

Re: Foreign Languages– A Waste of Time.

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- *From:* "Edward Grefenstette" <egrefen@xxxxxxxx>
 - *Date:* 18 Jun 2006 05:53:16 –0700
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expatriateauthority@xxxxxxxx wrote:

I have noticed that over the past 20–30 years or so more and more people speak English, and prefer to speak it to foreigners. Also, what is becoming more and more common is that you have native English speakers who live in non–English speaking countries for decades and who are doing just fine by using only English. They have friends, do their shopping, attend to legal and bank formalities and even get lovers and later, husbands and wives, without learning but a few token words in the language of the country. They do so with smug pride and conviction that it is the right thing to do. I can see them everywhere with confident looks and a proudly raised chin. "I am an American! I speak English!" Upon being asked "Do you speak Spanish?" the reply is "Not a word!", followed by another confident raising of the jaw in proud self–reveling.

"Yes, sir", say the natives and accommodate the speaker for yet another decade. They are used to that. A mono–lingual American/Brit/Canadian/ Australian is simply like that. There is nothing you can do to change him/her. He thinks the whole world should speak English.

And the whole world just might start doing just that. If you cannot make the mountain come to Mohammad, Mohammad will just have to go to the mountain.

I am an avid foreign language learner, and I seem to be a dying breed since I do not see many like me among the expat crowd in many countries. When in an Arab country, I was the only one studying Arabic and when in Japan, I was only one of the two poor and lonely blokes studying Japanese. All the others were partying and having the time of their lives.

Somehow, while before, people would get mad that foreigners, particularly "Anglos" would come to their country and not learn the language, by now they have gotten used to it and have begun adjusting themselves to the English– speakers, even though, ideally, it is the English speakers who should be adjusting to the cultures of host

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countries. However, the host countries have understood that the Anglo pride is incorrigible and now, the illusion that the entire world should speak English that is shared by many native English speakers has stopped being an illusion. English speakers who have been yelling abroad at the natives who did not understand them, have actually had a very powerful effect. People have not rebelled, but began speaking English more and more. So the illusion has become a reality. The world today is becoming more and more of an English–speaking place and foreign languages have become less and less useful for international travelers.

It used to be that if you took up business in 1980ies, you would take French or Spanish along with that. Now, most businessmen speak English, so when you have a negotiation or business correspondence, it is mostly conducted in English. So, why rack your brains over a difficult language since people on the other end will just switch to English anyway?

Somehow, the natives have finally accepted the idea that: "a Brit/American/Canadian, etc. will never learn my language, but they are the ones with money and technology, so we should be learning their language instead".

Many are questioning the feasibility of spending years learning Arabic, Portuguese, German, etc. if the educated locals will just speak English to you, anyway. Why bother?

I spent years learning Japanese and it is quite fluent by now. I would still be puzzled by seeing Westerners speaking English to the Japanese in a haughty way expecting them to understand and the Japanese doubling over backwards to please them.

In other countries, if you speak local languages, people start treating you condescendingly, but once you start speaking English in an authoritarian fashion, people stand at attention treating you like "The Boss".

So, sometimes I wonder if I have been wasting my time with all these languages as I have seen those who do not do it have a much better time in foreign countries than I.

In fact, those who do not learn the languages of host nations have many advantages:

- 1) People treat them as guests; forever. That means: with deferment and respect.
- 2) They surround themselves by friends who speak only English. That means– cosmopolitan people who appreciate intercultural friendship and communication, who are broad–minded and international and relatively free from bigotry.
- 3) They do not understand what bad things are being said to them or

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about them, hence, they are protected from being insulted because they will not understand the insult, anyway. They are seen as cute and helpless by some and attract desire to help and general endearment.

4) Seen as "powerful" Westerners, they also attract romantic admirers who will see them as something mysterious and worthy of discovery. I have seen it so many times– in Asia, in particular. American and British guys with Japanese and Thai girls, and the girls are speaking in faltering English while falling all over the guys who sound strong and confident and "in control" by speaking thunderous English. There is an aura of mystique and exoticism that is irresistible and it drives those women wild. The girls play the host and introduce the guy to their country– for tens of years– while learning English in the process. A very effective way to get a lover if I have ever seen one.

5) As an English–only speaker, you will not have people get angry at you since they will not be able to express their anger, and will just keep quiet. And if they do, you will not understand what they are saying, anyway. Your English–only status will effectively put a cushion between you and other people, a respectful distance of sorts. When in Thailand, I saw a couple– a Thai girl who could not speak English and a British man who did not speak Thai. And they seemed blissfully happy. They could not quarrel and were forever discovering each other.

6) You may revel in the illusion that you are a neo–colonialist who is superior to everyone and many people on the outside will feed and share your illusion as it in fact is becoming a reality

With the advent of the Internet, English has become even more widespread and will be growing in popularity more and more. Foreign language studies will be relegated to scholastic hobbies especially in native English–speaking countries. I think people should not be wasting their time learning other languages outside of a few words to make the natives laugh. They will enjoy life more, have more friends and get more respect from the locals who will be treating them as Gods

Dear unnamed author,

I'm a hard time deciding whether or not the above was written tongue–in–cheek or not, because for all its attempt to reflect innate cultural openness and sophistication, I see nothing but blank–minded naiveté and unjustified statements. Learning other languages is more than just an exercise in utility, as as you have mentioned, english is a fairly widespread lingua franca (although not as widespread as you would like, once you leave the cosmopolitan linguistic safety of large metropolises abroad), but also a good way of training the mind, acquiring deeper understanding of your own languages vocabulary (when learning latin–based languages or german, in the case of a native english speaker) and even, if we are to believe Chomskian ideals, gain greater understanding of the human mind through the analysis of underlying patterns in different languages.

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Furthermore, not bothering to learn the local languages is not necessarily (and actually rarely) accompanied by the various perks you describe in your message. The very of idea of this is plainly ignorant. Plus, don't forget that what is the established lingua franca can change very fast, over the course of a few decades. Don't forget that english replaced french as the language franca only 60 or so years ago. Who knows what it will be in a few decades? The way things are looking, now would be a good time to brush up on your cantonese...

Sincerely Yours,
Edward Grefenstette.