

Off Piste: One tongue, very tied

17 July 2008

In decades of linguinsania, Deirdre McCloskey has tried to learn a second language - everything from French, Greek and Latin to German, Scots Gaelic and Sanskrit - with no success. But she's still not resigned to monolingualism

In 1925, Virginia Woolf wrote "On Not Knowing Greek", the point of which was that the Greeks are very different from you and me. Yes, Virginia, they spoke Greek. Yet even Virginia's friend John Maynard Keynes - a mere economist - could read that philosophic tongue with ease.

I, alas, cannot. When Richard Posner, who is now a distinguished federal judge, started teaching at the Law School of the University of Chicago, he began studying Greek at the institution's undergraduate college. He learnt it pretty well, or so I, over in economics, was told. The feat impressed me so much that a few years later, when I was at the University of Iowa, I started learning Latin.

Or, rather, relearning it. At school I had taken four years with little lasting effect. I nonetheless won the Latin Prize (an English version of Don Quixote, perhaps to encourage one to go on to a daughter language), but only because among the mere three students in my fourth-year Latin class I wrote English at least coherently. I would get a rough idea in the assigned passage of what Cicero or Virgil was on about, then close the book and write English. My actual Latin was derisory. Gerunds and their proper use? Don't ask me.

And that's my sad theme. Despite an elite education, then 40 years spent teaching across from the departments of various languages and numerous trips to countries whose inhabitants speak in unusual ways, for all my burning shame, I - like so many American and British and Australian and even Canadian academics - am embarrassingly monolingual. I have never mastered a foreign tongue. Not even French, for goodness' sake.

I suppose you are similarly embarrassed. The chances are good. That is, they are good unless you are like a maddening physicist friend of mine at the University of Iowa, who one summer learnt Italian out of Italian Made Easy before going to a conference in Sicily. Thereafter he spoke it more or less fluently in what I, oversophisticated from still another misaimed shot at learning the language of Dante, could hear was an appalling accent.

In my life I have studied, in at least semester-long classes ... let's see ... in order: Latin, German, Greek, French, Latin (again, I said), Italian and Dutch. I have dabbled repeatedly in German. My second shot at German was in graduate school, although it was not under compulsion, since Harvard University had just then made one of its contributions to civilisation among its graduates in economics by claiming that mathematics and statistics were languages, and therefore the economists didn't need to learn any for their PhDs. Not even English. My new spouse, before going off to exhausting work at Massachusetts General Hospital quite early each morning, agreed to join me in learning to sing "Wenn' komm', wenn' komm'/ Wenn' wiederum, wiederum

komm" - that, and the Canadian Air Force exercises. I myself, leisured scholar that I was, would then return to bed. The German experiment lasted to about halfway through the first tape. I have dabbled, too, in French (again and again and again), Scots Gaelic, Irish, Norwegian, Swedish, Sanskrit, Hebrew, modern Greek, Portuguese, Afrikaans.

You can perhaps detect a madness here. If you saw my collection of books in languages that I, at one point or another, was excitedly persuaded I was about to learn, there would be no "perhaps" about it. Polish. Yiddish. Tok Pisin. Call it "linguinsania" or "glottomania". (You see the fruit of hundreds of hours of studying Latin and Greek.) Quae tanta insania, Deirdre.

The height of the insania was a scheme I would fantasise about, aged 45 or so, to study simultaneously Greek, Latin and Sanskrit, thereby acquiring a working knowledge of Proto-Indo-European and deducing all the languages from Calcutta to Cornwall. A simple matter, you see. In fleeting moments of lucidity I realised that this would not work, especially since I had not learnt well even one of the ancient three, or any daughters or granddaughters of Proto-Indo-European.

I once came across an inspiring inscription over the medieval city hall in Gouda in the Netherlands that amazingly I could read as if I actually knew Latin. It advised "Audite et alteram partem" - listen you-all, even to the other side. (It seems rather more profound in Latin than in English.) So with the help of my stacks of Latin dictionaries at home I undertook to translate a life-enhancing remark by my high-school driving instructor, "Aim high in steering", or Intendete alto in gubernando. Words to live by. I have it hanging in large Happy Birthday letters in my office, to inspire students and to remind myself. But is the Latin right? Should it be alto or alte? How about that gubernando? Oh, good Lord, I don't know.

The high-aiming notion of studying simultaneously all the languages important for my culture haunted me for a while, and I worked out a plan, if the MacArthur Foundation would but smile on this obviously meritorious candidate, for devoting a year to the study of languages. The notion was to rise up finally and slay the beast, and cease going around feeling like an idiot because I did not really grasp the French *passer le temps*. Under the plan, I was to study four or five languages ten hours a day. I had a schedule worked out, according to the US Foreign Service's standards of how many hours it took to master this or that language.

Twenty years after the motion died for want of a second, I tried mightily to learn Dutch. (I've lived in the Netherlands for a total of three years but I still can't read a newspaper, so you can imagine the shame. Dutch, reckons the Foreign Service quite correctly, is not a difficult language for an English speaker.) But I found that ten hours a day of book learning of a language is simply impossible, at any rate in one's sixties. I worked hard in 2004, very hard, at *het Nederlands*, with classmates at the University of Amsterdam, mostly kids in their twenties who were learning the language because their lovers spoke it or because they needed it for their PhD dissertations in the history of science.

The kids worked half as hard as I did, drinking a lot of an evening, and yet they became twice as proficient. That works out (I am a quantitative type) at four times more efficiency in language learning if you are in your twenties rather than in your sixties. The final examination included a

long video segment of a lecture about economics, and yet I could not understand what the fellow was driving at. I still have the unopened envelope announcing the results of the examination. I will open it when I can carry on a conversation in Dutch about unemployment and price controls.

The Netherlands is a trying place to visit if you are ashamed of being monolingual. I suggest you stay away from it. I have only once encountered a native Dutch person who could not speak English. Apparently there are a few hiding out in the rural east of the country, but not in the places I frequented. Once I was lost in Amsterdam, which is usual, since the place is organised on Einstein's plan of a curved universe. I went up to a policeman and mentioned the name of the street I was seeking. I said in a questioning tone (fortunately that feature of language appears to be universal) merely "Singel?" not "Where is the Singel?" or "Où est la Singel?" So officially the policeman did not know what my native language was. He stretched to his full (considerable) height and answered in smooth, British-accented English, "In which language would you wish me to reply, madam - English, French or German?" The highly distinguished visiting professor of economics and philosophy felt like an idiot. Which, I believe, was the policeman's point.

What makes my monolinguality still more embarrassing is that bi- or tri- or quadri-linguality is rather common among ordinary folk with no academic pretensions. In New Guinea you can't get a husband unless you can talk with the people across the mountain, whose language has evolved and evolved since 40,000BC into something very different from your own. Thus in New Guinea, the lingua franca - and, in an age of English dominance, how that phrase must enrage the French - is the English-based Creole Tok Pisin.

Likewise, in South Africa a few years ago, I had a guide and taxi driver who claimed to be able to speak eight of the 11 official languages of the now thankfully democratic country, including languages with three different kinds of clicks and other amazing vocables. He claimed that he could not speak Afrikaans, as a protest, but I didn't believe him. Yet, to mention Afrikaans - that stripped-down but charming daughter of Dutch with exactly one irregular verb - I must confess that after many months of recent study poor little moi has still not grasped the vowel system. Will someone please tell me whether "ou" is always pronounced like English "ow!" or sometimes as it would seem like English "oh"?

In my seventh decade, I am pretty much resigned to not learning even French. I do encourage multilingual friends with small children to immerse their offspring in all the family's languages. Contrary to the usual objection, it won't confuse them. Little human beings can easily learn four languages. Go to Greece in the summer and have your children play with their cousins. We've all seen the astonishing speed with which children pick up languages. They are trying to save Scots Gaelic, I understand, by opening nursery schools that use the language. That and a branch of the University of the Highlands and Islands at Stornoway (Steornabhagh to you, dear) would do the trick. But you'll have to carry on learning Gaelic without me.

The human ability to learn languages is amazing. In the first year of infancy (infans, you see: not speaking) a chimpanzee raised with a human child is in every way more competent. But then the little human gets into language and the poor chimp in his nappies gets left in the dust. But an elderly university lecturer doesn't have the knack any more. And even a middle-aged one, you can see, was not thus gifted, especially living in America, and far from Hispanics or Quebecois.

Had I been raised in Odessa with a French governess and fled the revolution in 1919 to Romania and thence to university in Vienna, and then left the Anschluss behind for the United States, like my supervisor in graduate school, Alexander Gerschenkron, I would doubtless have been able to pick up, as he did, Swedish in a week and Portuguese in an afternoon.

The trick, unhappily, is to start early. As we say in Chicago about voting: do it early and often. Are you 30 and monolingual? Get to it, as a matter of urgency. An Italian academic doctor was visiting with his family, including his eight-year-old son, and lived next to us in Iowa City. An Icelandic family with three children was visiting the same year across the street. After a couple of months of American public schools - and building a tree house on my property along with my daughter - all the foreign kids, even the little three-year-old Icelandic girl, were chattering away in unaccented English.

One day, the Italian boy was working on the tree house - bang, bang (or, properly, pan, pan?). I thought to go inspect and try out my Italian. "Ciao," I said on approaching. "Come stai?" Ah, yes, I reflected, the correct verb form to address a child - what a scholar! Without a moment's hesitation this blessed boy replied in his perfect English, "How did you learn to speak Italian so well?!"

In a French child, of course, such a remark could be suspected of sarcasm. But gli italiani are wonderfully modest about their elegant tongue and are delighted at any attempts by foreigners to use it. I have often astonished Italians by reciting in a fair accent (much better than my physicist friend, you understand) the first lines of the *Inferno*: "Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita," etc, etc. Great stuff. Unhappily, that's about it. That and "Come sta/stai?" Oh yes, and "Guardate la luna!" learnt from the film *Moonstruck* starring Nicolas Cage.

Oh, well. I suppose I should be thankful that my monolinguality is located in our great English tongue. At Harrow, Churchill remarked, the brighter boys learnt Latin as a duty and Greek as a treat. The slower ones like him learnt merely to write immortal English.

But wait. I forgot yet another of my assaults on language: Old English. Hopeless. But if I could learn Icelandic and Old High German, then by analogy ...

Postscript :

Deirdre McCloskey is distinguished professor of economics, history, English and communication at the University of Illinois at Chicago.