words, but eventually they stuck with me.

Hong Kong is not a Mandarin speaking city and so I was quite isolated in my study. I could not just go out and talk to shopkeepers or others in Mandarin. While there were some Mandarin radio and television programs, I found I could only understand some of the language and then it was gone. On the other hand, I found that using a tape recorder to listen over and over again to material that I already understood was very beneficial to my learning. The problem was getting hold of enough interesting audio content at my level of comprehension.

When I lived in Hong Kong, tape recorders were not portable. Those were still the days of the open reel tape recorders that were large, heavy and awkward. I had to sit at home and listen. Today, modern technology makes it possible to easily find material of interest to download or record so you can take your listening everywhere.

Since Chinese essentially has no phonetic script, I had to learn three to four thousand characters, each requiring fifteen or more strokes. Needless to say, vocabulary acquisition is more difficult than in English. I realized that the dictionary had to be the last resort of the language learner. Looking words up in a conventional dictionary is one of the least efficient and most wasteful activities of language learning. Very often you forget the meaning of the word as soon as you close the dictionary. Using a Chinese Dictionary is even more difficult than looking up a word in a language based on an alphabet.

One of the frustrations we all face in language learning is the speed with which we forget newly learned words. It seems as if everything has to be learned and relearned so many times. In Chinese, this is an even greater problem because of the

difficulty of learning the characters. I had to find a way to increase my speed of learning characters.

I developed techniques of working with new vocabulary items that enabled me to reinforce learning and vocabulary retention. One system was based on the way Chinese children learn characters. I bought exercise books that were divided into squares for writing characters. I would start writing a character six or seven times down the first column and then write the sound or English meaning on the third column. Then I would start a second character and do the same. Soon I ran into the first character I had learned and had to write it again. In other words, I reminded myself regularly of words that I had just learned before I had a chance to forget them. At first I could only learn ten new characters a day but after a while I was up to thirty per day, with roughly a fifty percent retention rate. The retention rate was higher if the words were connected to content that I was reading or listening to. This principle of systematically relearning new words until they start to stick has been carried over to all my language learning.

It was important for me to write Chinese, even though my calligraphy was poor. When I wrote Chinese I had the time to compose my sentences and choose my words carefully. Writing helped me reinforce my vocabulary. It also was an opportunity to practice sentence structure.

In modern Chinese the written language is similar to the spoken language, and my writing certainly was. Chinese classics, on the other hand, are written in an elegant short hand quite different from the spoken language. Modern Chinese writers often include some of this more refined language in their prose. I did not bother with that. My Chinese writing was simple and direct,

quite sufficient to translate newspaper editorials or whatever I was given as a study assignment. Making my writing a sort of extension of my spoken language helped me improve my ability to express myself in Chinese. Language learners should write often, and they should minimize any differences between their written and spoken language.

Another principle of learning new vocabulary that has stuck with me is the importance of context. It is easier to remember the meanings of Chinese characters in compound words consisting of two or more characters than individually. I still have difficulty recognizing certain characters on their own but easily can identify the meanings of characters in compound words. This principle of learning words in the context of phrases and larger content is useful in any language, and became a fundamental feature of the learning system we developed.

### **The Importance of Phrases**

The principles of Chinese grammar are different from English. I deliberately ignored explanations of the theory of Chinese grammar because these theoretical explanations made no sense to me. Instead, I just accepted the various structural patterns of sentences in Chinese as normal. I knew that with enough exposure they would start to seem natural to me. I found it easier to learn the structure of a new language from frequent exposure to phrase patterns rather than trying to understand abstract grammatical explanations of that structure. I realized in studying Chinese, a language so different from my own, that the fundamental component I had to learn was not the word, but the phrase. Language skill consists of spontaneously being able to use prefabricated phrases and phrase patterns that are natural to the native speaker and need to become natural to the learner.



Phrases are the best models of correct practice in a language. Certain words naturally belong together in a way that the learner cannot anticipate but can only try to get used to. When words are combined in the natural phrases of the language they achieve force and clarity. It is not grammar and words that need to be learned, so much as phrases. New vocabulary is more easily learned together with the phrases where it is found, and even pronunciation should be learned in the form of phrases. These principles are at the core of The Linguist program.

### **Pronunciation**

We are all capable of correctly pronouncing the sounds of any foreign language. All humans have the same physiological ability to make sounds, regardless of ethnic origin. However, mastering the pronunciation of a new language does require dedication and hard work. Chinese at first represented quite a challenge.

When I wanted to master pronunciation I would spend hours every day listening to the same content over and over. I worked especially hard on mastering Chinese sounds with the appropriate tone. I tried to imitate while listening. I taped my own voice and compared it to the native speaker. I practiced reading in a loud voice. Eventually my ability to hear the differences between my pronunciation and that of the native speaker improved. I would force my mouth to conform to the needs of Chinese pronunciation. I would also work on the rhythm of the new language, always exaggerating and even accompanying my pronunciation with the appropriate facial expressions and gestures. Eventually I was able to achieve a near native quality of pronunciation.

Once I was able to pronounce individual words and phrases satisfactorily, I would find it easier to understand content not designed for the learner: in other words, real authentic material. As my Chinese improved, I particularly enjoyed listening to the famous Beijing Xiang Sheng comic dialogue performer Hou Bao Lin, with his colourful Beijing rhythm of speech. In recent years, to maintain my Mandarin, I sometimes listen to CDs of famous Chinese storytellers, like Yuan Kuo Cheng, narrating classic novels such as *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. The storytelling art in China is highly developed and when I listen to one of these CDs I thoroughly enjoy being transported back to a bygone era.

After struggling though the frustrations of confronting such a different language I was soon able to enjoy my learning. Within eight months of starting my studies, I could appreciate essays by intellectuals and novels by Chinese writers of the 1930s like Lao She and Lu Xun. I also became familiar with the writings of Mao Tse Tung and the polemics of the Cultural Revolution. There were many words I did not understand, but it was not my purpose to learn every new word. I was just reading for pleasure and training my mind to the Chinese writing system. I was working to develop my ability to guess at meaning, an important learning skill which develops gradually with enough exposure to a language. I was also absorbing an understanding of the culture.



The world of the thirties in China was far removed from the reality of China in the late 1960s. Pre-Liberation China was full of tragedy, poverty, and uncertainty. China was torn apart by internal rivalries between different political forces and selfish local warlords, while fighting off foreign invasion. These were cruel and hard times. Yet to me, China was fascinating and even romantic. With enough distance in time or space, periods of warfare and struggle can seem heroic. *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, the epic Chinese novel, or the glorification of the knights of Medieval Europe, are but two examples of how legend and literature romanticize periods of terrible human suffering. Chinese society was looking for its place in a world where foreign influence had all of a sudden collided with a complex, brilliant and previously self-contained Chinese civilization in decline.

The Chinese intellectual class that had been one of the main supports of traditional China was now searching for its new role. Some Chinese intellectuals were defenders of Chinese orthodoxy, some were champions of the new revolutionary thought of Marxism, and yet others, like Dr. Hu Shih, were extremely sophisticated explainers of Western philosophy and its relevance to the new China, and even of its relationship with Chinese philosophy.

The historic evolution of China was different from that of Western Asia and the Mediterranean. The power of the Chinese central state proved more durable than the power of Egypt, Mesopotamia, Greece or Rome. As Chinese culture and people spread and mixed with local ethnic groups in South China, no permanent separate states sprang up as was the case in Europe with the interaction of Romans and other peoples. In the North of China, constant invasions and settlement by Turkic, Mongolian, Tibetan and Tungusic

peoples were a dominant feature for 2,000 years. Yet throughout this period, the prestige and power of Chinese culture was not permanently challenged. This is in part because of the flexibility of the Chinese writing system, which could be used to represent meaning even if words were pronounced differently. China was able to maintain its unity while absorbing diverse cultural and ethnic elements in different regions of the country.

It is impossible to look at the refined scenes from Chinese paintings of the Tang or Song periods without admiring the high standard of living and sophistication of Chinese society of the time, compared to the lower level of culture at the same period in Europe. It is interesting to speculate what this technically and culturally sophisticated Chinese society would have created under different historical circumstances. But then, change is the only constant of the human condition.

We in the Western world do not learn enough in school about the involvement of Chinese civilization with other parts of the world. The beneficiaries of Chinese culture were not only neighboring East Asian countries, who borrowed heavily from Chinese culture, but also Western Europe. The introduction of Chinese technology to Europe in the Early Middle Ages was instrumental in stimulating progress in technology and navigation.

---

### **Crossing Into China, Canton 1969**

In 1969 I was finally able to see the China of my imagination, and to use Mandarin in an environment where it was the national language. I crossed into China from Hong Kong at the Lowu bridge near a small village called Shen Zhen. From the waiting room of the train station I could just make out the rows of low traditional peasant houses behind the posters with

slogans exhorting the people to greater revolutionary efforts. Today, this quiet village has become one of the largest cities in China, a vast urban sprawl of modern skyscrapers and thriving capitalism, and a leader in high tech, fashion and more.

As a foreigner, I was automatically seated in the soft seat section on the train to Canton (today's Guangzhou). This entitled me to a cup of flower tea, which was regularly refreshed with more hot water by an attendant as the train rode through Southern Guangdong Province with its hills of red earth and green rice fields. I strained to listen to the constant political messages being broadcast on the train's public address system.

In Canton I stayed at the Dong Fang Hotel, a Soviet style hotel which accommodated the European and North American businessmen. The Japanese and Overseas Chinese stayed elsewhere, according to the arrangements of the Chinese authorities.

China was caught up in the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution. Early every morning the guests of the Dong Fang Hotel were wakened to the stirring strains of Chinese revolutionary and patriotic music. The walls of the city were covered in slogans. The air of this southern city was heavy with warm humidity and tension. Military personnel were in evidence everywhere.

To a foreigner visiting for a short period, Canton seemed pleasant. There was very little traffic. The semi-tropical vegetation of Canton's many parks was lush and green. The pace of life appeared leisurely, especially when compared to the hustle of Hong Kong. In addition, the legendary cuisine of Canton did not disappoint. There was a selection of excellent restaurants at reasonable prices. Still, it was impossible not to

notice the mood of tension and discouragement among many of the people.

Being a foreign diplomat, I was assigned a guide from the China Travel Service whose duty it was to keep an eye on me. We spoke in Chinese and exchanged views on many subjects. One day I asked him how he put up with the constant barrage of slogans. My guide, a product of Mao's China and obviously security-cleared to guide foreign diplomats replied, "It is like Dr. Goebbels said in the Second World War. If you tell a lie a thousand times, it becomes the truth!"

So much for stereotypes! Far from accepting all the propaganda, this person was well read and had an opinion of his own. I was amazed!

Throughout 1969 and 1970 I was a regular visitor to the Canton International Trade Fair in my capacity as a Trade Commissioner. I was there to help Canadian businessmen in their discussions with the representatives of Chinese trading corporations. During the Cultural Revolution, the discussion was about politics as much as it was about business, much to the frustration of visiting Canadians. I tried to understand what was really going on in China but it was rather difficult. I was often invited to various presentations of the latest showing of Chinese Revolutionary Opera, revised and approved for its ideological content by Jiang Qing (Chairman Mao's wife), leader of the Gang of Four who ran China in those days.

Around that time, Canada was involved in negotiations with China to establish diplomatic relations. I discovered that Canada did not have its own interpreter present and relied on the Chinese side to do the interpreting. Even though I was a

lowly language student, I immediately wrote a letter to the director of Canada's Foreign Service. I protested that not to use our own interpreter was demeaning to Canada's image and discouraging to those of us who were studying Chinese for the government. I recommended that my colleague Martin Collacott, who had been studying for a year longer than me, should be assigned to the negotiations. Martin was soon on his way to Stockholm, where the negotiations were taking place.

In 1970, Canada established diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China. In October of that year, I accompanied the first Canadian delegation to Beijing for a ten day visit to help locate an Embassy building for Canada and make other administrative arrangements. The old city with its grey walls and hidden courtyards felt like one big forbidden city. The Imperial Palace (also known officially as The Forbidden City) was majestic in its scale. In the maze of *Hutungs* or lanes which surrounded it, I was reminded of Lao She's famous novel, *Rickshaw Boy*. I pictured to myself the people living behind these walls quietly carrying on the ageless traditions of Chinese culture: painting, calligraphy, Peking Opera, or poetry, while outside the authorities were trying to discredit this very legacy for reasons of their own.

Every morning for breakfast we ate caviar which had come from the Ussuri River. We dined on Peking duck and had dinner in a Mongolian Restaurant that dated from the 1400s. In those days there were no modern buildings and the city looked much as it had for centuries. There was little traffic, other than the bicycles fighting a stiff autumn wind blowing in from the Central Asian steppes.

I thoroughly enjoyed my visits to China, even though it was not easy to approach the people of China on a personal basis. I visited China a few times in the seventies and early eighties, then was not able to visit again until 2002.

Returning after such a long absence, I found the rate of new construction and the transformation of China simply unbelievable. After all my efforts at learning Chinese, thanks to the changes taking place in China today, I will finally have opportunities to use Mandarin regularly and develop business and personal relationships with ordinary Chinese people. This is very satisfying, since the goal of language study is communication with people.



## Working and Learning in Japan

---



*Sumeba miyako.*

*(free translation) Home is where you make it.*

– Japanese saying

---

Having studied Chinese, I was expected to be assigned to Beijing as Assistant Trade Commissioner back in 1970. Instead, I refused to go. The reason was a major personality conflict with my immediate boss, the person designated to be Senior Trade Commissioner in Beijing. I felt it would be unpleasant to work in a post like Beijing where we would be quite isolated from the general population, if I could not get along with my superior. I promised the Trade Commissioner Service that I would learn Japanese on my own if reassigned to Tokyo. In this way the government would recoup some value from their investment in my language training. My superiors agreed.

I consider myself lucky to have lived in Montreal, Paris, Hong Kong, Tokyo and now Vancouver. All of these cities have personality. Montreal manages to inspire its citizens with a certain Latin élan in a harsh climate that can only be compared to Moscow amongst major world cities. Paris is a living history and art museum with culinary flair. Hong Kong is condensed exoticism on the edge of the largest and longest running culture show in the world, China. Vancouver is a comfortable and easy to live in cosmopolitan city surrounded by some of the most spectacular scenery of any urban environment in the world.

Tokyo is different. Tokyo is a collection of villages, each different and each with its own personality. Overall, Tokyo is not a beautiful city. For the people who live there, however, and

especially for most foreigners, it has a definite appeal. It is the *complete* city. Tokyo has everything you might be looking for in a metropolis, with the friendliness, politeness and honesty of a small village. Tokyo was to become my home for nine years.

I want to mention just one example of the friendliness and politeness that I encountered while living in Japan. In the 1990s, long after I had moved back to Canada, I was visiting Tokyo on business. I was getting ready to take the bus out to Narita Airport to return home. I wanted to buy flowers to send to Osaka, where I had been entertained at the home of a customer. I entered a flower shop to ask if that kind of service was available. The kind lady in the shop said no, but told me that another flower shop five minutes away did do this. She insisted that I leave my bags with her while I went to her competitor to buy the flowers I needed. Where else but in Tokyo?

### **Setting Language Goals, Tokyo 1971**

Back in 1971 when I was first assigned to the Canadian Embassy in Tokyo I did not know what to expect. But I was determined to become fluent in Japanese, as I had promised my employer. My Chinese learning experience had allowed me to greatly improve my language learning methods and confidence. When I moved to Japan, I took these methods with me. I made a commitment to learn Japanese on my own, within six months. I would make every necessary sacrifice to achieve a breakthrough during this period. If I succeeded I would then be able to live in Japanese, unlike the majority of Westerners who lived in English.

When my wife and I moved to Japan, we had one child and another on the way. My work at the Embassy was largely in

English. Therefore I had to work hard to surround myself with a Japanese language environment to learn from. Furthermore, in Japan I did not have the luxury of studying the language full time at my employer's expense, as had been the case in Hong Kong, nor had I studied the language in school as had been the case for French. I had to do it on my own while working full time.

Since the majority of foreigners were comfortable working and living in English, I knew that I had to force myself to live and work in Japanese as early as possible in order to avoid falling into the comfortable routine of “getting by” in English.

I had gained some initial exposure to Japanese while still in Hong Kong from good friends among the members of the Japanese consulate who were studying Chinese. One *Gaimusho* (Foreign Affairs) official was Mr. Koichi Kato, who subsequently became a leading Liberal Democratic politician. But my initial exposure to Japanese in Hong Kong was just a foretaste to get me interested.

My first six months of living in Japan formed my period of concentrated study, my make-or-break period. I had to find my own learning material and continue to develop my own language learning methods. I relied on bookstores to find content that I needed. This content was not as good as the content available for Chinese language study, and was certainly a far cry from the material that is available for studying any language today via the Internet.

### **Seeking Out Content**

I knew that to progress in Japanese I had to expose myself to as much Japanese language content as possible. As soon as I could

make out some of the meaning, I made a point of always listening to Japanese radio even though there was an English language radio station in Tokyo. I listened repeatedly to tapes, and read what I could. Unfortunately there were not nearly as many readers with vocabulary lists available in Japanese as there had been for Chinese. Nowadays with the Internet, modern dictionary software and a system like The Linguist, a great range of material is accessible to the motivated learner. It is possible to quickly progress from specially prepared “textbooks” to the real language. The sooner you can get away from learner language and start to discover the real language, the faster you will progress.

You must be determined to find your own way to a new language, and be careful of teachers imposing their versions of the language on you. One evening I was driving home listening to Japanese Public Educational Radio (NHK) when I heard the following sounds coming from my radio. “Zey aa sayrazu, zey aa sayrazu.” This went on for many minutes. I thought it was a Buddhist chant. Finally I realized that it was a radio English teacher with a heavy Japanese accent repeating the phrase “they are sailors.” This kind of repetitive mimicry of words is the opposite of meaningful content and is of little use. In a way this reminded me of the French instruction I had in school. Today there are young native speaker English teachers in every Japanese city and town. English teaching in Japan has progressed a great deal since the 1970s.

As my Japanese improved, I tried to vary the type of content to keep it interesting and to broaden my knowledge of the language. For example, when our family went on a tour of the Izu Peninsula, I took an audio version of Nobel Prize winner Kawabata Yasunari’s novel *The Izu Dancers* along to listen to in

the car. We retraced the route of the itinerant dancing troupe described in the novel while enjoying the picturesque mountain and ocean scenery of the region.

One of the most interesting tapes that I listened to was an NHK product called *The History of the Showa Era*. This consisted of re-broadcast live radio news from the period 1925 to 1945. Over time I was able to understand most of it. In my mind, I can still hear certain phrases from radio personalities announcing sports events or political or historical happenings from that period. Today, with the expanded production of audio books and e-books, there is a great deal of authentic content available in many languages to suit the interests of language learners.

While reading and repetitive listening are effective in becoming familiar with a new language, genuine interaction with native speakers is always the greatest stimulus and training ground for the learner. My closest colleague at the Canadian Embassy in Tokyo was the Japanese Commercial Officer, Mr. “Nick” Yazaki. He was a major help in my efforts to learn Japanese. He had the advantage, from my point of view, of being inclined to express himself in a most careful, painstaking and long-winded way. I imitated his pronunciation and his favourite turns of phrase. From the beginning he supported me in my efforts to learn Japanese. He was an important influence on my learning. Finding a native speaker who is patient and supportive can be invaluable in learning a new language.

In time, I was able to hold up my end of most conversations. My conversation strategy was to try to keep what I had to say simple and well within my capabilities. I tried to avoid speaking quickly so that my thoughts did not run ahead of my language.

This is easier said than done, however, and often I struggled to express myself. But it was all part of the learning process.

### **Is Japanese Difficult?**

I am regularly asked by Japanese people if Japanese is the most difficult language to learn. They are disappointed if I do not agree that it is. But every language has its own unique difficulties, and with enough exposure all difficulties can be overcome. There is no unlearnable language. Certainly the legions of young English language teachers who come to Japan to teach English are proof that Japanese presents no major problems for the person who wants to integrate with Japanese society. Many of these foreigners become good Japanese speakers. Young Japanese people are generally open and sociable and I often think these foreign teachers benefit more from their stay in Japan than their students who are trying to learn English.

A major obstacle to learning Japanese is the problem of the Chinese characters, or *Kanji* as they are called in Japanese. Many language learners can learn to speak well without reading, but it is easier to gain a feeling for the language if you can read it as you listen. Reading is a form of sensual appreciation of the language quite different from listening, and it strengthens your understanding of the language. Having learned most of the characters I needed from Chinese, I had an advantage. However, the pronunciation in Japanese can be a problem. Unlike Chinese, there are often several ways to pronounce the same characters. The meaning of Chinese characters in Japanese can sometimes be different from the meaning in Chinese.

I had to design my own learning program based on my interests and abilities. This is easily done in today's digital age but was very difficult to do when I lived in Tokyo. Knowing the Kanji characters, at least in Chinese, I concentrated on Japanese content that was weighted towards Chinese characters, such as the newspapers and the radio news, and then progressed to more day-to-day conversation. I was able to conduct business in Japanese fairly soon, but did not understand television soap operas until later.

Living in a Japanese environment and reading the Japanese newspapers daily trained my mind to read characters. I observed that my ability to read Chinese improved while I was in Japan although I essentially never read Chinese. I think that my ability to speak Chinese also improved because my brain was becoming even more capable of processing different languages. Certainly learning new languages has never crowded out previously learned languages or confused me.



The relationship between writing systems and the brain is interesting and illustrates the many sided nature of language learning. According to Robert Ornstein in *The Right Mind*:

*Almost all pictographic systems [of writing] favor a vertical layout, while most phonographic systems are horizontal. And out of several hundred phonographic systems that have vowels, almost all are written toward the right, while of over fifty languages that do not have any signs for vowels, all are written to the left. This strongly suggests that there is a good reason for the connection between type of system and direction. And the most likely candidate is that our eyes and brain work in different ways depending on what sorts of scripts they are reading. It is likely that the culture one*

*encounters at birth and first few years affects the way the hemispheres are organized.*

*The Greeks, as well as just about everybody else in the world, developed their alphabet from the Phoenician alphabet. By mid-700s BC, the new Greek alphabet was in use but being written from right to left in the same way as its parent. Within a hundred and fifty years or so it was written in boustrophedon, referring to the route an ox plows a field—alternately right to left and left to right. But by about 550 BC it had settled down into the familiar left to right.*

---

Aside from the writing system, another early obstacle I found in Japanese was the similarity of the sounds. This is a common reaction when starting a new language, but Japanese has, in fact, fewer different sounds than most languages. Vocabulary acquisition was slow at first. This problem disappeared as I got used to seeing and hearing words in their natural contexts. Difficulties encountered at the early stages in language learning can be discouraging. However consistent exposure and an open mind will gradually allow you to overcome these problems.

### **Polite Language**

Perhaps the most unique aspect of Japanese is the use of different words and sentence structures for different social situations. No language I have learned has such a difference of vocabulary and structure depending on whether you are talking casually to a friend, to a subordinate or very formally to a “senior” person. Just the word “I” has at least three commonly used forms, *watakushi*, *boku* and *ore*, and the same is true for “you” and the other pronouns.



To master these distinctions you must be involved often in social situations that require you to use them correctly. Just explaining the logic behind language patterns will not enable you to master them. You have to become a little bit Japanese in your mentality before you can switch on polite or casual language depending on the social setting. This requires considerable exposure either in real life situations or through listening to appropriate material in recorded form. It also requires you to accept the culture.

Until I mastered the different levels of politeness, I simply spoke neutral Japanese. In fact, to a large extent I still do. I think it is important not to try to be either too colloquial or too formal when speaking a foreign language. It is normally not expected of a foreigner. Nor is total mastery of the politeness levels necessary for communication. Fully understanding the nuances of polite words and phrases requires a very advanced level of cultural sensitivity that cannot be forced, but will develop naturally over time.



Apparently the sentence structure of Japanese is of North Asian origin and therefore similar to Korean. Much of the original vocabulary is, according to some experts, vaguely related to Polynesian languages and comes from the Jomon people who settled in Japan starting 20,000 years ago. The Jomon were hunter-gatherers who lived in Japan before different waves of North Asian immigrants, called Yayoi people, brought rice culture and the influence of their language to Japan starting around 300 BC. Incidentally, the Jomon people may have been the first in the world to develop pottery— over 10,000 years ago.

The Chinese writing system was introduced to Japan just over

1,500 years ago along with many Chinese words, Chinese technology and the Buddhist religion. The magnificent wooden structures found in Nara and Kyoto include the oldest and largest wooden buildings in the world. The techniques used in construction are the best preserved and most outstanding examples of Chinese wood building technology, which dates back to the original Yellow River civilization.

---

In recent times, the Japanese language has accepted many foreign borrowed words, especially from English. Japanese is a rich amalgam of many influences. Knowledge of the Chinese characters is an advantage to a foreigner learning Japanese, and the grammatical structure of Japanese is similar to Korean. So neighboring Asian people have an advantage in learning Japanese. However, the attitude of the learner is a more important factor than geographic or genetic proximity. I have met many foreigners from other parts of the world who have a positive attitude and excel at spoken Japanese.

At a time when I was already fluent in Japanese, my wife who looks Asian, still could not speak Japanese very well. Often we had triangular conversations with Japanese people in public places. I spoke Japanese, and the Japanese person replied to my wife. The Japanese person could not accept the fact that the Western face, not the Asian face, was the one actually speaking Japanese.

In a similar vein, years later in Canada, an older Japanese lady made the following observation about a young child of mixed Japanese-Caucasian parents who was late in starting to talk. “Of course he is slow, since Japanese people have trouble speaking English!”

I hear Caucasians marvel that a Caucasian can learn an Asian language even though we are familiar with second generation Canadians of Asian origin who are native speakers of English. How many times have I heard Chinese people say that English is impossible to learn because Chinese culture is so different from English? This kind of cultural preconception is just another obstacle to proper language learning and needs to be discarded. I am convinced that anyone, of whatever culture or background, and of whatever age, can learn any language if they commit to doing so.

A Westerner visiting or living in Japan who will only eat “meat and potatoes” and does not enjoy sushi will usually not be successful in learning Japanese. Similarly, Japanese people who will only travel abroad in groups and will only eat familiar food are unlikely to be successful in learning other foreign languages, no matter how much time they spend trying. Learning a language is like traveling. Both activities are an adventure. There is no point in traveling abroad and acting like you stayed at home.

### **Japan Incorporated**

Japan in the 1970s and early 1980s was different from today’s Japan. It was a less open society.

During the first four years of my stay in Japan I was First Secretary at the Canadian Embassy. During this time I was involved in initiating a program to introduce the North American platform frame wood building system to Japan. This program met the objectives of the Japanese Ministry of Construction, which was concerned about the projected lack of carpenters trained in the demanding traditional Japanese

building system. This was a time of rapid improvement in living standards and a high annual level of house construction.

I enjoyed my stint at the Embassy because of my close involvement with my Japanese counterparts, especially those like the Ministry of Construction officials and the members of the Tokyo Young Lumbermen's Association who participated in the introduction of the new wood frame building system. On the other hand, the social obligations of the diplomatic service, the frequent evening cocktail parties and entertainment which ate into my private life, were less enjoyable.

At the end of my Embassy posting in October 1974, despite vague plans to return to University to do Asian Studies, I was recruited by Seaboard Lumber Sales, a leading Canadian forest products company, to set up a subsidiary company in Tokyo. I would never have been given this opportunity had I not learned Japanese. I worked in the forest industry in Japan from 1974 to 1977 for Seaboard and then returned to Vancouver with my family. We returned to Japan for a further two years in 1981 to 1982 on behalf of another major Canadian forest products company, MacMillan Bloedel Ltd.

This was a period when Japan, although very pleased to export large amounts of manufactured goods, was only slowly and reluctantly opening up its market to imports, despite the efforts of foreign exporters and Japanese people involved in import. As the person in charge of MacMillan Bloedel's operations in Asia, I was responsible for marketing paper and pulp as well as lumber. I occasionally encountered trade barriers.

The paper industry in Japan was a tightly knit community of users, producers and government officials. It was particularly

difficult for our Japanese employees to be seen promoting Canadian paper in competition with Japanese producers. It was almost considered unpatriotic. A famous book, *The Day We Ran Out of Paper* was written in 1981 under a pseudonym by an official of MITI (the Japanese Ministry of International Trade and Industry). The message of this book was that a Japanese newspaper publisher importing foreign newsprint paper was selling out freedom of speech to a foreign conspiracy. Times have changed now, and Japanese paper companies themselves have built paper mills in many countries of the world, including Canada.

In the 1980s, under trade liberalization pressure from the United States, the Japanese Telephone Company (NTT) allowed foreign paper producers to bid for the telephone directory paper business. Our company was the first foreign supplier to pass the quality testing. That was the easy part. It was much more difficult to deal with the cozy relationships between Japanese suppliers and customers, often described by the term “Japan Incorporated.”

The Japanese paper producers, who were our competitors, had retired senior executives of NTT, our common customer, on their Boards of Directors. Furthermore, we had to deal through a “fixer” agency company owned and run by retired employees of NTT. The printing companies were also owned and run by ex-employees of NTT. My ability to read and speak Japanese helped me navigate this world of complex relationships and create a market for our Canadian paper products.

The Japanese paper market was dominated by a small number of large producers and users and therefore it was easy for semi-monopolistic trading practices to become established. The

lumber trade, however, was different. It consisted of a large number of traditionally minded lumber retailers, wholesalers and home builders. Paradoxically, because of the larger number of participants, the traditional Japanese lumber sector was more open than the modern and sophisticated paper sector.

My relationship with the Japanese lumber trade was to become a dominant experience in my life. I was able to experience first-hand the Japanese love of nature and their pursuit of excellence in product design and manufacture. Their respect for their traditional house building system and the skills of the carpenter, and their appreciation and understanding of wood, have all had a profound and lasting impact on me.

I also encountered the conservatism of that society. At times I went against established practices to achieve the objectives of my company. This often upset our Japanese counterparts. I was once described as the “Kaufmann Typhoon” in a lumber trade newspaper. However, I always felt that Japanese business people were able to maintain an attitude of respect, even when disagreeing on substantive issues. Mutual respect is an important part of the mood of Japanese society, and a large reason for their social cohesion and success.

### **Fitting In**

It is important to participate in the culture of a country, in order to be in a state of mind to absorb the language. Not all encounters are pleasant or welcoming, but you have to persevere. Sometimes you meet resistance because you are a foreigner. This phenomenon is not unique to any culture, and can happen at any time. But most encounters will be pleasant and memorable.

One of my proudest moments in Japan was when I participated in the *Kiba Matsuri*, or Wood Market Festival. I was a member of one of many groups of young men wearing white shorts or loin cloth, a cotton *happi* coat and a *hachimaki* wrapped around my forehead. We carried heavy wooden shrines through Tokyo's streets from morning to night, drinking sake and getting showered with water by the onlookers. We shouted *Wasshoi* every time the heavy wooden shrine was thrown up into the air and caught again. Since I was taller than the other men, I either had to carry a disproportionate share of the load or constantly bend my knees. I guess I did a little of both from 5:30 in the morning until 3:30 in the afternoon. That night I could hardly crawl into bed, I was so tired and sore.

I often noticed that some foreigners who studied Japanese reached the peak of their language capability at the end of their period of language learning. Once launched into Japanese working life, they reverted back to living in English and their Japanese skills deteriorated. They never pushed themselves far enough to make living and working in Japanese seem natural for them. I deliberately took a different approach. This did not mean that I could not also live in English with other Canadians, it just meant that I had created another option for myself, that of living in Japanese.

The tendency for us to be most comfortable in our own cultural community is normal; however, it is no help to language learning. Once you really commit to the local language and make more local friends and professional acquaintances, the differences between people become less obvious than the similarities. I thoroughly enjoyed my nine-year stay in Japan. I came away with a profound appreciation for Japanese culture

and the refinement that the Japanese bring to so many aspects of daily human activities.

I am aware of cultural differences between people, just as I notice differences of personality between individuals. Yet my understanding of the essential similarity of all individual human beings was only confirmed during my nine years in Japan. Above all, every human being is an individual, with hopes and fears and ambitions. We seek comfort from belonging to communities, whether local, national or religious. However, an even greater sense of comfort is available to those of us who recognize that, as individuals, we are all equal members of the human family.

Japan is facing many economic difficulties today. The traditional hierarchical structure of Japanese society has inhibited the input of the younger generation towards solving these problems. This will likely change. In what Kennichi Ohmae, a leading Japanese thinker, calls “the modern borderless world,” increased knowledge of foreign languages will ensure a greater diversity of perspectives on issues affecting Japanese society.



## Exploring Languages at Home

---



*Without going outside, you may know the whole world.  
Without looking through the window,  
you may see the ways of heaven.*

**– Laozi**

---

It is always easiest to learn a language when you are living in a society that speaks that language if you take advantage of the opportunities that surround you. However, a new language in the real world can be difficult to understand. People may talk too quickly or use words that even the intermediate non-native speaker does not understand. You may feel hesitant in certain situations because you are not fluent. This can be stressful.

In these cases I have always found it useful to create my own world of language, a world of meaningful language content for me to listen to or read without pressure. Until I mastered Japanese, and even as I was living and working in Japanese, I still sought out advanced Japanese readers with meaningful content and vocabulary lists to read. I also listened repetitively to interesting tapes to gain greater confidence in using certain phrases and words.

I still listen to interesting material in languages that I speak fluently. I take advantage of time that is available while driving or exercising or doing chores around the house. There is an increasing availability of high quality audio books which can be easily enjoyed using the latest in portable listening technology.

Electronic texts are also more convenient than ever. This has great advantages for the learner. I regularly read newspapers

and articles on the Internet and use online dictionaries and The Linguist system to increase my vocabulary in different languages.

In situations where you are studying a new language away from the native speaking environment, it becomes essential to create this personal language world. This is what I have done in Vancouver over the last twenty years as I sought to improve my knowledge of languages that I had been exposed to earlier but could not speak.

### **A World Apart**

When I lived in Hong Kong I was not in a Mandarin speaking environment, but I listened to and read a limited number of texts: history and cultural books, modern literature, and tapes of comic dialogues. These became like old friends and provided the core of the vocabulary and phrasing that I needed to use in my communication.

Communicating with this imaginary world was easier than communicating with the real world, since it was readily available and under my control. This friendly world of my own exploration was a great source of strength in preparation for the real test of communicating with native speakers.



In 1512, Niccolò Machiavelli was briefly imprisoned and tortured by the Medici family, then withdrew to a simple country house outside Florence. During the day he talked and played cards with the local people, but at night he changed into formal clothes and withdrew into his study. There he communicated with the ancient historians through books, and wrote one of the classics of Western literature, *The Prince*. Machiavelli is an example of how we can communicate with a

**culture through reading or listening, even if we do not have daily personal contact with the people.**

---

While living in Vancouver well past the age of forty, I was able to make great advances on the learning I had begun in German, Swedish and Italian. I had some previous exposure, but certainly did not have fluency or confidence. For each language I had to commit myself to a concentrated period of listening to comprehensible audio material and reading texts with vocabulary lists.

At my home, I have at least fifty readers for German, Italian, Spanish, and Swedish. I purchased these readers because they all have vocabulary lists so that I could avoid using dictionaries. Unfortunately much of the content of these readers was uninteresting to me, but it was the only content that I could find.

What I was only able to do through great effort is made easier and more effective today. Using modern technology, vast amounts of content can be turned into accessible learning material. You can seek out content that is of interest to you, and learn the language from it. The independent learner is more independent than ever before.

## **German**

My ability in German is considered good by native speakers and I have no difficulty in conversation, or in understanding radio and newspapers. Although I had exposure to German in my younger days at home, while working on a German ship and while working on construction in Vienna, I really could not

carry on a conversation. In November 1986, I decided to spend the month learning German.

I went to many secondhand bookstores in Vancouver looking for reading books in the German language which had vocabulary lists. I must have bought about ten or fifteen of such books as well as various cassette tape products in German. The readers were full of the scribbles of the people who had used them before. For one month I read and listened to tapes in German, with the help of vocabulary lists. Of course I achieved a dramatic improvement in my German. I was subsequently able to improve on this during visits to Germany. But it was hard work.

In German, the nouns have three genders. Word endings change depending on case. This is very hard to master in speech. Only repetitive listening has enabled me to cope with this difficulty, not explanations and lists. I just speak German the way I hear it and hope for the best. My German is natural and fluent, but I am resigned to the fact that I am not perfect in German grammar.

I never had to pass a test in German, but I have done business in that language. I have also traveled to the wonderful medieval towns of Germany, sat down in restaurants and engaged the locals in lengthy conversations in German. I know that I frequently get my genders and cases wrong. It has not held me back. On the other hand, I know that to improve my grammar I just have to listen and read more, and occasionally refer to grammar texts to reinforce what I am experiencing in the real language. The isolated study of cases and genders, without a lot of language exposure, will not enable me to improve my grammar in real situations.

## Italian

Italian is relatively easy for someone familiar with Spanish and French. Concentrated listening to tapes and reading soon brought my Italian up to a usable level. Unfortunately I have too little opportunity to use it, but I always enjoy watching an Italian movie and being able to understand what is said. I also intend to buy more Italian ebooks and audio books when I have the time.

Italian is known as the language of music and love. While Italian may have the reputation of being an exceptionally beautiful language, I find that all languages are beautiful when I study them and start to understand them. When any language is well spoken, it has its own elegance and beauty. I always appreciate hearing people speak a language well, with the appropriate choice of words and with clarity, and with reference to the culture and history of that language.



It is impossible to study Italian without thinking of the enormous cultural contribution of Italy to Europe and the world. But Italy was as much a conduit of culture as a creator. It was the influence of Greece, itself stimulated by other more ancient Mediterranean cultures, that was Rome's great teacher. The Romans respected Greek culture and in their myth of origin they try to impute their ancestry back to Aeneas of Troy. (This myth, like so many myths of origin, is not true.)

The legacy of Rome's law and literature and its great public works have profoundly marked Western civilization. Long after the collapse of the Roman Empire, the genius of Italian culture again flourished in various city states. As always in history, the stimulus of foreign contact was paramount. Venice achieved its splendour because of its dominance of the sea

and contacts with Byzantium and the East. Similarly the involvement of Italian cities like Genoa and the cities of Tuscany in foreign trade, including trade with the Muslim world, contributed to their rapid growth in the early Middle Ages and eventually led to the Italian Renaissance.

---

## Cantonese

It was after the age of fifty in Vancouver that I decided to really work on Cantonese, since so many people in Vancouver speak that language. I had always heard some Cantonese when I was with my wife's Chinese relatives. However, my ability did not go far beyond ordering food in a restaurant, and even there I made mistakes.

I am never shy about using what little language knowledge I have. Once in a restaurant when I wanted to order a dozen spring rolls or *chun gyun*, I ordered a dozen *chun doi* or “spring bags.” In Chinese the word *chun* means spring, and has the connotation of sex. (I find that a very poetic association.) Unfortunately for me, *chun doi* or spring bags refers to the male sex organ and not to an item of food. After the initial shock at what I had said subsided, there was laughter all around.

My wife grew up speaking Cantonese. However, she and I always spoke English at home and we were not about to change the habits of thirty years. I was able to read the Chinese newspaper in Mandarin but could not pronounce the characters in Cantonese. I enlisted the help of my friend, the Cantonese speaking Vancouver journalist Gabriel Yiu, but really did not make progress.

I suppose I understood about ten percent of what was said in conversation or on the radio. I believe a person needs to

understand well over ninety percent of most situations to be considered fluent. I had a long way to go. The problem was that I had a bad attitude. Subconsciously I felt that the pronunciation, with nine tones, was simply too difficult. I also felt that Mandarin, the national language, was good enough and that I really did not need Cantonese. I did not have commitment.

I started searching Chinese bookstores in Vancouver for Cantonese learning material. I found a book that amounted to a breakthrough. This book demystified the issue of the nine tones of Cantonese. This system emphatically stated that six tones were enough. This seemed very sensible to me since I felt I could not even get six tones right and would still be able to communicate adequately. In addition, the author showed that these same tones existed in English, not to distinguish the meaning of words, but to provide emphasis in sentences. I suddenly realized that the phenomenon of all these tones was already familiar to me from English. I had been a prisoner of my fear of the tones. Now the obstacle of the tones was removed and the doors opened.

Next I needed material to listen to. I asked people to tape simple content for me that I listened to over and over. Then I bought a Minidisc player, which is a truly revolutionary tool for the language learner. It can record from radio or television as well as download from a computer. It can record your own voice and store a great deal of material. Yet it is light to carry and the sound quality is outstanding.

I soon started recording Cantonese radio programs, including talk show programs. As my Cantonese improved, I started to phone in to the Cantonese radio talk shows to offer my

opinions on different subjects. I recorded this all and compared myself to the native speaker announcers. I believe the Minidisc recorder enabled me to achieve a degree of concentration in my learning that contributed to my breakthrough in acquiring Cantonese. Unfortunately I have not been able to find electronic texts in Cantonese which correspond to the audio material that is available. I am sure this will come and that it will facilitate the learning of Cantonese.

By concentrating on content that I enjoyed listening to, and with my knowledge of Mandarin to help me, my comprehension gradually improved. This reinforced all my previous experiences with language learning. It pointed out once again the crucial role of the learner in achieving success, and the importance of finding interesting material. Also, my success at Cantonese confirmed to me that age is no barrier to effective language learning, if the learner is prepared to make the commitment.

While I am not totally fluent, I am able to carry on a conversation, even to the point of phoning in to radio talk shows. My six month period of greatest effort is now behind me, and I will continue to improve just by listening to the radio and meeting with people. I recently spent a few days in Shen Zhen and Guang Zhou (Canton) after an absence of twenty years. Of course I was amazed at the changes in those places. I thoroughly enjoyed being able to speak Cantonese with people that I met, which greatly added to the enjoyment of my visit.

The hard work that I have put into the learning of languages and creating a personalized learning environment has been made dramatically easier with the Internet and modern software systems. What I did with great effort can now be done more



effectively and more enjoyably. I am looking forward to learning more languages myself, and continuing to upgrade skills in the languages that I already speak.



# Language and International Business

---



*You never step in the same river twice, for fresh waters are ever flowing in upon you.*

– Heraclitus, 6th century BC

---

In June 1987, I started my own company in lumber export. For six months my wife and I worked out of the basement of our home with a fax machine and a phone. I traveled thousands of kilometres by car in Western Canada. I traveled tens of thousands of kilometres by air to Japan and Europe. Fifteen years later we have offices in Vancouver, Northern Alberta, Sweden and Japan, and a well established international trading business. I could not have done this without my knowledge of languages.

Admittedly success in business life does not depend solely on language skills. There are countless examples of outstanding business people who are able to get by only speaking their first language, especially when that language is English. However, being a linguist can help in many ways, and it certainly helped me.

## **Opportunity**

Throughout our lives we are surrounded by opportunities. It is only by being active and acquiring knowledge that we are able to see these opportunities and to take advantage of them. In my case it was my willingness to learn languages that created my opportunities.

Although I had already learned two languages in addition to English, it was my move to Japan, and the subsequent

acquisition of the Japanese language, that made a major difference to my life. Speaking Japanese, I was able to create good personal contacts in the Japanese business community. For this reason I was later hired by two of the major Canadian lumber exporting companies, on two separate occasions to run their Asian marketing operations. This eventually resulted in me starting my own company, whereby I was able to achieve a certain degree of financial independence.

I do not know what path I would have followed if I had gone to Beijing after all. No doubt I would have become more fluent in Chinese. I might still be in the diplomatic service or in the academic field or perhaps other opportunities would have come along. But pursuing languages was like a net for me, allowing me to catch opportunities that would otherwise have passed me by.

One example occurred in 1981. As President of MacMillan Bloedel Asia Ltd., based in Tokyo, I was back in Vancouver on a business trip. M. Bernard Guillemette, an important customer from France, was also visiting Vancouver at the same time. I was the only marketing person available at MacMillan Bloedel who spoke French. Even though I was responsible for the Far East, I ended up accompanying M. Guillemette for a whole day visiting our sawmills. From that day, we formed a lasting friendship.

Many years later, Guillemette et Cie. became my own company's best customer in Europe and has remained so. What is more, in October 1992 I took part in Bernard Guillemette's sixty-fifth birthday party in Paris, a gala dinner on a boat floating down the Seine. At that dinner I met another guest, Mr. Christer Johansson, President of Vida Timber of Sweden. We

struck up a friendship which also continues to this day. Within four months of meeting Mr. Johansson, fluctuations in international currencies made European lumber competitive in Japan. Working with Vida, our company was among the first exporters of lumber from Sweden to Japan. Vida has subsequently grown to become one of the largest lumber producers in Sweden and is our main supplier to Japan from Europe. These relationships were partly the result of luck, but could not have been achieved without my knowledge of French and Swedish, not to mention Japanese.

When I started my own company, my main idea was to focus on producing the special lumber sizes used in the Japanese manufactured house industry. Not a particularly brilliant idea, perhaps, but one that made sense at that time.

Because I had close relations with various people in the Japanese wood industry I had a good understanding of the trends in the market. I also was confident that some of my friends and contacts would trust me in my new venture. It was my relationship with these people, the result of my fluency in Japanese, that created this opportunity for me.

Even though our company was a newcomer with no history of meeting commitments, I obtained the support of the world's largest home manufacturer, Sekisui House Limited, to supply their housing components. My company grew to be their largest wood supplier in the early 1990s. Similarly, my friend Mr. Hiroshi Higuma, the President of a medium sized regional wholesaler called the Bungohama Company, agreed immediately over a sushi lunch to switch his purchasing of traditional Japanese lumber components to my company, based on a mutual trust that had developed between us over the

previous ten years. These relationships depended on my fluency in Japanese and could not have been achieved in English. These international relationships have continued over the years and are amongst the greatest rewards of international business.

Even with my Canadian suppliers, language was a positive factor in building trust. My two most important Canadian partners are both linguists in their own way.

Mr. Norm Boucher, President of Manning Diversified Forest Products Ltd., is a dynamic and self-reliant leader of the lumber industry in Alberta. He is originally from Quebec and speaks French. Even though we conduct most of our business in English, our ability to communicate in French created an additional degree of mutual understanding and trust. Norm grew up in the harsh environment of Northern Alberta to which he is still attached today. He likes to tell the story of how tough his childhood was. As a young boy on winter mornings, he would have to go out to a frozen lake in minus thirty degree celsius weather and make a hole in the ice to fetch water for the family. On his way back he had to check the rabbit traps for the dinner stew. Once, during a visit to Japan in the 1990s, we were at a sumptuous dinner of Japanese food. Norm was struggling to eat with the unfamiliar chopsticks. With his characteristic sense of humour he told our Japanese hosts that when he was growing up his family was poor and had to survive on rabbit meat but at least they could afford a fork!

Mr. Ben Sawatzky has been my partner in developing the Japanese market. He is President of Spruceland Millworks Ltd. and an outstanding business leader. He is quick to decide what to do, and then follows his decision through to completion. He started with one employee and now employs one hundred fifty

people in three plants. In addition, he owns several ranches and has built a private school. Ben speaks German and Spanish as well as English. We have traveled together in Germany and Spain, and our interest in languages has given us something in common beyond our business dealings.

Ben always wanted to learn Japanese so he could join in the conversation with our Japanese customers. He studied Japanese off and on but not consistently. Once in Sendai at a meal hosted by Japanese customers, he took advantage of the fact that I had gone to the bathroom to try out his language. Ben always speaks in a strong voice. He wanted to say that the meal was “oishikatta” meaning “was delicious” but he confused the past tense with the negative and told our host in his usual forceful way that the meal was “oishiku arimasen” meaning “not good.” In language, a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing!

Norm Boucher, Ben Sawatzky and Sekisui House are today partners with me and some others in a successful joint sawmill venture in Northern Alberta.

## **Success**

To succeed in any endeavour requires enthusiasm and hard work. This is true for an employee, for an entrepreneur and for someone studying languages. This enthusiasm gives you the energy to work hard to overcome obstacles and to take advantage of opportunities. I have worked with many people who had enthusiasm and were effective in their work. They were not all linguists, but they had the knowledge and ability that transcends language barriers. These kind of people exist in every culture and language group. Such people can also become good linguists if they are motivated to do so.

But language is not a condition of success in business, just an enhancer. If you are a good business person, the ability to communicate in other languages can make you more effective. In business, you need credibility. People have to trust you. Business is dependent on a network of people: colleagues, employees, bosses, customers, suppliers, advisors, friends and others on whom you can rely and who are prepared to rely on you. If you are not trustworthy, reliable and effective at what you do, speaking foreign languages will not help you. I believe it was Voltaire who said of a certain French nobleman that he spoke six languages and had nothing to say in any of them.

However, speaking a foreign language fluently can be invaluable in building relationships of trust. You need not speak like a native speaker, but you need to be comfortably fluent. You need to be able to communicate without struggling and your counterpart needs to feel comfortable communicating with you in the language. This is the professional level of language competence that is required for international business. It is definitely achievable with the right attitude and method of study. I believe The Linguist program can help any learner achieve this level of fluency.



*Fish traps exist to capture fish.  
Once you've got the fish you can forget the trap.  
Rabbit snares exist to capture rabbits.  
Once you've got the rabbit you can forget the snare.  
Words exist to capture meaning.  
Once you've got the meaning, you can forget the words.  
Where can I find a man who has forgotten words?  
I'd like to have a word with him!*  
– Zhuangzi, 4th century BC



## THE ATTITUDE OF A LINGUIST

### Just Communicate

It may seem obvious, but to become a linguist you have to *want* to communicate in another language. People who succeed in learning another language have a goal in mind: to get to know another people and their culture, not just to learn a new language. It was only when I became motivated to connect with a new culture and people that I was on my way to becoming a linguist.

Not all language learners are motivated to use the language they are learning. I remember clearly one day forty years ago when I was in charge of a language lab at the Agricultural Institute in Paris. One of my students suddenly groaned “*Merde*, I have been studying English for ten years and I still do not understand a thing!” With that he flung down his headset and stomped out of the room. I can still see him.

I can sympathize with his frustration. He speaks for all the language learners who suffer through years of formal classroom language teaching, memorizing, drilling, answering questions, studying for tests— and yet do not achieve fluency. He was fed up with trying to learn words that were not relevant to him. He did not care about the content of what he was studying. He had

no desire to communicate in English. The whole process was meaningless to him.

The linguist knows that to become fluent in a new language requires a commitment that goes beyond attending classes or studying text books. A linguist stretches in order to connect with a new culture, taking every opportunity to confront the new language in real life situations. Without the motivation to communicate in the new language, the learner is left struggling with the technical details of language that are so easily forgotten.

I remember how it was when I studied Latin in school. We had competitions to see who could decline Latin nouns the fastest, out loud. I could decline *bellum*, in both singular and plural, in a few seconds. It literally sounded like a blur. But I never had any intention of speaking Latin. I just wanted to pass tests. My high school French was similar. My Latin is now long since forgotten and I was unable to speak French properly until after I left high school.

Language is about communicating, not about details of grammar, nor vocabulary lists, nor tests, nor exercises. In the quotation that starts this chapter, Zhuangzi tells us that even the very words of language are artificial creations. It is the heart to heart communication of meaning that is the essential nature of language, and therefore of language learning. All the rest is artificial. Fish traps are only useful for catching fish. Words are only useful if communication takes place. The learner has to *want* to start communicating.

## Resistance to Language Learning

Not everyone wants to communicate in another language or learn about other cultures. It is understandable that many people are happier just using their own language and resist learning a new one. Ironically, however, many of the people who are trying to learn a second language are also actively resisting it.

Meeting a different language and culture can be stressful. It is certainly true that expressing thoughts and feelings in a new language is an intimate activity. Your language reflects your attitudes and personality, and therefore you feel most comfortable in your native language. It is also possible for people to resist a new language as a form of defense of their own language and identity. Some people feel inadequate and exposed when speaking in a second language. Some learners actually resent having to speak a new language, while others just find it tiring. People all too often compare the new language to their own, rather than just imitating it and learning it.

These reactions are similar to how people may behave when they travel abroad. Whereas eager travelers simply immerse themselves in their destination and enjoy themselves, others are looking for reasons to say that “after all, things are better at home.” Either it is the food, or the cleanliness, or the weather, that confirms to them that they were better off at home. Of course we are always happy to come home from a trip, but why think of it while traveling? Speaking your native language *is* easier and more relaxing, but why focus on that while trying to communicate in a new language?

It is disappointing to see that many learners do not take advantage of the environments that surround them. It is

common for parents to send their children to foreign countries to learn languages. When I studied Political Science at the University of Grenoble, France in the early 1960s, there were many students from England and the United States who were there to study the French language. They were mostly interested in having a good time with other English speaking friends. They did not take full advantage of the opportunity of living in France. They were not sufficiently motivated to get to know French people. As a result, they did not improve their French as much as they could have.

In a similar vein, I once spoke with a Japanese professor of chemistry at a prestigious British university. He told me that unfortunately many of the language students from Japan at his university stay within their own language group. It was a common joke that students from Tokyo returned to Japan with an Osaka accent but little improvement in their English.

When we first learn to swim, the water can look uninviting. Until we commit ourselves, communicating in a foreign language can be the same. I remember hearing a recent immigrant to Canada tell me that after leaving his homeland, he first lived in Europe. He was invited to go out drinking with his co-workers but felt that he did not understand their sense of humor, so he stopped going out with them. He related this incident to me, quite out of context, presumably to convince me or himself that the cultural gap between him and “the foreigners” was simply too wide to bridge. Yet he wanted to improve his English. He did not realize that he had to learn to find common ground with “the foreigners” if he hoped to speak other languages fluently. He did not have the attitude of a linguist.

The personal, professional and cultural opportunities that come from being able to communicate in other languages are obvious. I derive enormous pleasure from speaking other languages, whether I am at home or traveling. What's more, I have built up my business through my ability to speak languages. Now, even when I am at home in Vancouver, it is not unusual for me to speak French on the telephone in the morning with a customer in Le Havre, or Swedish or German with suppliers, then chat with waiters over dim sum lunch in Cantonese, and then be on the telephone to Beijing or Nagoya in the evening speaking Mandarin and Japanese. I ran companies in Japan for six years. I have had occasion to give speeches to forest industry gatherings in Asia, Europe, Latin America and North America in Japanese, Spanish, Italian, French, and Swedish, as well as English.

### **Overcoming Resistance to Language Learning**

To become a linguist you must overcome the different forms of resistance to language learning. It may take a personal relationship or sudden positive experience to break down this mental block to learning a new culture.

I remember an incident in Japan twenty years ago. I was selling lumber for a major Canadian exporter. We were having trouble getting our sawmills to produce the quality that the Japanese customers wanted. We arranged for our senior quality supervisor to come to Japan in order to better understand the customers' needs.

The first days were a disaster. Our man was from a small town in Canada and had worked at lumber grading and quality for his whole life. He had definite views on how lumber should be graded, and believed that it was not a matter of adjusting our

sawmills' standards to the needs of the customers, but of showing the customers why they were wrong! In other words, our senior grader had a closed mind when it came to understanding the views of our customers.

One evening we went out on the town for a few drinks. We went to one of the bars in Japan where young ladies provide entertainment in the form of flattery and idle chit-chat. One pretty hostess asked our senior grader if he spoke Japanese. He gave her an intense star-struck gaze and answered, "No, but I can learn." He had a delightful evening at that bar.

From the next day, he started to see the Japanese customers' point of view and we were able to develop a new and successful Japanese lumber grade. This is the kind of event that should happen to every learner in order to soften resistance and increase interest in a language. The best opportunity to break down resistance to a new language is to make a friend in that language.

There are others who want to learn a new language and do not resist the new language. Yet they do not become linguists. They have another problem. They are afraid to make mistakes. These people put pressure on themselves to achieve accuracy or perfection at a stage when they have no feel for the language, and cannot visualize themselves comfortably using it. This is counterproductive and inhibits their ability to communicate by making them self-conscious. If you are willing to communicate at your level, even imperfectly, you will start to gain the confidence and the motivation to improve. Pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary can then be learned naturally, when the time is right.

By communicating and making mistakes I was able to learn and improve. Roughly forty years ago, in a university class in France, I was making an oral presentation. When I wanted to say the word “responsible”, I said it with an “i” as in English, instead of “responsable” with an “a” as in French. Every time I pronounced it wrong there was laughter in the room. Only later did I realize that people were laughing at my mispronunciation. But it did not bother me that people were laughing at me. I was totally involved in giving my presentation and in getting my meaning across. I ignored the reason for everyone’s laughter until later. But their laughter helped me. Now I never make that mistake.

Try to free yourself from the desire to achieve perfection, which is vanity and will hinder your progress. Instead, seek to communicate naturally and enjoy yourself. Your improvement will be constant although uneven. You must believe that you have the ability to communicate in the new language and that by following the correct method you will achieve your goals. Just as in sports, confidence is an important ingredient for success.

In a very useful book about golf, Robert J. Rotella deals not with the techniques of golfing, but with developing the necessary attitude. The book is called *Golf is Not a Game of Perfect*. In golf, trying to be perfect undermines your enjoyment and your confidence, and therefore leads to poor performance. The same is true, if not more so, in language learning. To improve in golf it is important to practice, but it is critical to get out and enjoy the game regardless of your score. It is pointless to spend the whole time on the practice range.

To be a linguist you have to enjoy communicating in a new language for its own sake, regardless of your level. Do not spend your time in a vain attempt to master the language from grammar rules and word lists. You will not enjoy this tedious form of study, and it will not work.

### **Communicate at Your Level**

How do you communicate when you are learning a new language? Speaking and writing, as well as listening and reading, are all forms of communication in the new language. The key is to communicate in a way that suits your interests and skill level. When speaking, stay within your limits. Do not use slang, idioms or complicated words. Try to limit the conversation to subjects you can handle. Every time you communicate in a new language, even a little, pat yourself on the back and enjoy it. This will build up your confidence.

Even at the earliest stages of learning a language your objective has to be to communicate, not to learn the language as an academic subject. It does not matter how much you struggle nor how many mistakes you make, you will progress faster by communicating than trying to master theory.

My wife Carmen is a good example of this principle. When we lived in Tokyo she had little time to study Japanese but she communicated very comfortably with all the shopkeepers in our neighbourhood by learning the names of the vegetables and fish that she wanted to buy.

Years later, we entertained our friends and customers from France, the Guillemettes, by spending a week driving them around British Columbia. Bernard Guillemette and I sat in the front and Carmen and Bernard's wife, Monique who spoke only



French, sat in the back. Carmen's grammar was atrocious but for one week she and Monique had a lively and enjoyable conversation in French in the back seat. I am sure that Carmen would be put in a beginner's class for grammar but she communicates better in French than most English-Canadians who have studied French at school for years. If she needs to improve her grammar she can do so, but at least she now has a sense for the language and some degree of confidence in communicating.

Carmen does not need to achieve fluency in French since she has only the occasional need to speak it. To use a language effectively in working situations requires real fluency, but for social purposes the ability to communicate is sufficient. Carmen has enough experience and confidence in casual communication that she could certainly achieve greater accuracy if she chose to pursue that as a goal.

It is the same when you listen and read: focus on subjects that are of interest or relevant to you. Your studies will be much more enjoyable and effective if you read or listen to aspects of the new culture that attract you or subjects that you need to learn about. Seeking out meaningful content is your first step to becoming a linguist. This can be on daily life, business, an academic subject that you know already, a hobby or common interest with a new friend, food, music, or whatever. You must articulate your reason for communicating. If you are only motivated by a sense of obligation to learn the language, you will just see a bunch of rules and words and language learning will be a difficult struggle.

The term “meaningful content” appears often in this book. It refers to real language situations, such as a conversation for a

genuine purpose, rather than a dialogue in class or a drill or test question. It refers to reading and listening to content that is of interest and comprehensible to you. The more the context of your learning is realistic, the better you will learn. You will get beyond the details of the language you are learning and absorb the language naturally, because you are interested in the content. That is real communication. You will find what you are learning to be useful and therefore it will be easier to remember and retain.

The classroom is not real life. To learn, you must expose yourself to situations where you need the language, because you want to communicate or learn something other than the language itself. I attended the 2001 Christmas Party of the Tsinghua University Alumnus Association of Vancouver. Tsinghua is the MIT of China, a world-class institute of engineering and technology. Graduates of Tsinghua who have immigrated to Canada have had varying degrees of success integrating into Canadian society. Often, graduates have difficulty finding work when they first arrive.

Two of the alumni I met at the party who were the most fluent in English had taken unusual approaches to plunging into Canadian society. One spent the first four months selling door to door in Surrey and Delta, communities where there are very few Chinese people. He had since moved on to a better job—but his English, after only four years in Canada, was outstanding! Another alumnus had only been in Canada one year but had opened a winemaking shop, which brought him into contact with the neighborhood. Rather than worry about their limited English or their status as highly educated professionals, these two people just plunged into a real context and as a result learned the language quickly.

Learning a new language can be intimidating, especially for the first foreign language. However, by proceeding gradually and gaining small victories, your confidence will grow. It is important to remember that in learning a language you are not learning knowledge so much as acquiring a skill that takes time to develop. You have to get used to it. You are learning by *becoming*, not from theory.

You will not always perform equally well. When you play sports you are better on some occasions than on others, regardless of how much you practice. Language learning is the same way. Enjoy the moments when you are doing well and learn to forget the occasions when it seems that you are losing ground.

Once you have learned a second language, you will have the confidence to learn another one. In fact, the more languages you know the better you will speak them all. You will even speak your native language better, because your ability to speak and to understand the nuances of meaning is enhanced when you learn new languages. You will be on your way to becoming a linguist.



## Discover Language Naturally

---



*We Englishmen, being far northerly, do not open our mouths  
in the cold air wide enough to grace a southern tongue.*

– John Milton (1644), English Poet

---

Each new language is a wonder of nature that we are all capable of discovering. The teacher can only stimulate, inspire and guide. It is up to you, the learner, to explore the language and absorb it gradually on your own terms. You should have the confidence that it is a natural thing for you to do. Milton was obviously wrong when he suggested that his northern countrymen were physically unable to learn southern languages. Seeing language learning as an extraordinary task can be a self-fulfilling vision, preventing you from achieving your potential. If you do not believe you can speak another language, you will certainly not succeed in doing so. You have to believe you can learn in order to achieve success. Accept the fact that you were born with the ability to learn to speak a new language, to be a linguist. You just have to find the way to develop this ability as an adult.

We generally accept that everyone has an equal gift for learning their first language. Why should we assume that we require a special “gift” to learn a second language? Some people even claim that an ear for music is essential to language learning. A good place to test this theory is at a karaoke bar, where it can be easily demonstrated that there is no correlation between singing ability and language skills. We can all learn if we have the right attitude and if we find the method that is most suited to our nature.

Some people may have better language learning ability than others, but this innate learning ability is not the decisive difference in language learning success. Why are so many Dutch or Swedish people good at learning languages while Germans and English, not to mention Americans, are generally not as good at it? Why are French Canadians in general more successful in learning English than French people from France? Why are Chinese people from Singapore usually better at English than Chinese people from China or even from Hong Kong?

I do not believe that some nationalities have a better innate ability to learn languages than others. It is more likely that the big difference is attitude. The successful foreign language speakers take for granted that they will have to communicate in another language, and do not feel that it is an unusual thing to do. It is just expected. It is natural to them. Many Dutch or Swedish people realize that they need to speak foreign languages because few foreigners are going to learn Dutch or Swedish. Similarly, a large number of Singaporeans and Quebecois know they need English, and simply accept that they are going to be English speakers. There is no resistance. These people can all naturally visualize themselves as fluent speakers of English.

### **The Limits of Language Teaching**

Language needs to be discovered. It cannot be taught to an unmotivated learner. Becoming a linguist depends on you, not on schools or teachers. Language teachers are dedicated to helping you improve, but they cannot make you fluent. You have to acquire the language yourself. The teacher can stimulate, explain, and provide the best possible language resources. After that, you must take charge and pursue your

own learning, according to your own interests and nature. If you do that you will learn, naturally and without stress.

The language classroom is too often an artificial environment where the emphasis is on *teaching* the language according to a timetable imposed by the curriculum. The expectation is that the teacher will impart language knowledge or skills in a certain order. As long as the textbook is covered in the prescribed time period and test scores are positive, the assumption is that the language has been learned. Unfortunately the results in terms of fluency are mostly disappointing. The language classroom can be stressful. The learners often dislike having the teacher correct them in front of others, and are frequently frustrated at their own inability to speak properly. There is an underlying expectation that the students should perform correctly, rather than just communicate. The students alternately feel threatened or annoyed by their fellow students, depending on whether their classmates are more or less proficient at learning the new language than they are themselves.

In the most effective classrooms it is not the language that is studied, but some other subject of interest to the students. In studying another subject the learners absorb the language, and are less self-conscious about their own language difficulties in their enthusiasm to communicate about something of interest to them. After the learners are exposed to a sufficient amount of interesting content by listening and reading in the language, they gradually become aware of the need for correct structure and word use. Then they are motivated to work on these aspects of the language.

It is best if the learners ask for help as they need it, rather than having to respond to the timetable of the teacher. The teacher is

able to correct the students privately or on written content and to offer relevant grammatical explanations as required. The classroom can be a useful learning environment if it is used in a flexible way which puts the learner and not the teacher in control.

Another way in which the teachers, rather than the learners, control conventional language teaching is through the frequent use of tests to evaluate learners. For a variety of reasons, educational authorities find it necessary to try to objectively assess the language competence of non-native speakers. For English, there are standardized tests which go by names like *TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language)* and *TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication)* and similar acronyms.

These tests may be a necessary evil for university entrance, or for job interviews, but in my opinion results in these tests are not a reliable indicator of language fluency. They should not become an obsession, and must never become the goal of language learning. The best judge of your language competence is you, the learner. You know if you can read more easily, if you can understand more of what you hear, or if you are having an easier time expressing yourself. Paradoxically you will score better on these tests by acquiring a balanced ability in the new language rather than by just studying to pass these tests.

Too many language learners focus on doing well on these tests rather than on learning how to communicate comfortably. In preparation for tests, especially for the major standard tests, students will study word lists which are isolated from any content. They will spend countless hours reviewing specialized books with grammar rules, lists of verbs, phrases, idioms and sample questions. They study the techniques for getting high



scores on these tests. In this way they pursue study methods that are inefficient and stressful. In the long run, an undue emphasis on getting a high TOEFL or TOEIC score can divert you from the real goal of achieving fluency in the language. The test is only an interim goal on your way to academic and professional success. If you focus on test results without really learning the language, you are only fooling yourself. In the end you will not be able to use the language effectively.

There are no shortcuts. To be comfortable in answering most TOEFL and TOEIC questions, you need to become familiar with the natural flow of the language in many different contexts. This can best be acquired through intensive listening and reading of a wide variety of interesting material while using a program that helps you remember new words and especially the most common phrases. This kind of exposure to the new language in real situations, not studying grammar and word lists, is the fastest and most enjoyable way to learn.

In some countries, especially in East Asia, fierce competition exists for entry into prestigious schools and universities. Foreign language ability is an important subject and school children are put through high pressure study programs to achieve good marks on national tests. There are cram schools with classes of fifty to seventy people. It is impossible to learn to communicate in these situations. Teachers devote themselves to revealing how to get high marks in this examination hell. I can well understand that this kind of teaching will discourage a learner's interest in a new language.

Public school systems everywhere have been widely unsuccessful in teaching second languages. This has had a negative influence on language learning. Many potential

linguists are conditioned to think that language is a tedious subject that has to be taught in schools.

In my own case, I found studying theoretical explanations of grammar uninteresting and not an effective way to learn languages. I resisted doing exercises and answering questions that tested my knowledge of grammar. After I left high school I discovered that I learned faster through systematic exposure to the language than if I relied on formal teaching in a classroom environment. Sentence structures that were strange and difficult at first eventually felt natural if I encountered them often enough in my reading and listening.

Occasionally I would consult grammar books to answer questions that I had about the language. Sometimes the explanations helped and at other times they did not. Much like when I looked words up in a dictionary, I would usually remember grammar rules or explanations (if I understood them) only for a short period of time and then forget them. In the end it was only through enough exposure to the language that my grammar improved.

I was prepared to devote considerable effort away from class to listening and reading on subjects of interest to me. This was the natural and enjoyable way to discover the language. I developed my own systems for expanding my usable vocabulary, to ensure that I was able to retain words and phrases rather than immediately forget them if I did not see them again for a few days. These methods helped me develop study programs for *The Linguist*.

There are undoubtedly learners who are happiest in the structured environment of a conventional language classroom

and who are comfortable studying grammar and preparing for tests. Even those learners can benefit from a self-directed learning system like The Linguist. By customizing the learning process to suit their needs and interests, learners will find that their classroom language experience will be more effective. In this way they will also make it possible for themselves to continue progressing in the language after the formal classes are ended.

### Natural Learning

Speaking a new language is natural. You need only cultivate the latent capabilities that you already possess, but which need to be properly stimulated. The way of the linguist is one that leaves you free to pursue your own needs and interests, rather than having to learn according to an externally imposed program. You develop skills that you have within you. You integrate with the target language, listening and imitating rather than learning from theory.



*Man is most nearly himself when he achieves the seriousness of a child at play.*

**– Heraclitus**

---

Children learn languages using these natural methods. They just want to communicate. They cannot read grammars, they do not do drills, they do not prepare for tests. They just naturally want to learn. At birth, children of all nationalities have the same innate ability to learn a new language. It is true that children normally learn their mother tongue, but they possess a universal language instinct that will enable them to learn any language.

Children are exposed to a limited range of content which matters to them: the language of their parents and their friends at play. They concentrate on the words and phrases that are important to them and find opportunities to use them. They are not concerned about making mistakes of pronunciation or grammar. Children absorb the language without resistance. Unlike the classroom language learner, they are not constantly corrected but are encouraged in their efforts to speak.

Children learn naturally, but adults can learn faster than children. When I studied Mandarin Chinese or Japanese I was able to read the newspaper and have serious discussions within six months. It takes a child longer to reach that level of vocabulary. Adults can use their greater knowledge and broader interests to direct their learning, and can progress quickly.

As a linguist, you should create your own customized curriculum. If you control your learning, you will learn faster. In listening and reading, comprehension depends on context. When listening to or reading material that you have chosen and where the background is familiar, your comprehension is higher than when you are struggling through uninteresting material. This is the natural way to build confidence and fluency in a non-stressful way.

Gradually your range of interests will take you into new areas, thus expanding your language ability. But the decision of what to study should be yours. Furthermore, if you accept the responsibility to seek out your own content, you will take a major step towards cultivating the self-reliant attitude needed for success in language learning.

Fred Genesee of McGill University, a leading researcher on language learning and the brain, explains what happens when we learn a new language:

*When learning occurs, neuro-chemical communication between neurons is facilitated, in other words a neural network is gradually established. Exposure to unfamiliar speech sounds is initially registered by the brain as undifferentiated neural activity. As exposure continues, the listener (and the brain) learns to differentiate among different sounds and even among short sequences of sounds that correspond to words or parts of words...*

*Students' vocabulary acquisition can be enhanced when it is embedded in real-world complex contexts that are familiar to them.*

Through intensive and repetitive exposure to enjoyable language material you will bathe your mind in the new language. This process is sometimes referred to as an “input flood” which trains your mind and prepares it for the more difficult task of expressing yourself in the new language. The linguist accepts the new language without resistance, confident that with enough exposure the difficulties of the language will gradually be overcome.

Language learning is not primarily an intellectual activity. It requires enthusiasm and repeated and concentrated exposure to language contexts that become familiar over time. I have often observed that foreign professional athletes in North America are good language learners, often more successful than foreign university professors. Hockey or basketball players are able to deliver fluent interviews on television, whereas the more intellectual professors are likely to have very strong accents and speak in a more stilted and unnatural manner. The reason is that

athletes have constant informal verbal interaction with teammates. They need to fit into the team or they will not perform well. They learn quickly, immersed in the comfortable and familiar environment of their sport.

Unlike the athlete on a team, most language learners are not exposed to constant and familiar language contexts. That is why it is so important to create your own curriculum based on learning contexts which cater to your interests and needs. Following your interests is the natural way to learn. The greater your range of interests, the more curious you are about the world around you, the better you will learn.

## Identity and Language

---



*Languages are unlike any other subject taught in a classroom in that they involve the acquisition of skills and behaviour patterns which are characteristic of another community.*

– R.C.Gardner, ***Social Psychology and Language Learning, the Role of Attitudes and Motivation***

---

With your first encounter with a foreign language you are coming into contact with an “other,” another language and another culture. But actually that “other” is not as foreign as you think. In time the new language and culture can become natural to you, a part of who you are. You become a linguist when you accept the fact that you can change. You can acquire skills and behaviour patterns characteristic of another culture. I have done it many times, and have seen others with no previous experience of language learning do the same.

In his excellent book *El Bosque Originario* (Ediciones Taurus), on the genealogical myths of the people of Europe, the Basque philosopher Jon Juaristi writes:

*There is no nation without its tale or tales of origin. These myths are based on the logic of exclusion, of a difference constructed on the basis of exalting Us and negating the Other. Recurring themes like aboriginality, divine selection, purity of blood or language are supports of different variants of a common narrative.*

The linguist knows that the differences between people, exalted in such traditions, are not based on biology but on education. The linguist sees these differences but also sees similarity. The

linguist is able to grow as a person and accept elements of a new culture as part of his or her larger human identity.

Charles Pasqua, the former French Minister of Immigration, once said that when an immigrant arrives in France his ancestors become the Gauls, the ancient Celtic people who lived in France at the time of the Roman Empire.

The resonance of M. Pasqua's statement is not diminished by the fact that M. Pasqua, like new immigrants, had ancestors who were not Gauls. However, in French history and French myths of origin, the Gauls were important. Pasqua is French, so at least symbolically, his ancestors were the Gauls. This is part of his sense of belonging to the group.

In a similar sense, as a human being, I consider all ancient people as my ancestors. I can choose to partake of any of the traditions and cultures I see around me if I make the effort to learn them. As a result of having learned French I am able to participate in French culture and consider it a part of who I am. When I approached the study of Chinese it was in order to make this previously unknown culture a part of me, to explore my human heritage. In learning new languages it is never my intention to compare different cultures to see which is “better,” but to acquire something new and valuable and expand as a human being. As a linguist it is important to let go of the security of your native language and culture and broaden your identity.

When I speak French, I try to become French; when I speak Chinese I try to be Chinese; when I speak Japanese, I act as if I am Japanese. Largely this is a form of theatre and not a change



of personality. But people do observe that my facial expressions and gestures change when I speak different languages.

Until we become fluent in a new language, when we speak it we should engage in a certain degree of play-acting. Have fun and pretend that you are what you are not. You should empty your mind of your ancestral culture for a while in order to better absorb the language you are learning. You do not give up your original identity, and that is certainly not the aim of language learning. But you do acquire the ability to understand the values and way of thinking of another culture.



*I was a butterfly, flying contentedly  
Then I awoke as Zhuangzi.  
And now I don't know who I really am—  
A butterfly who dreams he is Zhuangzi  
Or Zhuangzi who dreamed he was a butterfly.*  
– **Zhuangzi**

---

Sports psychologists encourage competitive athletes to visualize their success. Paul Kariya is one of the top ice hockey players in the world. My younger son Mark played hockey for Yale University against Paul Kariya when Kariya played for Maine University. Apparently Kariya sat for an hour before each game and visualized himself making plays against the players on the other team. Paul Kariya is a player of relatively small physical stature who has reached the highest world level in a game of strength and speed. I am sure this technique helped him. Be like Paul Kariya: visualize your success! Try to visualize yourself as a fluent native speaker.

Visualize yourself pronouncing like a native speaker and thinking in the language. The ability to reason in the logic of other languages exists within all of us. It is there for you to develop. In that sense, language learning is a process of self-discovery. You need to accept the spirit of the new language, even if it seems strange at first. Let it be a force for uncovering your latent language abilities. There is no need to fear losing the logic or values of your native language. You will only be enriched by acquiring additional languages and new perspectives.

We have the potential to penetrate other cultures regardless of our background, as long as we are curious enough to do so. There are many examples of people who were outstanding artists in a second culture. Joseph Conrad, a Pole, is a leading figure of modern English literature. Samuel Beckett, an Irishman, wrote one of the prominent plays of modern French literature, *Waiting for Godot*. There are many outstanding non-European virtuosos performing European classical music. Many non-Asians dedicate themselves with success to Asian arts or traditional sports.

### **The Fundamental Similarity of Human Beings**

With the discovery of DNA, we now understand what the Taoists knew intuitively: all is one. Human beings are remarkably uniform and have a common origin. As Richard Dawkins brilliantly explains in *River Out of Eden*, our genes have been handed down to us by those of our ancestors who survived long enough to produce children. Many of our characteristics, such as blood type and susceptibility to certain diseases, cut across the lines of more superficial differences like skin colour or body shape. While we may look different from each other today, every person alive has a common male

ancestor who lived around 50,000 years ago. To quote again from Spencer Wells in *The Journey of Man, A Genetic Odyssey*, “Physical traits that distinguish modern human geographic groups only appear in the fossil record within the past 30,000 years. Most older fossils of Africans, Asians and Europeans are very similar to each other.”

Our genes are so common that they can cohabit with the genes of other human beings of any nation or race to create members of a next generation. Genetic differences between individuals are greater than the genetic differences between ethnic groups. And any one of us can speak any language.

I have been told that there are people who have paid money to have an operation on their tongues in order to be able to better pronounce a foreign language. Whether this is true or not I cannot say, but the fact that such a story is told is an indication of the persistence of the association of language with ancestry. If you were adopted at birth by someone of a different race, you would naturally learn to speak their language without needing a tongue operation.

### **Human Culture is Universal**

Just as with genes, human culture has passed from generation to generation, its form and content constantly evolving. Like the genetic makeup of people, human culture is universal despite its variations. The source of world culture is everywhere the same: human creativity. Twenty-five hundred years ago, philosophers in China, India and Greece dealt with the same human issues as we do now, and their thoughts are readily understood by people of many different cultures today.

In fact, a closer study of the thoughts of Heraclitus, Zhuangzi, and Buddha show remarkable similarities between them. Their philosophies are not just accessible to Greeks, Chinese or Indians. These thinkers have had an influence that greatly exceeded their time and country. The explanations that humans have sought to solve the riddles of human existence are universal. It is precisely this universality of human thought and feeling that makes learning foreign languages such a natural and rewarding adventure.

All cultures are connected. The ancient civilizations of the Middle East spawned a literary revolution that dramatically influenced the course of history. The Semitic alphabet, the mother of all alphabets, indirectly made possible Greek and Indian philosophical writings and the books of the great religions. As thoughts were written down, it became possible for others to read them, ponder them and comment on them. Chinese writing had the same effect on East Asian cultures. It is on these foundations that the modern world is built.

In more recent times, the development of European science and the industrial revolution were dependent on Chinese technology, Indian mathematics and Arabic cultural influence. Religions created in the Middle East and India dominate the world, while much of the world's popular music is influenced by African rhythms.

Our modern world is the result of an ongoing process of cultural creativity and interaction that started with the first humans. Migration, trade, conquest, cultural exchange, cultural synthesis and assimilation have been the constant pattern of history on all continents. Globalization is not a recent

phenomenon, it is just that the speed and the scale have increased as modern communications have shrunk the globe.

### **Individuals in a Shrinking World**

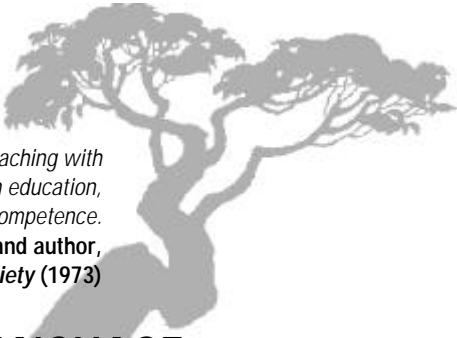
Canada is an interesting example of a country where cultures are mixing and a new identity is emerging. Perhaps Canada is at the same stage in its evolution as older societies in Europe or Asia were one thousand or several thousand years ago. Over the last fifty years, Canada has absorbed many different peoples who are today united through their common language, either English or French. The process of blending in can take time, but today a “native speaker” of Canadian English can be of African, East Asian, South Asian, Mediterranean, Northern European, First Nation or any other single or mixed origin.

My own case is an example of the impermanent nature of national identity. My parents were born into a German speaking Jewish community in the Austro-Hungarian Empire in an area that subsequently became Czechoslovakia and then the Czech Republic. My parents moved to Sweden in 1939. I was born in 1945 in Sweden and my family moved to Montreal in 1951.

My national identity is Canadian, specifically English Canadian. However, depending on different historical factors beyond my control, I could just as easily have ended up Austrian, Czech, Swedish, Israeli, or a French speaking Quebecois. Despite accelerated globalization, national or regional identities are not disappearing, and in fact may be getting stronger. However, today we have more freedom to choose our identity.

We are all individual human beings. We can share in different identities and understand different cultures. We are stamped by our native culture but this is an accident of history. It cannot

limit us. As individuals we have the opportunity and, I would say the responsibility, to explore other cultures. The best way to do that is through language.



*The pupil is ... "schooled" to confuse teaching with learning, grade advancement with education, a diploma with competence.*

**- Ivan Illich, Educator and author,  
Deschooling Society (1973)**

## HOW TO LEARN A LANGUAGE

### Conviviality

By now you understand that learning does not only take place in a school. Learning is done by individuals who want to acquire knowledge from others or from the world around them. My own success as a linguist has been driven by an interest in languages and the pursuit of conviviality in the sense that Cicero meant it - enjoying the company of others because they share our lives, regardless of their country or language.

This attitude of autonomy, combined with a desire for human communication, is common to many people around the world. The world is full of potential linguists who only need to find the best way to develop their abilities. Are you one of these people?



The famous Austrian linguist and philosopher Ivan Illich proposed the creation of convivial learning webs as a substitute for the formal education system dominated by "experts." These convivial webs were to be informal communities which provided resources for independent-minded people to learn and share knowledge in a manner that was more effective than formal schooling. The Linguist language learning system ([www.thelinguist.com](http://www.thelinguist.com)) brings

**Illich's vision to life. I will use it to illustrate how language learning should be organized.**

---

How can a convivial language learning environment work in practice? The Linguist website offers a varied and constantly growing collection of interviews with real people in different walks of life and in different languages, as well as texts on many subjects, both fiction and non-fiction. This content is in audio and text format. The audio can be downloaded and the text can be read at the website. An online dictionary and a powerful method for storing new words and phrases for regular review are built into the system. In addition, there are pronunciation and writing correction sections which are unique and practical.

Members of The Linguist can communicate with other learners and native speakers using instant messaging and email, voice-chat, video-chat or even face to face meetings. Members organize different events, with or without native speaker coaches. In this convivial learning community, it is up to the members to take the initiative. There is, however, a recommended plan of study.



## Focus On Input First

As a language learner, you want to learn to express yourself comfortably in a new language. This is certainly achievable. Before you can express yourself, however, you need to absorb a great deal of your new language through listening, reading, and learning words and phrases in a systematic way. Therefore, you should focus first on gaining the right language input.

Except for a small amount of beginner material, all the content on *The Linguist* is real language and not artificial content designed for language learners. You are able to share in the lives of real native speakers. You can select items where the background is familiar and of interest. The *Linguist* system even tells you which content items are at your level of vocabulary and language skill. You can build your own language curriculum and will not need any textbooks. Let's look at the different ways you can get the necessary input in your new language.

### Listening

The first thing to do is to listen. My experience with learning Chinese, Japanese and other languages has confirmed to me that the best way to improve fluency and comprehension is the seemingly passive activity of listening over and over to understandable content. This activity allows you to expand your language skills in a non-stressful way. Listening is not just for beginners. I still listen to my favourite tapes in languages that I already speak well: in my car, while walking or jogging, or doing chores around the house. You can always improve pronunciation, rhythm, vocabulary and fluency.

Start by choosing content at your level and just listen. If you are a beginner, you may choose short items of a few lines. Later you

will be able to handle content of two to five minutes in length. As you progress you will want to listen to content that is twenty minutes in length or even longer. Listen to the same content over and over. The subject should be of interest, the voices pleasing to you, and the level not too difficult. The more familiar the background, the easier it will be for you to understand.

Get in the habit of listening frequently: in the morning, during the day and in the evening. Make sure you get a convenient portable listening device such as a Minidisc recorder, MP3 player, or CD player. Take the trouble to learn how to download content and then record it onto your portable device. This way you do not have to buy CDs or tapes but can quickly download what you want. You don't need to sit in a room beside a tape recorder like I did when I was learning in the late 1960s. Nor should you just sit in front of your computer listening to the content from *The Linguist*. Do as I did when I learned Cantonese at the age of fifty-five. Take your lessons with you when shopping, driving, exercising, washing the dishes and cleaning the garage. That is how to accumulate the necessary exposure to the language.

When you first listen to new content, you need only get used to the sounds. Try to get a sense for the rhythm. Do not worry if you do not understand all of it. Listen a few times without reading the text. Then read the text carefully, look up new words in an online dictionary, and save new words and phrases to a list for later review.

Even after you basically understand a text, you need to listen, over and over, to make this content part of your subconscious. You may have to read the text again and you will certainly

review the new words and phrases many times. But mostly you should listen.

Especially in the early stages, focus on a small amount of content and get used to it, rather than trying to listen to constantly changing content. By listening to the same content repeatedly you will get better at hearing where one word or phrase ends and the next one begins. You will also start to recognize familiar words when you listen to new content. Let the phrases ring in your mind even after you stop listening. Repeat certain phrases out loud. Try to imitate the correct pronunciation.

Repetitive listening is like physical training. You are training your mind to process the new language. Short, frequent listening sessions can be better than fewer longer sessions. Try to listen for one hour a day, broken into short segments of ten to thirty minutes at a time.

I have never been in favour of modern audiovisual learning materials such as computer assisted interactive games or other tests and quizzes which create artificial learning environments. I did not enjoy being tested on my comprehension of what I was listening to. I resisted questions that forced me to try to remember what I had heard. I preferred to listen again, or to listen to new material, or to engage in a general conversation on the subject of my listening. I always felt that natural communication was a more effective way to learn.

Listening is real communication. When you are listening, you are absorbed in a pure language environment. You have to use the sounds of the language to imagine the meaning. Repetitive listening is an ideal learning environment, as long as you choose

content of interest to you, content that you want to understand. You should build up an ever-expanding library of such material as part of a lifelong language learning strategy.

## Reading

It is said that some people are visual learners and some people learn better by hearing. But all learners can benefit from doing both. Reading a lot is essential to achieving fluency in a new language. To read a lot you must make it enjoyable by finding material to read that is interesting. Our website opens up a limitless source of interesting reading material, consisting of our own content and the full range of articles, e-books and other material that is accessible via the Internet, and which our unique functionality makes accessible to the learner.

At first you need to read to understand what you are listening to and to reinforce your learning. As you progress in your learning, you will read to gain new vocabulary and to learn about the culture and other subjects in your new language. Get in the habit of reading new content in an electronic text format on your computer. On the computer you can access software dictionaries and create a database for words and phrases. This will make it easier to read and understand unfamiliar material and ensure your reading contributes to your vocabulary growth.

Reading should be a growing part of your learning activities. As your vocabulary and confidence increase you will actually start to enjoy reading conventional print versions of books and periodicals in the new language. When reading away from the computer, you should ignore the few words you do not know and just enjoy yourself. I sometimes found it a struggle to read in a foreign language when there were so many words I did not understand. If I was interested enough in the content I would

persevere. Gradually my ability to read in a number of languages improved. I now read these languages for information and enjoyment rather than as a learning task. Whether you are a native speaker or a non-native speaker, reading widely will enhance your ability to express yourself clearly and eloquently.

## **Learning Words and Phrases**

When I studied languages, I had to search bookstores for language readers with vocabulary lists in order to avoid the time consuming activity of using a conventional dictionary. But these vocabulary lists were not customized to my needs, and the content in these readers was often not interesting to me. Many of the words on the vocabulary list were known to me, whereas words that I did not understand were often not explained.

There was no way for the editor of the book to predict what I knew and did not know. While reading, I would constantly refer to these vocabulary lists as a crutch, instead of developing the important ability to guess at the meaning of a word from the content around it. Using these word lists was a necessary evil. It enabled me to read new material but it also distracted me in my reading. However, the biggest problem with these word lists was that I would quickly forget most of the words on the list.

Working to expand your vocabulary is a fundamental language learning task and one that is easily measured. You may need to learn more than 10,000 words and phrases to reach a university or professional level of fluency. In The Linguist system you can measure your own steady progress towards your own vocabulary goal. I think this is an important motivator.

Learning new words and phrases can be frustrating. New words are easy to forget and complex words and phrases can have

subtle shades of meaning which vary depending on context. Vocabulary learning is often handled in an inefficient manner by learners. Learners look words up in a dictionary and then forget them. They write lists which they never refer to. They have no record of what they have learned, and what they still need to learn. Often learners study isolated lists of words and phrases in the hope that they will remember them for tests. There is an absence of method, measurement and planning. At The Linguist we have developed an entirely new approach to the learning of words and phrases that dramatically speeds up language learning.

The Linguist does not provide vocabulary lists with each lesson. You must take the initiative. Just as you choose what to listen to and read, you also decide which words and phrases from your listening and reading will be most useful to you. By choosing your own vocabulary items rather than being spoon-fed, you will remember them better.

For this to work you must take advantage of the benefits of electronic text. By reading on the computer you can obtain instant explanations and translations of new words by using dictionary software. You can enter new words and phrases into your own personal database, where they can be managed in many useful ways to enhance learning. You can create customized lists of these words and phrases, based on subject matter, function in the sentence, or root words. Such customized lists drawn from your listening and reading are far more useful than the “Word Books” and “Phrase Books” that are sold widely to language learners. For a proper explanation of how this system works, you will have to visit [www.thelinguist.com](http://www.thelinguist.com).

As well as acquiring new words, you also have to learn to identify new phrases that can help you to speak like a native. These phrases can be any group of two or more words that you feel will be useful for you to express yourself. Because you choose these phrases, they will be more meaningful to you than phrases that are provided out of context. By following The Linguist process you will make these phrases a part of your daily language. As you become accustomed to using them, you not only acquire strings of new words, you also naturally acquire correct grammar.

The Linguist does not teach grammar rules or give grammar tests. Grammar is an abstraction, a theoretical explanation of the function of words. Grammar represents a standard of good practice and can be a useful reference, one which many learners like to rely on. There are many good grammar books around, and therefore we have deliberately left grammar out of our system. Trying to memorize the rules of grammar can be a distraction from learning the language. Grammatical explanations often introduce an artificial level of theory, with new technical terms that can be more confusing than helpful. Especially in the early stages, you should not let a concern about grammatical accuracy prevent you from communicating in the new language.

It is important to learn correct language, but this can only be achieved after intense exposure to language input. Rather than writing grammar tests, you are better to write freely and have your writing corrected. This is explained in more detail later.

Focus your efforts on phrases as the essential building blocks of language. This will improve your structure and style. You will have an easier time understanding the spoken language and you

will sound more like a native speaker if you have trained yourself in phrases. This emphasis on phrases starts with the first “how are you?” and continues right up to the most advanced stage.



## Learn To Express Yourself

In the study of a new language there comes a point when you successfully express your thoughts on something that is important to you. You feel a sense of triumph. Unfortunately this happy moment is often followed by another encounter where you find yourself tongue-tied and unable to really say what you want to say. Comfortable fluency takes time and practice. It is the ultimate goal and is certainly achievable for everyone.

To express yourself in a new language you must first absorb the language by listening, reading and learning vocabulary as explained above. These activities will always account for about three quarters of your effort while you are working to achieve a basic level of fluency. But from the beginning you also have to work on your skills of expression: pronunciation, writing and conversation. Developing these skills requires a conscious commitment to regular and patient practice.

### Pronunciation

Pronunciation should be a major area of emphasis from the beginning, and throughout the first period of studying a new language. You should set high standards and work hard on pronunciation practice on your own. Many learners do not put enough deliberate effort into pronunciation and resign themselves to speaking as if they were pronouncing their native language.

Any person can learn to pronounce any language, regardless of nationality. Some people may achieve better results than others, but we can all get pretty close if we work at it. Mandarin Chinese, with its four tones, is very different from English. Nevertheless, I was determined to master Mandarin

pronunciation, and to learn to speak like a native. I believe I have come pretty close, perhaps because I did not consider the possibility that I could not do so. In fact, I made pronunciation the major focus of my early effort, and I recommend this to you as well. It takes longer to get a feel for speaking in a grammatically correct manner, but you can work on pronunciation from the beginning.

At The Linguist we provide you with audio files of the basic sounds of the language using the five hundred or so most commonly used words. You will be able to hear and repeat examples of these sounds while reinforcing your knowledge of this basic vocabulary. There are also texts using this basic vocabulary where each sentence is an individual audio file that you can repeat or download for repetitive listening. Using this and other material at our website, your pronunciation activity should consist of four steps to train yourself to pronounce correctly:

First, LISTEN repeatedly to material within your basic range of comprehension, concentrating on pronunciation. Listen carefully to the intonation. Try to become conscious of the rhythm and breathing pattern. Try to identify separate words and phrases. With repetition, this gradually becomes easier. The language sounds strange at first but will become more familiar with repetitive listening.

Second, REPEAT individual words and phrases out loud, both during and after listening. You will remember certain phrases. Try to say them over and over again to yourself while doing other tasks. You will have trouble with certain sounds. Work especially hard to master them. Then practice repeating phrases and sentences with the proper emphasis and intonation.

Third, READ sentences and paragraphs out loud, first very slowly and then more quickly, and always in a loud voice. Imagine you are a native speaker. Exaggerate - pretend you are an actor. Have fun with it! You should alternate between reading unfamiliar material, and reading something that you have written and had corrected.

Fourth, RECORD your own pronunciation and compare it to a native speaker. This will train you to hear the differences in pronunciation between yourself and a native speaker. You have to hear it to be able to pronounce it! Recording your own pronunciation also serves as a record of your progress as your pronunciation improves.

The sounds, the intonation and even the writing system of your native language can influence your pronunciation of the second language. You have to force yourself to train the muscles of your mouth to make the new sounds accurately. You may have to breathe differently to pronounce the new language correctly. Work at imitating the new rhythm. The more you are able to establish freedom from the influence of your native language, including the influence on pronunciation, the better you will learn the second language.

Learn to be your own toughest pronunciation critic when you are working on it alone, and then forget about it and be relaxed when speaking to others. People are unlikely to comment on your pronunciation, as long as you are easily understood. Remember that perfection is not the goal, just comfortable communication.

## Writing

The ability to write clearly is required for entrance to university and for many workplace situations. Some learners may not feel it is necessary for them to work on their writing if they only want to learn to speak in the new language. However, I recommend that everyone make the effort to write regularly, even if only a little at a time. Writing is an excellent way to train yourself in the proper use of the language. You have the time to express yourself carefully when you write, whereas in conversation you are under greater pressure and need to be more spontaneous.

When you write, take the time to try to write correctly. Make a plan of what you are going to write. If you do not organize your thoughts ahead of time you may not make sense writing in a foreign language. When correcting English I am always amazed at non-native speakers who just dash off emails and other texts without even using a spell-checker. Anyone working as a professional in an international company has to write correctly and understandably, otherwise it is the very image of the company that is damaged. If you are unable to do this for yourself, use the services of a text correcting service.

If you have trouble with verb tenses, think through the time when each action is taking place. Use the phrases you have mastered when you write, instead of simply translating from your native language. Many of the most common problems relating to word order, choice of words, prepositions, verb tenses and verb agreement can be eliminated by building your written language around the phrases you have learned.

Until you are fluent, try to speak the way you write and write the way you speak, in short, simple and complete sentences. Do

not speak in a casual way and then try to write stilted or complicated prose. Even if native speakers are sloppy in their speech and use a lot of slang, as a learner you cannot afford to do so. You do not have a strong enough foundation in the new language. You will need to be aware of casual or slang speech in order to understand it. But you are best to avoid it until you are quite fluent and really sure when to use it. Even though it is hard work, writing is an excellent way to develop genuine eloquence in a new language.

If your speech is similar to your written style, each will reinforce the other. It is less stressful to accept corrections of what you write than to have your spoken language corrected. The corrections in your written work can then be applied to your spoken language. While spoken language is more forgiving than written language, the same phrases and words can be used effectively in both.

You should have your writing corrected regularly and your mistakes analyzed and measured. The Linguist keeps a statistical record of the kinds of errors you make most frequently and recommends new phrases to replace the incorrect ones. You can save these new phrases into your database. Later you can create custom lists of words and phrases in your database to use when writing and speaking. In this way you can make sure that your expression in the new language becomes richer and more accurate, incorporating the new vocabulary that you are learning.

It is worth considering the self-teaching methods of Heinrich Schliemann (1822-1890) the world-famous businessman turned archeologist who discovered the site of ancient Troy. As reported by Arnold Toynbee in *A Study of History* (Oxford

University Press 1963), Schliemann was able to express his thoughts orally and in writing after about six weeks of self-study, in Modern Greek, Ancient Greek, Persian, Arabic, and Turkish. His method consisted of “reading a great deal aloud without making a translation, taking a lesson every day, constantly writing essays upon subjects of interest, correcting these under the supervision of a teacher, learning them by heart, and repeating in the next lesson what was corrected on the previous day.” The motivated learner who is prepared to work every day can achieve great things. Fortunately language learning is much easier today than it was in the 19th century.

When you receive a corrected version of something you have written, take the time to look at it. Read it aloud several times. Focus on the corrected phrases. Make them a part of your way of speaking in the new language. Especially if you do not have easy access to native speakers for conversation, this can be an inexpensive and yet intense learning activity. You can improve your vocabulary, sentence structure, pronunciation and general speaking skills. You can prepare yourself for what most people find the most enjoyable part of language learning: conversation with the native speaker.

## **Conversation**

Your ultimate goal is to interact comfortably with native speakers. At an early stage you will want to try out what you have learned in order to build up your confidence and fluency. But conversation and speaking skills develop gradually and cannot be rushed. Do not be in a hurry or put pressure on yourself. Do not worry about how you sound, just focus on communicating. You will often feel that you are struggling, when in fact you are communicating quite successfully. The key to successful conversation is to try to relax and enjoy the

experience. Focus on the meaning you are trying to communicate, not on how well you are doing. Do not think that your grammar and pronunciation are being judged, just try to get your meaning across. Your listeners want to understand you. When you are successful in communicating, give yourself a pat on the back.

Use the phrases you know and build your conversation around these phrases. If you are using The Linguist system, you should print weekly lists of new words and phrases from your learning and deliberately try to use them. You will find that you can use your newly learned phrases as convenient components and build your conversation around them. Using them in conversation will also help you confirm that you really know how to use them. Your ability to express yourself will improve as you continue your intensive listening, reading, vocabulary learning, pronunciation and writing activities.

You will need to make an effort to find people to talk with. If you live where the language is spoken, you may have friends or co-workers who are native speakers. You may be able to enroll in courses offered in the language you are learning, but on subjects other than the language itself. This and other activities can bring you into casual and friendly contact with native speakers who share your interests. If you do not have ready opportunities to meet native speakers, you will have to organize small groups of learners with or without native speaker coaches to meet and discuss subjects of common interest.

You can organize meetings through The Linguist website, an international community of native speakers, language learners and language coaches. Members arrange meetings, voice-chat sessions, lessons or other events on subjects of interest with

people all over the world. These encounters are for interaction, feedback and stimulus. They should be enjoyable and not stressful. They can vary from serious forums on current affairs, business or academic subjects, to more relaxed social exchanges.

A formal language school can also offer excellent interaction and feedback, but one word of caution is necessary. Too many people think that simply attending language school will enable them to learn a language. In fact, whether you are attending formal classes or not, you will do most of your learning on your own. You direct your own listening and reading activity. You work on learning and relearning words and phrases, you train yourself to pronounce correctly, and you work on your writing. When you choose the activity that suits your mood, your studies are more intense than when you are forced to follow the teacher's agenda.



## Create Intensity

Learning a new language is most enjoyable when you are learning quickly, which requires intensity. In physical training you often hear the expression “no pain, no gain.” Only intensely overworking certain muscles will bring about the increased strength and performance of those muscles. Casual exercise will not do more than maintain an existing level of fitness. The same is true of language training. Your goal should be constant improvement towards fluency, not just maintenance.

You need to overwork the language processing capability of your brain by constant and frequent repetition during a period of intense learning. This period may vary from three months to twelve months depending on your starting point and your goals. During this period you must maintain a sustained commitment to your task. Fluency cannot be attained without sweat forming on your brow. It can still be enjoyable, but just as in physical exercise, the methods of training must be efficient. In fact, the greater the efficiency of the training methods the more intense the learning experience, and therefore the better the results.

The greatest intensity of learning is achieved when studying on your own, or when involved in communicating on a subject of interest with a native speaker. More than five people in a classroom is distracting and even a one-on-one class can be stressful if you are not in the mood. The more you can control what you are studying, and the more you follow your interests and inclinations, the faster you will learn.

For this to work, you need structure and discipline in your studies. You have to study a minimum amount every day. You

have to measure your progress. This kind of structure is provided at The Linguist.

## **Invest in the Tools**

If you are serious about learning the language, make sure you equip yourself with the necessary tools and learn how to use them. This initial investment is more important than spending time and money on additional language classes.

The time and money you have available for language learning is limited, so go out and buy reliable listening equipment to take with you wherever you go. The likelihood that you will put the required amount of time into listening increases with the portability of the listening device. Also, use good earphones. The effectiveness of listening increases significantly with good sound quality.

I own a portable CD player, a Minidisc player with small microphone, a portable audio cassette player, and a small hand-held computer with built-in MP3 player and microphone. With this equipment at my disposal, I am ready no matter what form the audio content comes in. I can buy cassette language systems and CD based audio books, download MP3 files, or record meetings, interviews and lectures for later listening. I can also record my own voice and upload files to a computer.

Choose what works for you. Decide how much you want to spend, and what the greatest source of your audio material will be. Language content from the Internet can be downloaded into MP3 players or MD players. Most new computers let you burn CDs. Most audio material you buy today is in CD or cassette form, but the quality and shelf-life of CDs is better than cassettes and in language learning, sound quality is

important. The MP3 player and MD player have the great advantage of being very small with high quality sound. But the choice is up to you.

To be a cost effective linguist today, you will need a personal computer and high speed Internet access. If you do not have this access at home you should identify a hub you can use for downloading and accessing content. This can be a library, your school, a friend or an Internet Café. Very often this hub will offer instructions on how to access the content and how to download.

You will also need a good online or offline software dictionary which gives you instant explanations in the language you are studying, as well as the all-important translation into your own language. Contrary to the view of some language teachers, I have always preferred to see the translation of a new word into my own language, rather than decipher an explanation in the language I was learning.

However, a dictionary can only provide you with a partial meaning of a new word. It will take time and significant exposure to the word in a natural context before you acquire a wider sense of the meaning of the word and the confidence to use it properly. You can also expect to forget whatever you look up in a dictionary pretty quickly. That is why it is so important to save all new words into a system like The Linguist's database for further review and study, in conjunction with your reading and listening.

Before you decide where you are going to study a language, make sure you are equipped to succeed as an independent language learner!

## Set Clear Goals

To succeed in most activities you need to set goals. How much time are you willing to commit each day, and for how long? What skill level do you want to achieve? How many words do you know and how many do you want to know? How fluent do you want to be? Do you need to participate in business meetings in the new language? Do you need to follow university lectures? How close to native level do you want your pronunciation to be? Do you need to write business reports or school reports in the new language?

You may decide that you can commit to two hours per day for a period of six months or one hour a day for twelve months. This degree of commitment would mean a total of more than three hundred fifty hours and should produce a language breakthrough if the study methods are effective. During this period of concentration, you will have to sacrifice familiar activities in order to fulfill your commitment. If you develop the habit of listening at various times during the day, doing some casual reading, watching television, spending time in more dedicated study and having regular conversation sessions on subjects of interest, you can achieve the required level of intensity.

The Linguist will help you diagnose your needs and set your goals. We will also measure your progress towards your goals. But in the end you will be the one to know when you have reached your target. You will know how good your pronunciation is, or how comfortable you are in reading or expressing yourself. You will know when you are a linguist. You will then realize that you are never really satisfied with your level. You will continue to want to improve, but by pursuing

your own interest in the language, the learning process will always be enjoyable and satisfying.





## A Final Word

In 2003 Mike Weir won the Masters Golf Tournament, probably the most prestigious golf tournament in the world. To defeat the world's best golfers required skill, determination and hard work over a long period of time. But above all it required an attitude. When Mike Weir was thirteen years old he wrote a letter to Jack Nicklaus, at that time the world's number one golfer. Mike, who was a left-handed golfer, asked Jack if he should continue left-handed, or try to switch to being right-handed, since almost all successful professional golfers were right-handed. Jack was gracious enough to reply, saying that Mike should stay left-handed: in other words he should follow what was natural for him. (Zhuangzi, the Taoist philosopher who inspired our crooked tree logo, would have said the same!)

What impressed me about this story is Mike's commitment. He believed in himself and felt it quite appropriate to ask the world's greatest player (whom he did not know) to resolve an important question for him. He dared to write to the king of golf, and the king sent him an answer. Powered with that sort of attitude, Mike was able to overcome many obstacles and finally achieve greatness in his chosen field of endeavour.

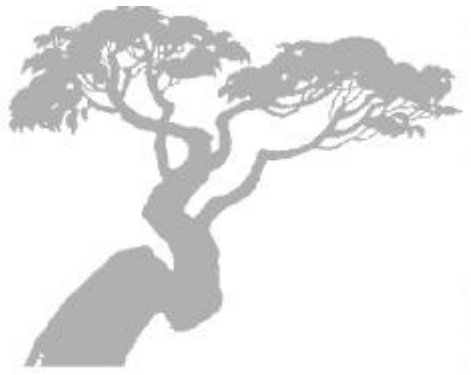
You have read about the attitudes necessary for successful language learning. You have a description of effective

techniques for acquiring language skills. You know what has to be done. Now it is up to you to believe in yourself and do it.

If you create the right habits, you will succeed. The rewards will more than compensate your efforts. Once you start learning languages you will not stop with just one. At The Linguist we will be continuing to add languages, while at the same time working to improve the range of content and learning tools we offer to our members.

Come and join us! I look forward to getting to know you at [www.thelinguist.com](http://www.thelinguist.com).





## APPENDIX

### For Immigrants and Potential Immigrants to Canada

I was initially motivated to write this book after seeing the difficulty that many recent immigrants experienced in Canada because of a lack of language and cultural skills. The following background on Canada may be useful to you if you are living in Canada as an immigrant or if you are contemplating emigrating to Canada.

Immigrant receiving countries like Canada and the United States consist of people whose families have come from many countries. Language becomes a very important unifying force and a marker of identity in these countries.

#### **A History of English Speaking Canada**

English speaking Canada is a new nation that has undergone constant evolution. The first inhabitants of the area that is now Canada came from Asia over 10,000 years ago and eventually spread out over all of North and South America. In Canada, these people were nomadic in some areas and settled farmers and fishermen in other areas. In the millennia that followed, nobody knows for sure how many different people may have visited North America. Certainly the Vikings did about one thousand years ago, and fishermen from Western Europe starting coming to the area off the East Coast of Canada about

six hundred years ago to fish for cod. In Eastern Canada, small permanent settlements of English and French speaking people from Europe eventually expanded across the North American continent, driven by the search for furs and by the desire to find farmland.

Canada became a colony of the British Empire in 1763. Soon after, as a result of the American Revolution, Canada received a major influx of Americans who wished to remain loyal to the British Crown: the United Empire Loyalists. This group determined how Canadians speak English today. The majority of immigrants to Canada for the first half of the 19th century were British Protestants who reinforced strong feelings of loyalty to the British Empire, opposition to the United States, and a sense of rivalry with the entrenched French speaking Catholic society of Quebec. The original constitution of Canada was known as the British North America Act.

Later immigration from other source countries caused attitudes to evolve. Most Canadians have gradually come to accept the increasingly varied makeup of Canada's evolving mainstream society. But still Canadians cherish common symbols, institutions and a way of life that are specific to Canada. They expect most immigrants to accept this Canadian way of life as a condition of making Canada their home.

The northern environment, the legacy of the aboriginal peoples, lingering Imperial British attachments, rivalry and accommodation with the French-Canadians, and the ever-changing influence of foreign-born people have all contributed to the evolution of English Canadian identity.

The image of the northern landscape remains a strong identification Canadians have with their country, even if most Canadians live in cities today. The landscape paintings of the early 20th century “Group of Seven” painters, and symbols like the Maple Leaf and the Beaver are examples of this identification with the rugged natural environment as distinctively Canadian.

Ice hockey has been elevated to the rank of a national ritual. (Not all Canadians like hockey, but everyone recognizes the association of hockey with Canada.) It is appropriate that the hockey teams which created patriotic pride in Canada by winning gold for Canada at the 2002 Winter Olympic games were composed of players with very diverse ancestries. To most Canadians, these players are just Canadian hockey heroes. The question of the ancestral origin of players with names like Yzerman, Iginla, Sakic, Kariya, Gretzky, Jovanovski, Sunohara, or Wickenheiser is simply not important.

The cement that holds English speaking Canadians together is the English language itself. Even though Canadian culture is now truly an amalgamation of influences from all over the world, the English-Canadian language is uniform across the country and is less varied than the pronunciation found in Britain, the US or the Southern Hemisphere. Canadian English is a very useful version of English for non-native speakers. It is easily understood and not out of place anywhere in the world.

### **The Immigrant Experience**

English speaking Canada does not have a powerful distinctiveness. The ever-increasing variety of people who make up English Canada has meant the decline in importance of British Protestantism, the British Empire and British

institutions. There is no longer a typical Canadian name, nor ethnic origin, nor religion. This lack of clear markers is what makes Canadian culture so accessible. Even the relative neutrality of the Canadian accent and the lack of regional accents make it easier for newcomers to blend into Canadian society.

In contrast, older established national groups in the world are more easily identified by common family names or identifiable physical appearance. People from these older cultures take pride in imagining their history going back for hundreds or thousands of years. The new immigrant from these older societies can have trouble stepping outside the ancestral culture which has such a powerful appeal. Often, in the mind of the new immigrant, the reality of Canadian life is contrasted with an idealized version of the society left behind. This can make the immigrant reluctant to join in the new language and society.

The children of immigrants, on the other hand, are typically more interested in just fitting into their new surroundings and new identity, and they often learn English very quickly. They become native speakers of the new language.



Human beings feel closest to family and kin. Beyond the family, however, the nature of the “in group” can vary depending on circumstances. Anthony Smith, who directed my older son Eric’s post graduate study at the London School of Economics, wrote an important book entitled *National Identity* (Penguin). In it, Smith distinguishes two visions of national identity, which have been promoted by ruling and intellectual elites in modern times.

**In one vision of national identity:**

*...nations must have a measure of common culture and a civic ideology, a set of common understandings and aspirations, sentiments and ideas, that bind the population together in their homeland. The task of ensuring a common public, mass culture has been handed over to the agencies of popular socialization, notably the public system of education and the mass media.*

In the other vision of national identity:

*Whether you stayed in your community or emigrated to another, you remained ineluctably, organically, a member of the community of your birth and were forever stamped by it. A nation, in other words, was first and foremost a community of common descent....or rather presumed descent.*

Canada is of the first kind. As the nature of human societies continues to evolve, I am convinced that attempts to freeze people's identity based on their ancestry will prove vain.

---

When you emigrate, you are making the decision that your descendants will change national identity. Your children and grandchildren may learn to speak the ancestral language and develop an interest in the ancestral culture, but this is not certain. If they do so, it will likely be as people who are culturally Canadian.

The difference in attitude between those of the older generation of immigrants who want to maintain their traditions and their local-born children who want to focus on their new country can create a generation gap. I experienced this in my own family when I was growing up.

While it is normal for people to be proud of their origins, it is just as normal for people to want to belong to the society in which they live. National identity is not automatically passed on to the next generation, from parents to children. It has never been that simple. Traditional nationalism is created by ideology, mythology and politically motivated history writing. National myths offer images of ancestral figures from which all subsequent members of the community are supposedly descended. People are persuaded that their identity can be projected back to these ancestors, who, if they existed at all in reality, were certainly different from their present day descendants. Canadian identity is not like this, since it draws its strength from the present and a belief in a common future.

Over the last one hundred fifty years the foreign-born share of Canada's population has usually been over fifteen percent of the total. Historically, immigrants have at first encountered difficulty finding appropriate employment and fully fitting into society. Typically these problems disappear with time and by the second generation the “newcomers” are Canadian in outlook.

### **Job Opportunities**

In the past, there were job opportunities for immigrants in agriculture, mining, forestry or other manual occupations. Today this is not the case. Ninety-four percent of immigrants settle in metropolitan areas, especially in Canada's three largest cities. The well-paid manual jobs are fewer and more difficult to find. On the other hand, there is an anticipated shortfall of skilled workers as the present baby-boom generation retires. In some areas and job categories, this shortfall is already here.

For the kind of skilled professionals required in health services, in education, and in other modern sectors of the economy, a comfortable knowledge of English is essential. A technical expert or engineer, no matter how well qualified, needs to work with other people and provide leadership. This requires familiarity with the local culture. It is impossible to overstate the importance of Canadian language and cultural skills in the workplace.

The point is sometimes made that immigrants bring with them the language and cultural skills of their homeland which can create commercial opportunities for Canada. This statement is true only to a very limited extent. In fact the overwhelming majority of jobs are oriented towards the Canadian and North American market, and to a lesser degree to the other major economies of the world in Europe and Japan. If you count only on employment using your original language and culture, you are severely limiting your opportunities.

By and large, employers are looking for people who not only understand written English, but who are comfortable communicating in English, and who can relate confidently with co-workers and customers. This requires competent English language skills and familiarity with Canadian mainstream culture. In reality, most jobs require people who can perform comfortably in the common language and culture.

Unfortunately, a significant percentage of the recently arrived skilled independent immigrants have difficulties communicating in English. This is not different from the situation fifty years ago when my parents came to Canada. This phenomenon costs the individual immigrants and the Canadian economy. It inhibits the full utilization of these people's skills in a

productive way. What is different today is that immigrants tend to concentrate in a few cities, with the result that there is a growing number of children born in Canada to immigrant families who also have difficulty speaking English.

At present, employers are not involved in the immigrant recruitment and settlement process. It is left to the Government Immigration Department to arbitrarily fix the number of immigrants desired and then try as hard as possible to achieve that goal. Immigration officials determine who they think is likely to find employment in Canada, but they are not very successful in this selection process.

Many of the recent skilled immigrants have difficulty finding appropriate employment. They often turn to various government funded social service organizations for assistance. The result is a large number of frustrated and disappointed immigrants who leave stable employment and a comfortable social status behind in their country of origin to find underemployment in Canada.

Take charge of your own language learning and don't rely on others to teach you. An independent, self-reliant and proactive approach to your language learning will help you in all aspects of integrating into your new country. This will be reflected in a more positive attitude generally that will help you find and keep good employment. It is your English communication skills, not your test results, that will help you become comfortably established in your new country.