

# Re: Teaching a child three languages

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*Source:* <http://sci.tech-archive.net/Archive/sci.lang/2006-03/msg00555.html>

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- *From:* "Seán O'Leathlóbhair" <jwlawler@xxxxxxxxxx>
  - *Date:* 9 Mar 2006 02:13:09 -0800
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Lee Sau Dan wrote:

"Seán" ==  
Seán  
O'Leathlóbhair  
<jwlawler@xxxxxxxxxx>  
writes:

>> This situation is very similar to Cantonese speakers in HK.  
>> They'll tell the foreigners that Cantonese is so difficult and  
>> so useless to spend time on or to learn seriously. (But they  
>> aren't aware that Cantonese has got more speakers worldwide  
>> than, perhaps, Dutch. "Just a few million speakers" is what  
>> they have in mind. They don't know there are "languages" (not  
>> "dialects") with less than a million speakers. And they don't  
>> know that Cantonese has got tens of millions of speakers.)

Seán> Maybe being near to the huge Mandarin speaking population  
Seán> makes them feel small.

But the Mandarin speaking region is pretty far away from HK. The  
Wu-speaking region is closer, and there used to be quite a few  
Shanghainese-speakers in HK. (Cantonese comes after Mandarin and  
Shanghainese in terms of speaker population.)

Geographically not particularly near, you can't hop on a train and be  
in a Mandarin area in a few hours but I would have expected that the HK  
population are very aware that they are sharing a country with a huge  
population of Mandarin speakers.

Seán> The nervousness applies to the Philippines as well. It is  
Seán> another factor that encourages understanding but not  
Seán> speaking Tagalog. Some Filipinos can speak English but are  
Seán> too shy to speak it to a foreigner. If you can understand  
Seán> but not speak Tagalog you can have a conversation in which

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Seán> you both speak your native language.

Tell this to those who believes that communication is possible only if it is done in one and only one language. Such a scene is not that rare. When children are raised in a place where a non-ancestral language is spoken, it is quite usual that they can understand but not speak the ancestral language, and their parents/grandparents can understand but not speak the local language. Communication between them is usually effected bilingually, with one language in each direction of communication.

I see quite a few of these asymmetric conversations. As you say, they are common in immigrant families.

Seán> Here is my favourite foreigner in Japan story. An  
Seán> ex-colleague speaks Japanese very well. One time he was  
Seán> trying to check into a Ryokan in a small town. The manager  
Seán> seemed reluctant to accept him and gave various reasons why  
Seán> my colleague would not be happy. "We only serve Japanese  
Seán> food" – "I like Japanese food". "We only have traditional  
Seán> Japanese beds" – "I know and like them". Finally: "We only  
Seán> speak Japanese, you would not be able to understand us" –  
Seán> "We have just had this entire conversation in Japanese". He  
Seán> finally gave up, went to a larger town, and stayed in a  
Seán> western style hotel.

I would have insisted! Why stay in a western style hotel when travelling in Japan?

He decided that he was not welcome and did not want to force himself in.

A few years back, I was in Maebashi (a small town in Gunma county 1-hour of bullet train northwest of Japan) for a conference with my Ph.D. supervisor. We have booked a hotel, which I think is meant to mainly serve the locals: the people at the reception didn't speak English; only the manager manages to speak simple English. The people serving breakfast in the dining hall spoke no English, either. (But the advantage is that we have the option of getting a very local, Japanese style breakfast.) I had no problems with that, because I know Kanji's and can speak some simple Japanese. My supervisor and another professor-friend had no problems with the stay, either.

You might not look so out of place as my colleague did.

It is an advantage to learning English. Whatever you look like, people

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will not be surprised if you speak English.

Seán> A similar problem can occur in Europe. I have seen  
Seán> discussions here making similar points about Dutch.  
>> And German. :)

Seán> But rather more people learn German than Dutch. Some  
Seán> English children even learn it in school. My niece speaks  
Seán> it quite well.

The father of cousin-in-law also did German in school, and lived in Germany for 3 years. We chatted for a while in German when we met a few days ago at my cousin's wedding.

Seán> In China, people sometimes respond with written notes.

That's their world. They assume that characters are understandable to all people. I think they get that assumption because visitors from other areas of China usually cannot understand their rural dialects, but can understand characters without difficulties.

I understand why. They are used to meeting people who cannot understand their speech. They are less used to meeting people who cannot understand their writing. I expect that they thought I was illiterate.

Seán> Sadly, they are even less likely to be useful to me than  
Seán> speech.

Well... I don't think so. They may be speaking a Chinese language completely different from Mandarin. Even in Mandarin speaking areas, some dialects are difficult to understand. The mutual intelligibility is very marginal.

True. But small as my spoken Mandarin vocabulary is, it is much bigger than my written. Only a very few written messages would be any use to me at all. Of course, the few that I do know are useful over a wide area e.g. Men / Women / Entrance / Exit.

Seán> It is which makes it a useful argument against those who  
Seán> think that simplifying a language will make it much easier  
Seán> to learn.

Simplifying a language? I don't believe this is possible. You can

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simplify one aspect of a language, at the expense of making other aspects more complicated. These other aspects are simply less superficial, but still important.

I am not saying whether or not it is possible to simplify a language (but I do agree), I am saying that it is pointless anyway. Success in learning languages seems to relate much more to utility, exposure, and motivation than to their (perceived) simplicity.

Seán> "If only French did not have so many irregular verbs it  
Seán> would be much easier."

Who knows? Maybe, that could create more homonyms!

The quotes were meant to suggest that it is something I have heard rather than my own opinion. Learners of French often complain about the verbs and blame their poor success on such aspects. Similarly, they will often accuse Mandarin of being hard due the tones and writing system. If you want to find something hard about a language then you probably will.

Remember, I don't find the PRC's "simplified characters" easier, because they have created more similar-looking characters. When reading simplified characters, you have to pay more attention to the fine details of each characters in order to recognize each one accurately. Some "simplified" characters are just a few pixel different from one another. It's so easy to misrecognize them. OTOH, traditional characters, having more strokes, are more different from one another. They're easier and faster to recognize and read.

If I ever became as fluent as you, I may agree but at the moment, the simplified ones do seem simpler.

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Seán O'Leathlóbhair

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