



Why I'm not Studying Swiss-German

I arrived in Basel five months ago. I was only supposed to be here for a few weeks, but even before I knew the brevity of my stay, I'd already made a decision. I was not going to study Swiss-German. Or German. Or French. Or any of the local languages that are used around this border city. You see, I already speak four languages.

Let me clarify: I speak four languages - one well, and three horribly. And, frankly, I've given up.

I spent six years earning A's in Spanish in junior high and high school and another two in university. What did it get me? A deep understanding of the nuances of usage for the pluperfect subjunctive and a conceit about my linguistic ability that stuck with me until my first visit to a Spanish-speaking country. It was then that I realized what those eight years of sitting at the top of my class hadn't given me - the ability to tell a taxi driver where I needed to go, or even to ask a waiter for a fork.

My linguistic conceit was further deflated in my thirties when I moved to Uzbekistan and tried to learn Russian. The humbling process was complete when I relocated to Amsterdam. There were sounds coming out of Dutch mouths that I didn't think were humanly possible to make - especially by this human. It's not that I'm completely hopeless when it comes to languages. I'm like a dog - I understand, but I just can't speak.

Over the years, as I've watched my fellow expats master the languages around me, I've developed a theory. Those people who babble incessantly in their native tongue will also be the first to master any new language. Why? Because the prospect of babbling away to entire countries full of fresh ears motivates them so much that they cannot help but learn incredible amounts of new vocabulary - not to mention that they get three times as much practice speaking as anybody else. I've watched it happen. It's true.

Most people, I've noticed, will pick up the words they need to know first. That's not the case with me. Seven years ago I learned the Dutch word for hippopotamus from the Discovery Channel - *nijlpaard*. To this day, I can recall that word immediately, on command. Yet after living in Amsterdam for ten years, I cannot remember the Dutch word for spoon.



Lovers who don't share a common language learn endearing terms for select body parts. Football fans learn to yell at referees in the opposition's tongue and read the sports pages. Me? The only reading I mastered in Russian (or Dutch) was my cable bill and the occasional menu.

I read someplace that our foreign language ability is governed by two sections of brain that sit right up against one another when we're small. In our young brains, the information needed to process or translate language moves from one section to another quickly, because it's right next-door, so to speak.

As we age, and our heads grow larger, these portions of the brain move further and further apart, making the connection inside the brain slower and the processing more difficult.

I have seen this theory at work in my nephew, who at age three already spoke Spanish, German, English and French. You'd almost expect him to have an extra small head. I have also proven this theory in myself. Judging from the speed with which I do not process Dutch (or Russian or Spanish), I figure one of these sections of my own brain is now residing in a piece of luggage that I lost about 15 years ago.

So I struggle every day here in Switzerland, as our stay stretches from weeks to months. I know that I'm missing out on friendships, gossipy strangers' stories on trams, and being able to talk to my neighbors' children. However, I did manage to glean some local news the other day. The Basel Zoo is threatening to put down its baby hippo if they can't find another zoo to adopt it. Maybe my language skills will come in handy, after all. There are sure to be some Dutch activists trying to save the little *nijlpaard*. I only hope I can help.

- Nanci Tangeman
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