



New Ways of Seeing

How Multilingualism Opens Our Eyes
and Trains Our Minds for a Complex World

By Chris Livaccari

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China Learning Initiatives

For Chih-Hsuan

“The way we reduce complexity in the world is by looking for patterns.”

– Nima Arkani-Hamed, Theoretical Physicist, Princeton University

“... The thing that differentiates scientists is purely an *artistic ability* to discern what is a good idea, what is a beautiful idea ...”

– Savas Dimopoulos, Theoretical Physicist, Stanford University

From the documentary film Particle Fever (2013)

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Forward

Once every few decades, an education leader comes along to fundamentally change how we think about teaching and learning. He or she leads us to think in much more expansive ways about education, a field notorious for its narrow conceptions of teaching and learning. The human being is a marvelous learning organism, but the politics and traditions of school districts often obstruct a child's natural desire to learn.

At the turn of the nineteenth century into the twentieth, John Dewey advocated for curricula that connected with children's own lives and communities. He predicted how the vitality of the American democracy would hinge on the quality of its school system. (In the tumult of this 2016 election year, he was prescient, indeed.) His contemporary, Maria Montessori, working a continent away, also promoted active, hands-on learning and connecting classroom life to real life. Both emphasized the natural curiosity of children and the value of allowing them more voice and greater choice in their own learning. Armed with new tools and research, today's progressive educators are creating a renaissance for Dewey's and Montessori's ideas.

Fast forward to the 1980s, when Seymour Papert of the MIT Media Lab developed the children's programming language LOGO, to teach mathematics and procedural thinking. Back then, teaching high school curricula—the arcane skills of computer science, no less—to grade school students seemed incredulous. Today, in our digital society, the benefits of learning to code are widely accepted. Papert compared American students' mediocre performance in math to their disappointing mastery of French after several years of high school instruction. The problem with both subjects, he argued, was that students were not being immersed in the richness of those cultures. After all, French children seem to learn French quite naturally!

In the 2000s, enter Chris Livaccari, with similarly bold—indeed, revolutionary ideas—for both educational theory and practice. His rich professional and personal life, as a student, diplomat, teacher, and school administrator, informs this essay with the tantalizing title, “New Ways of Seeing.” His ability to speak three languages beyond English—Chinese, Japanese, and Korean (and toss in some Russian, too)—gives him unusual standing as an American to reveal a broader and deeper view of language learning.

I first met Chris when he was working at the Asia Society as associate director of education. While his facility with multiple languages is striking, his ability to teach them is infectious. Just check out his online videos, as I have. Students who have studied with him are fortunate, indeed, to learn Chinese or Japanese in an entirely new way. Now, in this book, he shares his approach.

He begins by reminding us Americans of an inconvenient truth: multilingualism has been the norm throughout history and continues to be widespread around the world. The American focus on English alone is an accident of our history, politics, and geography. While we have been slow to embrace global learning and languages, the movement to multilingualism is growing in our increasingly multicultural society. Many educators and parents now recognize the benefits for students and their future careers. It’s now abundantly clear that students who learn other languages stand the best chance to thrive in the global economy.

But Chris Livaccari urges more fundamental purposes as to why language learning is important. Just as Papert argued for the value of learning computer language, he believes that learning another language can improve how you learn everything else. “Mental flexibility”—recognizing patterns, seeing deeper connections, trying other approaches—is critical to complex problem-solving and creativity in all domains. Emerging research is also suggesting that bilingual children might be more socially adept as well, better able to take another person’s perspective and, perhaps, be more tolerant of and even curious about other peoples and their cultures. Language learning can be one of the best hopes we have for ensuring a more peaceful world.

Livaccari also shows us how language learning can be dramatically improved. I find his comparisons to music, architecture, and visual art to be especially profound. He writes:

“Just like all music shares a common set of characteristics and formal properties, successful language learners must tune into the particular character of whatever language they are learning. Musicians must learn the idioms of classical, jazz or rock; the language learner must be attuned to the common properties of Japanese, Dutch, or Amharic.”

He puts forth an exciting idea: that learning a language might best begin by illuminating the principles embedded in all languages, i.e., the common DNA of languages, or their genotype. Next, instruction can focus on how a specific language expresses those principles, using the genetic analogy, its phenotype. Now, that’s a course I’d like to take. As a college senior, I enrolled in my first Chinese language course, using the textbook and a language lab. But the instructor never bothered to reveal the beauty and meaning of families of Chinese characters—for instance, that characters relating to water all have “three drops” on their left side.

This essay practices what it preaches about the emotional side of learning. It is fun and enjoyable to read. You’ll breeze through it and end up wanting more. That’s my definition of a powerful learning experience for which Dewey, Montessori, and Papert would be proud.

Milton Chen is senior fellow at The George Lucas Educational Foundation, chairman of the Panasonic Foundation, and a frequent speaker on educational innovation.

Preface

As a language educator who has worked with students from preschool through graduate school, a former U.S. diplomat who has had to use multiple foreign languages in a variety of real-world contexts, and a member of a household that regularly uses four different languages, I've often had occasion to reflect on the delights and challenges of becoming multilingual. Over the years, as I myself have become more multilingual, a paradox has emerged: I often struggle to find the right words to express myself in my native tongue, English. For instance: How to concisely convey the peculiar connotations of the Japanese "*komakai hito*," a person who focuses obsessively on details to the exclusion of everything important? Or, how to find the right equivalent for "*ch'ama*," the snappy Korean word that emboldens one to "keep going," "endure," or "stick with it"? When I'm running to catch a train, I instinctively come out with "*giri giri*," the Japanese expression for being very tight in terms of one's timing. When I'm speaking about building relationships with people, I inevitably think of the nuanced Chinese concept of "*guanxi*," or perhaps "*nemawashi*," what the Japanese refer to as "preparing the roots for planting." And when I'm thinking about an obviously petty, low-minded individual, the Chinese "*xiao ren*" — literally "little person" — immediately comes to mind. While all of these words can be translated or at least explained in English, their particular resonances and connotations are so richly unique that there are no simple, single English equivalents.

The Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi — often hailed as the greatest Italian poet since Dante — described this phenomenon in his gargantuan work *Zibaldone*, completed in 1832:

“Knowing several languages affords some greater facility and clarity in the way we formulate our thoughts, for it is through language that

we think. Now, perhaps no language has enough words and phrases to correspond to and express all the infinite subtleties of thought.”¹

He goes on to say that

“the knowledge of several languages and the ability, therefore, to express in one language what cannot be said in another, or cannot at least be expressed so succinctly or concisely, one which we cannot find as quickly in another language, makes it easier for us to articulate new thoughts and to understand ourselves ...”

This capacity to articulate new thoughts and understand one’s self are some of the most important rewards of becoming multilingual.

Leopardi goes on to describe how he experienced these rewards “on many occasions,” and how he had “*fixed* [his] ideas with Greek, French, Latin words, according to how for me they responded more precisely to the thing, and came most quickly to mind.” Leopardi’s genius, as both a thinker and a writer of Italian, was to some degree conditioned by his multilingual consciousness.

For a European intellectual of the nineteenth century like Leopardi—and indeed for most of the world today—multilingualism is a natural state of being, and not the exception to a rule. We have become too accustomed in the Anglophone world to regarding monolingualism as the norm and bilingualism as some deviation from that norm. For those American children that reach university with little or no facility in a language other than English, we have done them the disservice of limiting their possible worlds, the scope of their ideas, and their ability to express the “infinite subtleties of thought,” to use Leopardi’s phraseology.

But the transformative capacity of multilingualism is about much more than expression: There is a host of compelling new research that suggests multilingualism can play a critical role in the formation of an individual’s sense of identity, self-confidence, and sense of self.² Whether you are a teacher, a

1 All quotes by Giacomo Leopardi, from: Caesar, Michael, and Franco D’Intino, eds. *Zibaldone*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2013.

2 See the essays in Mercer, Sarah and Marion Williams, eds. *Multiple Perspectives on the Self in Second Language Acquisition*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2003.

student, or a parent, in this new millennium we must all recognize the truly transformative impact a multilingual identity can have.

The power of words is apparent in any language, and Leopardi creates a wonderful image of this power:

“For an idea without a word or a way to express it is lost to us, or roams about undefined in our thoughts, and is imperfectly understood by we who have conceived it. With the word it takes on body and almost visible, tangible, and distinct form.”

For the monolingual individual, this “visible, tangible, and distinct form” is dull and monochromatic, while for the multilingual person it is vibrant, bright, and glistening with color, an iridescent rainbow of insight, understanding, and eloquent expression. Let’s use some of that light to illuminate the problems and promises of being multilingual in the new millennium.

Language Appreciation

Italian and French are well known for being two of the world's most beautiful languages. But just what is it about them that their sound is so beautiful to so many ears? Opinions undoubtedly differ on this, but I think it has something to do with the vowels of Italian and the liquid intonation of French. These open, continuous sounds are pleasing to most of us. But while many profess their love of these languages, it's clear that all human languages have their respective beautiful aspects, and I've often wondered why we haven't placed greater emphasis on these aspects in our attempts to generate interest in multilingualism. That is, languages are not only tools for making oneself understood; they are sources of joy, beauty, and rich new worlds for us to inhabit. Many who argue for the value of multilingualism and a global consciousness do so because of a direct interest in trade, jobs, or an economic or political advantage. I won't rehearse any of those well-tread paths in arguing for the value of learning more than one language. Instead, I will insist that multilingualism is one lever for the development of a broader academic, cognitive, and professional skill set that goes well beyond any immediate economic payoff. Multilingualism is a key aspect of life for most people in the world (and has been throughout history), and is a rich source of engagement, playfulness, and joy. It's something that enriches one's life and should be celebrated for what it truly is: a core part of any person's education, cultural identity, and sense of self.

Learning another language has helped me expand my knowledge and see how other people communicate and how they think differently. It's made me feel a lot more curious about other cultures, and makes me want to spend time with other people and interact with them.

– **Nayelie, an International Studies Schools Network student in Denver, CO**

In this way, just as one might listen to a symphony, the latest pop hit, or an audiobook of a classic novel, I thoroughly enjoy listening to and appreciating the particular sounds and sonorities of any human language—even when I don't understand a word! I encourage anyone reading this to begin to attune themselves to the sounds of language as an aesthetic experience, particularly as you start to learn or teach a new language. Tune in to the sounds that are particularly appealing to you and try to learn intuitively about the most pleasing sounds in that particular language. Use this method as a way to gain an appreciation of the language itself, and to begin to internalize the patterns and rhythms of the language. I will have more to say about this later, but when encountering a new language for the first time, it's important to grasp the unique patterns and contours of the language—to hear its music.

Sound is a great place to start because its appreciation can be a visceral experience, like listening to music. But grammar too can be a source of delight—think of it as architecture. Just as a Gothic cathedral or a Frank Lloyd Wright house can be beautiful, so can a language's grammatical structure be beautiful. Again, tapping in to a language's particular style and method of organization can lead to much appreciation and joy. For instance, many people find Chinese elegant for its lack of grammatical inflection, and its economy and efficiency of expression. Others find beauty in what they perceive as the logically structured German language. And I am not alone when I profess a love for the beauties of the highly complex Japanese honorific system—one in which you may use not only different verbal conjugations but even entirely different words when speaking to people who are in different relationships or hierarchies to the speaker. I've marveled at Finnish, with its complex system of declensions, and at ancient languages like Latin and Sanskrit that encode all types of incredible meanings and subtleties through their gram-

mar. In fact, research on the linguistic phenomenon known as *grammaticalization* (or *grammaticization*) suggests that grammatical systems evolve over time to represent meaning through their structures. One classic work on this is Joan Bybee's *The Evolution of Grammar: Tense, Aspect, and Modality in the Languages of the World*, which explains that “the push for grammaticization comes from below—it originates in the need to be more specific in the tendency to infer as much as possible from the input, and in the necessity of interpreting items in context.”³ These dynamics of language structure are another source for joy and wonder when it comes to appreciating the richness of language.

Finally, a language's visual artistry is important to appreciate in its writing system, and scripts like Arabic and Chinese have long traditions of calligraphy. The glyphs of the ancient Maya make visual art of every single word or letter, and take the aesthetic potential of written language to the absolute limit. Maya scribes were obviously not just recording information or communicating ideas—they were creating deeply artistic statements that combined sound, script, and visuality. In a similar way, Chinese characters have a graphic element that makes reading them a completely different cognitive experience than reading an alphabetic system.

Whatever language you're learning or getting in to, it's important to begin to seriously appreciate the music (phonology), architecture (grammar), and visual artistry (script). Be a connoisseur and an enthusiast before you become a learner. I think this kind of approach might make acquiring other languages more exciting and attractive to a broader group of people—just ask those who love the languages of Tolkien's Middle-earth, Klingon from *Star Trek*, or Dothraki from *Game of Thrones*!

It's the kind of instrumental justifications usually wheeled out in discussions around multilingualism (“Knowing Chinese/Spanish will improve your job prospects!”) that have actually contributed to our national problem of strident monolingualism. This is not just a short-term problem of national interest, but a long-term one of depriving our children of a uniquely rewarding

3 Bybee, Joan, Revere Perkins, and William Pagliuca. *The Evolution of Grammar: Tense, Aspect, and Modality in the Languages of the World*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

perspective that enables them to see the world through diverse lenses. Being multilingual and multi-literate are just as fundamental to a student's education as is a solid foundation in science, mathematics, and the arts. It is no longer acceptable to regard a second language as an add-on, rather than a core component of a basic education.

“How will we use our second language in the future? Whatever we do, we will be able to do it on a broader scale—no matter what job we have. There will be more people in the world that we can interact with.”

—Christian, an International Studies Schools Network student in Denver, CO

A Nation of Extremes, and a National Crisis

How many Americans have studied four or five years of French or Spanish in school, and yet can barely manage a sentence of the language once we hit adulthood? Why do Americans continue to be ridiculed and sneered at by people around the world for our lack of linguistic prowess? Many educators with a global outlook are wrestling daily with these legacies of American exceptionalism. The reality, of course, is that many Americans *are* multilingual. Indeed, many of the best foreign speakers of Chinese and Japanese I have ever met are Americans. I think the problem is more one of being a nation of extremes—a country in which you’d expect to find the very best language learners and the very worst, just as you’ll find the most out-of-shape people and the most health-obsessed.

The major challenge is certainly a lack of incentives. Why do people in Iceland speak such beautiful English? The answer is simple: You wouldn’t get very far in life speaking only a language understood by less than half a million people on a single island north of Europe. While there is currently an explosion of interest in Chinese language-learning among Americans, the fact is that the vast majority of international business conducted in China—and globally—is conducted in English. So what’s the incentive for any kid to learn another language?

Therein lies the challenge—and the art—of language teaching and learning in the United States, and the problem with the kinds of economic and political arguments that are most often used to marshal support for teaching one language over another. If you’re in a non-English speaking country, the language of choice is obvious. But if you already speak English, it may not be so clear: Spanish, French, Arabic, Chinese? All good choices, I would argue, and the reality is that most previous predictions about “the language of the future”

have been wrong. The Chinese boom we're currently experiencing is not so different from the Japanese language boom of the 1980s and 1990s. I myself rode the Japanese wave of the '90s and washed back out with the tide to pick up the Chinese tsunami of the new millennium.

One of my favorite stories is of a talk I gave at a conference on U.S.-Japan relations about the changing fortunes of Chinese and Japanese language education in the U.S. over the past three decades. I described how the twentieth century saw us turning our attention from Japan to Korea to Vietnam (as we fought wars across Asia), then back to Japan, and now to China. The same century saw us swing from being diligent students of French and German, to Russian and Spanish, to Japanese and now to Mandarin. In my talk, I described Americans' frustrating inability to focus on more than one Asian language (and more than one Asian nation) at a time as "an unfortunate choice between pandas and cherry blossoms." After my remarks, an official from the Japanese Embassy stood up and proclaimed that my analogy about pandas and cherry blossoms was indeed a very poor one, since cherry blossoms are now native to the Washington soil, while pandas are foreign beasts that can never be tamed!

In 2005, I began teaching Chinese and Japanese in one of the first schools in what was to become the Asia Society International Studies Schools Network. My Japanese classes usually began with students telling me that they needed to learn Japanese as quickly as possible so that they could watch anime, read manga, or decipher the instructions for their video games. In a way, they had a utilitarian reason for wanting to learn the language; what this meant was that, after a month of learning a language with an extremely challenging system of writing and grammar, many of them became frustrated that they had not yet achieved the goal they had in mind. It turned out that a lot of these students just couldn't go the distance, so to speak, but on the other hand I found that those who stuck with it went further than many of their peers learning Chinese or Spanish. For these determined students of Japanese, their original utilitarian goal merged with the intrinsic joy of learning and appreciating the language.

My Chinese language students were of a different sort entirely. The vast majority of them had been assigned to take Chinese by the school or pushed by their parents, and what could be less appealing to a teenager than some authority figure (parents or principals) telling them what to do? While I've heard many Chinese language teachers complain that this means their students aren't fully motivated to learn Chinese, I took it as a challenge and a motivation for myself: If there was no external motivation for them, I'd make the class so exciting and fun that they'd have to plug in. And that's just what happened. I can tell you that there's nothing more rewarding than seeing a kid walk in with a completely blank expression, wondering why they've been put in a Chinese class, and walk out with a big smile and engaging in what some of my colleagues began to describe as the "ni-howling" ("ni hao" being the Chinese phrase for "hello").

It turned out to be a great thing that students had no expectations about China or Chinese. In the beginning, many of them still cited their most prominent image of China as "chicken and broccoli;" they asked my teaching assistant from Taiwan whether Taipei had paved roads. What a wonderful adventure to open to them an exciting path of discovery and engagement with a language and culture about which they knew so little, or thought was encapsulated in fortune cookies and pan-fried dumplings.

What follows from here are some thoughts on how to take students—or yourself—joyfully down this road, whether it's Chinese or Japanese, French or Italian, Hindi, Urdu, or Swahili. I say thoughts, not answers, because they are truly just that—but I hope they can be starters for conversations that will take both language learners and language educators out of their comfort zones and into some uncharted and exciting new territories.

Seeing with “Other Eyes”

It's become clear that multilingualism is quite possibly the most effective lever for helping us to see the world from multiple perspectives, think in different ways, and tackle real-world problems with a variety of approaches. These skills comprise the most critical set for students graduating into a world beyond school in which the rules are constantly changing—a world in which it is increasingly the case that, rather than going out and finding jobs, many young people must re-envision the very concept of having a “job” and create a job description for themselves which may or may not have existed a few years ago. And for language learners of any age, the ability to see the world from multiple perspectives is one of the marvelous gifts that learning another language can impart.

Those of us who regularly speak and read multiple languages know that the personas we adopt in each of them may well be radically different, and that the modalities of learning and communication we employ within the different linguistic worlds we inhabit give us a unique ability to think flexibly, adapt to new situations, and see things in ways our monolingual peers are seldom able to do. The curious thing to note, of course, is that there is ultimately no such thing as strict “monolingualism.” What my ten-year-old son means by the word “awesome” is completely different from what my grandmother would understand by that term. Even beyond the obvious differences between the varieties of English (American, Canadian, Australian, Irish, Indian, etc.) that we speak, even within a single linguistic community, there may be significant differences in the terms and expressions we use or the ways in which we articulate or make meaning. These differences correspond to cultural and educational background, social and economic status, and various other forms of personal and collective identity.

In the world we live in now, these identities and self-definitions are perpetually in a state of transformation. Indeed, perhaps the one and only constant in the world today is change. At the time of this writing, the so-called smart phones that we take to be such an inevitable part of our social and material landscape have scarcely been with us for a decade. The iPhone was released in 2007 and the iPad not until 2010—yet it's almost unimaginable now to contemplate a world without these devices. As a child in the 1980s, I grew up in a world that had just phased out eight-track tapes; we listened to albums on vinyl records and audio cassettes, and still used a mix of rotary-dial and touch-tone phones. When I told a student in Beijing in 2011 that my first computer had 5 K of memory, he replied: "That's impossible!" It was not only *not* impossible, but it was the state-of-the-art in personal computing at the time. I wrote programs in BASIC and designed maze games that we saved to digital tape; we dialed in to early BBS (bulletin board systems) through the phone lines and listened to the electronic beeps as the modem dialed in. Young children today can no more fathom that world than we can contemplate life in Sherlock Holmes's London, with its steam trains and horse-drawn carriages.

While we can extrapolate and predict much of what the future will bring, there is an extent to which we have no idea what kinds of skills our current elementary and secondary school students will face once they enter the world as professionals. Indeed, there has been a tectonic shift in the world, away from having secure, long-term jobs to creating opportunities for oneself through innovation and entrepreneurship. Young people today are less likely to be looking for a job than creating a job description *for themselves*. With this in mind, what we need to be teaching our students is not only a specific body of skills or knowledge, but for them to have the flexibility of mind to adapt to whatever knowledge and skills are required of them at a given time.

While this may seem like a recent phenomenon, rapid change has always been a driver for innovative thinking. Take the case of the great French novelist Marcel Proust (1871–1922), who lived when Paris was careening from the nineteenth into the twentieth century. At the time, some of the world's biggest celebrities were explorers who navigated the globe searching for lost civilizations and new natural wonders. But Proust, who spent much of his life in bed in his cork-lined room, knew better. He spoke about a possible future trip

to Mars or Venus, concluding that while “a pair of wings, a different mode of breathing, would enable us to traverse infinite space,” it would “in no way help us, for, if we visited Mars or Venus keeping the same senses, they would clothe in the same aspect as the things of the earth everything that we should be capable of seeing.” Proust knew that the “only true voyage ... would be not to visit strange lands but to possess other eyes.”⁴

Proust here is acknowledging the power of perspective and the important role that art plays in helping us see the world in different ways and from a multiplicity of angles. He goes on to suggest that true discovery lies in the act of beholding “the universe through the eyes of another, of a hundred others, to behold the hundred universes that each of them beholds, that each of them is ...”

While Proust was likely arguing for the power of art, literature, and music to transform our sense of reality and give meaning to the world, there is truly no better way to achieve this kind of understanding than through the acquisition of multiple languages. Just as science, art, or mathematics are different lenses through which to view and comprehend the complexity of the world, so too can the application of different *linguistic* lenses enhance and deepen a student’s capacity for processing information and analyzing the shape of the world.

Like Proust’s “new eyes,” the ancient Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi is well known for understanding the importance of being able to see the world through different lenses. In the “Autumn Floods” chapter of the text that bears his name, the Overlord of the Northern Sea proclaims: “You can’t tell a frog at the bottom of a well about the sea because it is confined by its season. You can’t tell a summer insect about ice because it is confined by its season. You can’t tell a scholar of distorted views about the Way because he is bound by his doctrine. Now you have ventured forth from your banks to observe the great sea and you have recognized your own insignificance, so that you can be told of the great principle.”⁵

4 All quotes by Marcel Proust, from: Moncrieff, C. K. Scott, trans. *Remembrance of Things Past*.

5 Mair, Victor H., trans. *Wandering on the Way: Early Taoist Tales and Parables of Chuang Tzu*.

The literary scholar George Steiner is to my mind one of the most eloquent commentators on this topic: "Each human language maps the world differently. There is life-giving compensation in the extreme grammatical complication of those languages (for example, among Australian Aboriginals or in the Kalahari) whose speakers dwell in material and social contexts of deprivation and barrenness. Each tongue—and there are no "small" or lesser languages—construes a set of possible worlds and geographies of remembrance."⁶ It's important to note that neither Steiner nor I are arguing that *people who speak different languages think differently*, as those who support the strong form of what has come to be known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. We are arguing instead that those who speak (and think in) different languages also organize knowledge and understanding in different ways, and that these different modes of organization help us to think more flexibly and to see issues from different perspectives.

Ludwig Wittgenstein's well-known dictum that "the limits of my language are the limits of my world" is also instructive in this regard. By promoting multilingualism and the multiple perspectives referenced by Proust and Zhuangzi, we are allowing ourselves to transcend those limits and see the richness of the world we live in. The flexibility of mind we will develop in the process applies well beyond the narrow space of language learning. What linguists call code-switching—the ability to alternate between different languages—is a way of training the brain to be flexible, adaptable, and to wear different "lenses." In thinking about the transformative power of this cognitive ability, the metaphor of music is perhaps instructive.

People often think about the acquisition of a new language as a rote process of transferring large amounts of vocabulary and grammar into the learner's cognitive and linguistic repertoire. Those of you who remember your high school French teacher certainly know that many teachers of languages approach the problem in this way. For me, however, the act of language learning is much like playing music. Every world language shares a core of common structures and patterns, and all languages can be described according to their

6 Steiner, George. *After Babel: Aspects of Language & Translation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

particular syntax, grammar, morphology, phonology, etc. — all the categories used by linguists to analyze particular languages. In the same way, all music shares a common set of characteristics and principles like tone, rhythm, instrumentation, harmony, etc. that musicologists use to understand different styles of music.

Languages differ from each other much in the way that Western classical music, jazz, rock, metal, and Indian classical music differ. To learn any language well, a learner needs to understand the underlying structures and functions of all language (sounds, symbols, and language structures) while at the same time develop an ear for the particular music of that language. In learning Chinese, for example, a learner needs to be particularly attuned to the characteristics of a tonal system that is radically different from the stress used in languages like English, the pitch-accent systems like those found in Japanese, or the vowel harmony of languages like Korean, Mongolian, and Turkish.

Becoming proficient in a language involves learning to improvise in a particular “musical” idiom. And whether we use the musical metaphor or the visual metaphor (i.e., different lenses), it’s clear that the human ability to process language has a lot to do with our ability to recognize and interpret patterns.

Recognizing Patterns

The skill set language learners develop as they begin to attune their ears—and minds—to the rhythms and peculiarities of different languages will naturally help them attune their brains to different ways of thinking, different perspectives, and different ways of seeing the world. Students should first understand the structures and patterns that underlie all human languages, and then learn to mimic—and then improvise with—the idioms of the various languages which they speak and in which they think.

Just as with music, the core of language can be found in patterns. Indeed, pattern recognition forms the core of all learning of any kind. In Michael Tomasello’s influential book *Constructing a Language*, he offers the following insights regarding pattern recognition in developing the human capacity to communicate: “... prelinguistic infants demonstrate some of the prerequisite skills necessary for an understanding of the grammatical dimensions of human communication ... It has recently been discovered that prelinguistic infants are able to find patterns in sequentially presented auditory stimuli with amazing facility ... what we have is an amazing set of necessary cognitive skills—namely, the statistical learning of concrete and abstract auditory patterns that are ready to be put to use in constructing the grammatical dimensions of language, once the children’s ability to understand linguistic symbols comes on-line in the months surrounding their first birthdays ...”

Tomasello notes that “this functional pattern-finding ranges from seeing similarities in the different referents to which a word like *ball* might be applied to seeing similarities in the different relationships indicated by the many different uses of the word *for* ... With their skills in finding both concrete and abstract patterns in auditory sequences, once children have begun to acquire

linguistic symbols they are also ready to begin relatively quickly to acquire more complex and abstract linguistic constructions.”⁷

Tomasello’s work shows quite clearly that language as a system of communication did not necessarily evolve as a direct result of Noam Chomsky’s famous “language acquisition device,” the idea that there is a part of the brain specifically designed to process language. Rather, it very likely evolved through the progressive application to verbal communication of the *pattern recognition skills* that are at work in other cognitive areas. By extension, this would also mean that the skills developed by language learners can be applied to other cognitive domains. This notion forms part of the argument for the effectiveness of language learning as a lever for mental flexibility and global competency, as well as the basis for the approach to second language learning for which I am arguing: namely, that language learning needs to be embedded in a richly interdisciplinary tapestry of connections and associations and liberated from the narrow prism of “language proficiency.”

In Tomasello’s terms, languages are *constructed* through the application of the mind’s broader pattern-making and recognition skills rather than expressed as an inherent feature of the human brain. In this way, it’s critical that language learners develop both an intuitive and very conscious understanding of linguistic patterns and structures, and also the reason why neglecting a language’s grammar is neither an efficient nor effective means of acquiring a language. That does not at all mean we should be going back to the old-school grammar translation approach, of course. It means that we need to find new ways to make acquiring and understanding the grammatical patterns of language accessible, exciting, and fun. To get there, we’ll have to help students learn about the building blocks of all languages, as well as about the particular music of Spanish, Arabic, or Amharic.

7 Tomasello, Michael. *Constructing a Language: A Usage-Based Theory of Language Acquisition*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003.

The DNA of Language

All human languages share the same “core DNA,” the linguistic principles that fundamentally shape the way we think, learn, and communicate. Tapping in to these principles—what those in the language business refer to as boosting one’s “metalinguistic awareness”—can help you learn any language successfully. But just like each species has its own core DNA (its *genotype*), each organism expresses that genotype in different ways—what’s called the *phenotype*.

A truly twenty-first-century approach to language learning must take into account both genotype and phenotype. We should start with that core DNA—those common patterns and principles that drive all of human language. Then we should think about the specific characteristics of each human language and use an approach designed to attune your brain to the particular resonances and sonorities of the individual language being studied.

Again, the musical metaphor is instructive. Just like all music shares a common series of characteristics and formal properties, successful language learners must tune in to the particular character of whatever language they are learning. Musicians must learn the idioms of classical, jazz, or rock; the language learner must be attuned to the special qualities of Japanese, Dutch, or Amharic. And, like the musician, one learns to appreciate and understand classical, rock, or jazz by learning and applying a set of basic principles, practicing with them, and then improvising or composing on one’s own. Teaching ourselves to appreciate the beautiful structures that underlie all human languages is a wonderful first step toward fostering success in one or more specific world languages.

Toward a Paradigm Shift

Over the past two decades and more—in not only mathematics and the sciences, but in the humanities and social sciences as well—students have been transformed from passive receivers of knowledge to active participants in the making of meaning. They have gone from being merely students to thinking like scientists, engineers, mathematicians, writers, and historians. This was made possible through a radical shift in the pedagogical approaches of their teachers.

In history classrooms, for example, students are no longer told to read a textbook account of the Crusades. They are more often asked to read a number of different primary sources about the period, from both Muslim and Christian perspectives, and then to formulate their own interpretations based on understanding the ways in which different perspectives shape the different accounts. In this way, they are learning to write and think in the manner of professional historians.

In mathematics, programs like Singapore Math have shown their efficacy through an approach that privileges deep understanding of mathematical concepts over the linear mastery of mathematical content. Students come to understand the way mathematics works, rather than simply how to perform arithmetical operations. In short, they develop an intuitive feel for the language of mathematics through the recognition, analysis, and application of patterns—much the way that professional mathematicians do.

One area that has not yet fully reaped the benefits of this education revolution has been the learning of world languages. How much more powerful to learn by being a “linguist” or “diplomat” than merely a foreign language student? Second language acquisition has for too long been a matter of learning

vocabulary and grammar, or developing the capacity to communicate across a prescribed range of situations. What's lacking is the opportunity for students to discover the way language itself works—that is, the opportunity for them to develop a *feel for language* in a very hands-on and intuitive way.

It's time to create a new paradigm in which students develop a deep knowledge of the patterns and structures of language and culture, and use this as a foundation for becoming more effective and efficient language learners. Students need to be able to recognize and understand language patterns on their own, without the intermediary of the teacher, and they need to be able to apply principles and patterns acquired through the learning of one language and/or culture to the learning of many others.

To take a concrete example, any approach to learning Mandarin Chinese must include attention to the general characteristics of language (syntax, for example), but must also focus on at least three core principles that make the language unique and so different from English and other European languages: (1) the writing system and the patterns of Chinese characters; (2) the phonological system and the four tones; and (3) a grammatical system that relies on syntax and particles rather than inflection (verb conjugations and tenses, noun and adjectival declensions and cases, etc.). If a student is to master Chinese, he or she needs to learn the language's core DNA (the genotype) and its expression (the phenotype), as well as develop an ear for its particular style of music (language use).

Given the unique qualities of the Chinese language, one can well imagine the range of choices available to a Chinese poet, for example, who may consider tone as much as rhyme or syllable structure, and may use a particular written character based on its visual or graphic element (as opposed to its sound alone). Of course, the complexities of Chinese are also its beauties—and what makes it difficult for native speakers of English and other European languages. Learning a language as different from English as Chinese opens the learner to consider all of the many different possible structures for organizing a language, and by extension, other ways of organizing information or viewing the world.

This is the true gift of multilingualism. It's also the fundamental reason why multilingualism is the most effective lever for building intercultural competency as well as broader abilities to see things from different perspectives, adapt to different mental and cognitive models, and have the flexibility of mind to learn new things quickly and efficiently. To get there, it's important that we give learners ample opportunity to think like linguists and diplomats.

But before we can do that, we need to wrestle with the very real dilemma that Americans for years have been on the receiving end of insults about our lack of linguistic prowess. Our linguistic deficiencies are part of a broader lack of global consciousness and awareness, and part of a national crisis that we need to more proactively—indeed *aggressively*—address. One place to start is by empowering students to take charge of their own learning.

Why Titles Matter

The premise I start from is that titles matter. After a number of years in the U.S. Foreign Service, I became quite used to addressing people as Madame or Mr. Ambassador, so when I began a Model United Nations program at my school, I started doing the very same thing with my students. How differently they behaved when they were “Madame Ambassador” instead of Sara or Joy, and “Mr. Ambassador” instead of Bobby or Mike. (Of course, I still had a few kids who never quite mastered the art of diplo-speak: “France, you guys just need to, like, chill out ...”)

The other premise I start from is that students who are given the proper degree of trust and respect will rise to the occasion. That’s why I chose to respect my students by using titles like “linguist” or “diplomat,” or, if we were dealing with economic or trade issues, “CEO” or “management consultant.” Although they may never have met these kinds of people, they’ve undoubtedly seen some on TV, and they’ll take on these roles with relish. It’s a way of letting them know that their day at school is just as important to the world as Mom or Dad’s day at work—not something most kids hear in school, but a simple idea with a powerful impact and resonance.

With these two premises in mind, let’s look at some basic principles to guide a new approach to world language teaching and learning: (a) the why and the how of the ways in which language learning can be more than about acquiring grammar, vocabulary, and communicative skills; and (b) the necessary development of a deep understanding of the patterns and structures that underlie all human languages, through the application of the kinds of inquiry and discovery-based approaches to learning that have been so fundamental in other disciplines.

Student as Linguist

I've visited many language programs across the country in recent years, and instinctively I've divided them into two categories. The first are programs that leave me with the distinct impression that they are fundamentally classes that happen in a room in a school building—there's not a lot of dynamism, authentic or experiential learning, and rarely a connection to something outside the textbook.

The second kind is far more rare, but it represents the programs that keep me engaged and invested in the language education field. These are programs where the classroom is a mere microcosm of the wider world, a jumping-off point into a rich, diverse, and exciting set of experiences, interactions, and insights. In these programs, students feel a constant connection to the world around them, recognize the connections between their own lives and what's happening in school, and have a sense that the teaching and learning that they and the entire school community are engaged in matter deeply for their futures.

Once in a conversation with a Japanese language educator, she shared with me her realization that “we never really thought enough about sustainability” when Japanese programs were growing strong in the 1980s and 1990s. As interest in Chinese language programs explodes across the United States, there is no more important factor to consider in developing a successful program. The reality is that it's very easy to have a Chinese language program in 2016, just as it was very easy to have a Japanese language program in 1988 or 1990. If you want to understand why this is important to you, just read the headlines. It's a lot more difficult to have a Japanese program in 2016, but there are still many of them out there thriving. Paradoxically, I often see the relative decline of interest in Japanese programs to be a blessing. The field has benefit-

ed from a kind of Social Darwinism that has made the weakest, lowest quality programs unsustainable—and given the strongest, highest quality programs the chance to flourish and continue.

After all, if Japan is no longer in the headlines, how does one sustain a Japanese language program? The answer is simple to state, but terribly difficult to achieve: Build a program that motivates and engages students, connects with the wider school community, and brings a kind of infectious enthusiasm for the language and culture that is palpable and authentic. The other key element, I think, is that you make the learning broadly applicable. That is, you instill the students with a sense that this is not just about Japanese or Chinese—not just about grammar and vocabulary and how many characters you know—but learning a set of important skills that can be applied to the learning of other languages and, indeed, beyond language learning.

Any psychologist will tell you that one of the most important aspects of learning is pattern recognition. Language learning—and in particular Chinese language learning—is a wonderful way to build students' capacities to recognize, interpret, and analyze patterns. This skill is one that the best language learners utilize intuitively, but that I don't often see teachers using in the classroom. I often hear math, science, and history teachers telling their students that they need to develop the skills of a “mathematician,” “scientist,” or “historian,” but I have never heard a language teacher telling students that they should learn how to think like a “linguist.”

It was almost by accident that I discovered how motivating and exciting this idea of “student as linguist” could be. When I started teaching the Chinese and Japanese languages in 2005, I decided that I had to develop a better way of introducing Chinese characters than rote memorization, the way I had learned them. I concluded that it wasn't learning specific characters or character components (usually called “radicals,” a term borrowed from chemistry), but about understanding the structure—the patterns—of Chinese characters.

I wound up creating hundreds of flashcards with Chinese characters on one side and their English meanings on the other. I had the students work in groups with the first task (like a puzzle) to find all the characters on the cards

that shared a similar component—the same radical, for example, in 吃, 喝, 听, and 吹. The students would eventually wind up with about 20 or 25 different piles of cards on their tables. They then had to read the English meanings of the characters on the cards in each pile, to try and make an educated guess about the meaning of the radical. So for the characters above, they would see “eat,” “drink,” “listen,” and “blow,” and likely conclude that these had something to do with the “mouth” (口).

One colleague at the time told me that this might be kind of a boring exercise, but I found, to the contrary, that students were incredibly engaged and motivated by the task. They loved the idea that they were going to discover these patterns on their own and turn the tables on their teacher—*they* were going to tell *me* what the structures and patterns were, rather than vice versa. I took this one step further and brought Chinese newspapers in to class during the first week of school and had students analyze the shapes and patterns of characters. Of course, they didn’t understand any of it, but they began to develop the skills of pattern recognition and the ability to think inductively about language, to create their own interpretations and meaning that would allow them to grow as learners.

After that experience, I began using more authentic materials in class, even at the very beginner levels. It was incredibly motivating to students to be applying these higher order cognitive skills of pattern recognition even at the most elementary stages of language learning. More and more I gave students movie clips, magazine articles, signs, songs, and audio files to analyze and decipher, with which we investigated word order, the use of particles, and countless types of sentence structures.

I discovered that this approach resulted in three key outcomes: (1) Students saw the connection between what we were learning in class and the “real” world; (2) students became more confident in their ability to master difficult or unfamiliar language; and (3) students were beginning to think like linguists and develop cognitive skills that they could apply beyond the Chinese or Japanese language classroom. I’d like to think that if those students today are faced with the task of learning of Russian, having spent a few years learning Chinese won’t have been an impediment. Rather, it will have built a solid

foundation for efficient and effective language learning that will make learning Russian a lot easier, not to mention a lot more interesting and fun.

My own experience learning Russian in high school is instructive. Russian has a complex system of grammatical declensions for nouns and adjectives, so these words will take different endings depending upon their placement in a sentence (for example, if they are the subject, the direct object or indirect object, or being used with a certain preposition). In Russian class, we dutifully memorized all of these declensions and now, more than twenty years later, I can still rattle them off. The problem was that, as a student, I had no idea whatsoever what they actually meant. It was not until several years later, when I developed a deeper understanding of language and linguistics, that it all began to make sense. In a strange way, my experience with Russian—a language for which I had a deep interest and affection—was the primary motivation for me to switch to some other languages in college, and gave me the opportunity to begin learning Chinese and Japanese. If I'd had more opportunities to approach Russian from the perspective of a young linguist, I might never have abandoned that language, though I did return to it for my college senior thesis, an analysis of Russian influences in early modern Chinese literature.

In addition to language structures, of course, culture is a major component for language study. Indeed, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the culture in which a language is embedded is a core part of that language's core DNA. I recently had this discussion with a colleague about a Chinese history curriculum. We were exploring how to make it more global in approach, but I was insistent that it needed to remain Sinocentric in order that our students acquire an understanding of allusions and references that are a fundamental component of the spoken, and even more, the written Chinese language.

Put simply, you cannot separate language from culture. So in addition to asking students to think like linguists, it's also important to have them think like diplomats. Some might argue that “anthropologist” might be more appropriate, but I like “diplomat” because it implies someone who must do more than understand or interpret a culture—he or she must be able to practically navigate through it on a daily basis to solve problems.

Student as Diplomat

Just as it is critically important for the language learner to recognize and understand patterns in language, it is equally necessary to be able to recognize patterns in culture. In both cases, it's not sufficient to merely observe the patterns, but also to interrogate and problematize them.

Here's why: In April 2011, *The New Republic* ran a feature on "The 9 Worst Diplomatic Blunders" that includes such transgressions as a band in Grenada striking up the national anthem of the Republic of China (Taiwan) at an event honoring the Ambassador of the *People's* Republic of China, and Michelle Obama putting her arm around the Queen of England.

There's even the story about an exchange of gifts in 2009 between President Obama and then British Prime Minister Gordon Brown. Brown gave Obama a framed commission for the warship HMS Resolute, whose wood was used to make a desk that has been in the White House since 1880, and a pen holder made from the wood of a contemporary ship, the HMS Gannet, that played a role in Victorian anti-slavery efforts. In exchange for this "cool gift" (as Maureen Dowd dubbed it in a *New York Times* story shortly after the meeting), Obama offered the "lame gift" (again, Dowd's words) of a set of twenty-five classic movie DVDs.

Just months after the meeting with Brown, Obama was off to Japan, where he was lauded by some—and bitterly criticized by others—for bowing to the Emperor. While most commentators agreed that the gesture was culturally appropriate in the Japanese context, many took the President to task for bowing before a foreign monarch. George Washington would not be amused! A few months after Obama's bow, Toyota's president made news when he bowed in apology for safety defects in the carmaker's brakes and accelerators. Many

commentators in Japan charged that he had not bowed deeply enough, and they read the gesture as a mere “sorry” rather than the more contrite and serious acceptance of responsibility and blame that they believed would be more appropriate in this situation.

“Learning another language gives you a different sense of the world, gives you a whole new perspective. When you translate language . . . you have to think about how they would think about it. The history always comes into the language. You have to get into their minds.”

–J’Lee, an International Studies Schools Network student in Denver, CO

Bowing is a tricky thing. After living in Japan for three years, my wife would laugh heartily every time she caught me speaking Japanese on the phone and bowing my head dutifully with every “hai” and “sou.” I’d have to consciously alter my bowing behavior when visiting her family in Seoul (less bowing than in Tokyo), and curtail it completely when I went to China, not to mention back in the United States. And can you imagine the horror my Korean wife felt when entering a large Italian-American family where every gathering began and ended with a long series of kisses and hugs?

If landing in Japan for the first time as a young person, it would obviously make sense to keenly observe the patterns of bowing behavior, just as it would make sense to observe patterns in the sound changes that accompany verb conjugations in the Japanese language. While it is clearly important to know when to “bow, kiss, or shake hands” (to echo the name of a popular book on international cultural and business practices), the missteps described above are unlikely to cause World War III.

But if there were any proof of the life-and-death value of global competence, it would be in the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. A 2012 *Washington Post* article notes more than 50 coalition troops being killed by their Afghan allies, “the majority stem[ming] from personal disputes and misunderstandings.”⁸ The U.S. military has trained soldiers using a video game designed

8 Sieff, Kevin and Richard Leiby. “Afghan troops get a lesson in American cultural ignorance.” *The Washington Post*, September 28, 2012. www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/afghan-troops-

to teach local customs, and now the Afghan military has released a guide to teach soldiers “the strange ways of the American soldier,” the goal being to “convince Afghan troops that when their Western counterparts do something deeply insulting, it’s likely a product of cultural ignorance and not worthy of revenge.” The guide cites examples such as NATO soldiers blowing their noses in public, patting counterparts on the back or even on the behind, and putting their feet up on desks and tables.

In another recent incident, U.S. soldiers attempted to burn almost 500 copies of the Koran housed in a prison library when they discovered that prisoners were passing notes in the pages of the books. The action caused crowds of protest, several acts of violence against U.S. forces, and decreasing trust and confidence in the U.S. military among their Afghan counterparts. While we might expect these types of cultural misunderstandings and conflicts between Americans and Afghans, there have been examples of communication issues even among the various coalition forces.

A 2008 study commissioned by the U.S. Army Research Laboratory and the U.K. Ministry of Defence documents the linguistic sources of coalition miscommunication. The study concludes that these miscommunications are not due only to “lexical and grammatical differences” between British and American English but also, and perhaps more importantly, to pragmatic issues involving “differences in the way the two cultures use a ‘common’ language.” One of the best examples given of this involves British politeness: A U.S. Air Force officer interviewed for the study reported that British officers would often issue orders in the form, “You may well wish to ...,” which resulted in U.S. personnel misinterpreting them as suggestions.

The example above proves the quip that the United States and Great Britain are indeed two countries separated by a common language.

I had a similar experience during my first trip to China. In the mid-1990s, I spent a year in Yantai, Shandong Province, where at the time there were only a small number of other foreigners, almost all of whom were mission-

get-a-lesson-in-american-cultural-ignorance/2012/09/28/6882621a-08d4-11e2-a10c-fa5a255a9258-story.html.

aries from Mississippi, Georgia, and some other southern states. While my Chinese friends encouraged me to make friends with my “laoxiang” (the Chinese term for people from the same hometown), I found that my New York-area Italian-American upbringing led to complete culture shock when dealing with Christian missionaries from the American South. Chinese culture is a lot closer to what I grew up with in the ways of food, family, and friendship. While my “laoxiang” and I were all Americans, I began to question and interrogate those inherited and accepted categories and constructions, most especially by recognizing patterns (much as a scientist would) in the data I was collecting from the real world.

In the same way, while people from Heilongjiang, Guangdong, and Ningxia are all Chinese, it's clear that there are cultural differences among them. Being globally competent doesn't mean that I'll instantly know the differences between them (or between Italian-Americans from the Northeast and Christian missionaries from the South)—what it does mean is that I will have the openness of mind and capacity for critical thinking to anticipate and appreciate that such differences will exist.

The “Chinese Room”

Part of applying these skills of a linguist and diplomat involves an intuitive understanding, not only of external patterns of language and culture, but also of oneself as a learner, and of individual perceptions, misperceptions, and interpretations. Some language learners become highly adept at manipulating grammatical patterns, but may never develop the kind of deep understanding of the language that will enable them to understand the nuances and subtleties of literature, philosophy, or slang or street talk. There’s an interesting analogy to this in the debate over whether a machine can develop true intelligence or even consciousness.

The philosopher John Searle developed the idea, appropriately enough, of the “Chinese Room” as a metaphor for what happens in computation. The Chinese Room is composed of a group of people, who know no Chinese, sitting in a room. These people are given a rulebook that tells them how to assemble groups of written Chinese characters into responses to questions that come in. So the people in the room are handed questions in Chinese (none of which they can understand), but they put together characters based on these rules and provide answers to the questions in what seems to an outside observer to be perfect Chinese.

Searle was using this argument to talk about how even though a system (or computer) may seem to “understand,” in reality all it’s doing is manipulating symbols according to rules that it has been given to create the illusion of understanding.

For anyone to become truly proficient in a target language, we need to break free of our own Chinese Rooms, and understand not only how the language works (by empowering ourselves to become “students as linguists”)

but also our own learning processes, challenges, and — most importantly of all! — talents.

It seems to me that a good language teacher can get a sense for those talents fairly quickly. I've reflected on my own language skills, such as in a 2006 essay in the literary journal *AGNI 63*, where I locate the origins of my lifelong interest in languages in an obsessive fascination with the accents I discovered on British television.⁹ While I grew up in a household that was largely composed of one or more dialects of New York-accented English, hearing the varieties of English spoken on British television opened to me the multiple possibilities of just how rich our language could be.

Listening to the sonorities of Oxbridge, Cockney, and Birmingham accents, and learning how to imitate all of them convincingly, made me both an enthusiastic and fairly competent mimic. This background served me well when I got my first chances to study Spanish and Russian in middle and high school.

My Russian language education was extremely formal; it revolved largely around memorizing declensions of nouns and adjectives, and perfective and imperfective forms of verbs. I was able to reel them off in convincingly accented Russian, but unfortunately never really understood how the system worked. I remember participating in the New York State Olympiada of Spoken Russian after having studied a couple of years of the language in high school. In stage one, I was on familiar ground, answering questions I'd prepared for and reciting long passages from Russian literature. The face of the teacher who was questioning me shone with satisfaction as I nailed another passage from Pushkin. In stage two, I entered in to more basic territory in linguistic terms, but nothing for which I had explicitly prepared. The teacher sitting in front of me was clearly wondering how I had made it this far. He sneered and rolled his eyes as I stumbled and stuttered in my feeble attempts to respond to his questions. At the time, it was confusing for me to understand how I could be so good at certain aspects of language learning and so poor at others.

9 Livaccari, Chris. "Of Emptiness, Nothingness, and Asymptotic Freedom." *AGNI 63* (2006). <http://www.bu.edu/agni/essays/print/2006/63-livaccari.html>.

My encounter with British accents had prepared me to speak clearly articulated, largely unaccented Russian, but my teachers and textbooks did not prepare me for understanding the subtleties of the Russian noun and verb systems or navigating the give-and-take of an actual conversation with a Russian speaker! And what those teachers and textbooks had prepared me for even less was how to understand myself as a learner. I don't think it was obvious to me at the time that I might be a gifted mimic but not as good at memorizing large lists of vocabulary or intuitively understanding the nuances of grammatical constructions. Had I known and understood those things at the time, I might have stuck with Russian and actually delved much deeper into those untranslated works by Dostoevsky, Chekhov, Bulgakov, and others that I cherish so much.

I was lucky to have had the opportunity to learn some Russian, and in subsequent years I reapplied some of my growing linguistic knowledge to the language I had studied as a child. Since my Russian teacher taught all of the grammar in Russian, using little or no English, I found over time that I was able to plug in the appropriate responses to questions without necessarily understanding those answers or why I was forming them as I did. I became increasingly skilled at manipulating Russian symbols (words), but much less adept at understanding the patterns and nuances that underlay them. This situation reminds me very much of the Chinese Room argument employed in the philosophy of mind.

Considering my students' talents and how I might break them free of their own Chinese Rooms, I think my predictions about their phonological abilities were pretty accurate after just the first day. I could hear almost immediately which students had an "ear for the language" and were able to pick up the distinctive sounds of the language, rather than speaking in approximations of English sounds.

The trick here is not to take those as final pronouncements on a student's abilities, but good information the teacher can use to help support and individualize the approach to learning for that student. We don't want to take students out of the Chinese Room and put them in another box, but constantly reevaluate our understanding of students' capacities, and constantly challenge them to go beyond.

Linguists and Diplomats Confronting Stereotypes

In the U.S. Foreign Service, presidential visits bring the best stories. Imagine a bunch of White House interns and volunteers with little or no understanding of the local language or culture, descending on an unsuspecting nation, and with the absolutely unqualified belief (like that of the religious zealot) that “our President” is the very center of the universe, the hub around which all else revolves—rather like the black hole at the center of our galaxy. The role of the Foreign Service Officer in these situations is to stand at the intersection of cultural misunderstanding and international incident, to mediate distrust and miscommunication, and at the end of the day, of course, to get the White House whatever it wants.

My first substantive assignment in the Foreign Service was to be the press lead for elements of President Clinton’s participation in the 2000 G8 summit in Okinawa, Japan. This was where I learned the hard way that phrases like “if they think x , then they must be smoking crack” didn’t translate very well (or at all) into Japanese. I’ve deleted the expletives here, but suffice to say it was extremely hard to get my non-Japanese-speaking White House counterparts to understand the subtleties of translation.

Most of us understand language—and indeed our world—largely through our mother tongue. What’s astonishing is that many professional linguists and philosophers of language in the English-speaking world are gloriously monolingual. Even Noam Chomsky himself is unlikely to be able to order a meal in a language other than English. How can someone grasp the nature and structure of language if he or she has only a single point of reference?

Like those White House staffers, many of my language students came to class thinking that other languages are basically just like English, with all the words

replaced. So if, for example, they wanted to say “I buy five books” in Japanese, all they had to do was replace each English word in the sentence with a corresponding Japanese word. But that of course doesn’t work; the appropriate Japanese sentence is structured in English as “I books five buy.” These teenagers proved themselves quicker than the White House staffers: Rather than feeling frustration about this difference in structure, most kids took it as a particularly compelling indication that the world seen through Japanese might look a bit different than one seen through English.

I don’t subscribe to strong versions of what’s come to be called the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, the idea that people who speak different languages actually think differently at the most basic levels. Statements of Whorfian ideas are most often delivered with long lists of Eskimo words for snow. The fact is that all of these words for snow can be translated into English (wet snow, loose snow, snow packed hard like ice, snow on trees, falling snow) — we just don’t view each of these terms as separate lexical items (that is, as individual words).

Japanese word order is something I enjoy exploring with students almost immediately because it lets them know immediately that the world is not as it seems. This is to say nothing of even more complex and nuanced differences between English and other languages. The language of the Maya, for example, exhibits a property (known as “ergativity” to linguists) in which the subject of intransitive verbs is identical with the object of transitive ones. While this makes no sense to most of us, what it means in practice is that in most Mayan languages, people say things like “*my* shot the turkey,” “*his* struck me,” and “*me* slept.”¹⁰

And there are of course many more extreme examples of languages structured so differently from English they would make your head spin. One linguistic fact of life seems to be that the more people speak and learn a language, the less complex it will become over time. This flies in the face of some prevailing notions about primitive languages, as it becomes crystal clear that the languages of so-called “aboriginal” people are viciously more complex than languages like English, Spanish, French, German, or Mandarin. For more on

10 Coe, Michael D., and Mark Van Stone. *Reading the Maya Glyphs*. New York: Thames & Hudson,

this, an excellent account is given in George Lakoff's classic (and definitely a runner-up for best book title ever), *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*.

What's even more interesting is that we can subvert commonly accepted categories like English or Mandarin, both of which come in a bewildering array of flavors and colors. Languages change across distances and over time, and with contexts and social groups. I think I'd agree with the humanist George Steiner whose book *After Babel* developed the idea that virtually all communication is an act of translation—not merely between different languages, but even across the same language. This is a beautiful idea and one that helps us see that every act of communication we make involves an interpretive act of one sort or another by the receiver of that communication.

There are even those who have tried to reduce all of language and cognition to metaphor. One of the best examples of the central role of metaphor comes in the physicist's search for the fundamental principles of the universe and the fundamental building blocks of matter, which are called "quarks" (the word was taken by the physicist Murray Gell-Mann, from an evocative passage in James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*). Just as atoms may be said to have positive and negative "charge," quarks are divided into a number of types that include properties like "color," "charm," and "strangeness." A quark's color obviously has nothing to do with the spectrum of visible light, and "charmed" quarks are not necessarily engaging dinner companions. And you might notice that I referred in the paragraph above to the fact that English and Mandarin come in a wide variety of "flavors and colors," which is also a metaphor, but one that you no doubt instantly understood.

In addition to metaphor and the contingency of language structure, humor is another great way to challenge and deepen students' received opinions and understanding of language. When my wife, a native Korean speaker, began to laugh at *Seinfeld*, I knew she had reached a peak in her English language skills and understanding of American—specifically New York—culture. Humor is a difficult thing to translate; some would say it's the most difficult thing. This is one of the unfortunate reasons that Hollywood produces such awful, formulaic movies: explosions and car chases translate a lot better across linguistic and cultural boundaries than do wit, sarcasm, and subtlety.

So it was little surprise to me that when the satirical publication *The Onion* announced North Korean leader Kim Jong Un as their choice for “Sexiest Man Alive,” some in the Chinese media failed to get the joke.¹¹ The online version of the *People’s Daily* ran the story as straight news, translating literally from the English original, and the Chinese news outlet was lambasted in the U.S. media for taking it seriously.

In some ways, it’s not exactly fair to criticize. Looked at literally, the language in *The Onion* piece is pretty straightforward. And after all, Kim Jong-un is the first North Korean leader whose wife has been featured prominently in the media for her beauty and grace, so we may conclude that at least one attractive woman likes his style!

It’s an understanding of the broader context that seems to be lacking here. Taking language literally is something that happens all the time. I remember a former student of mine who wished to describe himself as a “hard worker” in a Chinese language essay. He went straight to the dictionary and found the word for “hard” and the word for “worker” and described himself as a 坚硬的劳动者, essentially a rock-hard (as if he were made of steel) laborer, like something out of a Marvel comic book, which said nothing of his diligence and work ethic.

There’s a famous story about an American official who, speaking through an interpreter, complimented his Chinese counterpart for having a beautiful wife. The Chinese official responded with a common display of Chinese modesty and humility, saying, “Where, where?” This is a typical, if now somewhat quaint and antiquated reply to a compliment, meaning something like, “Where can you see this great thing you are saying about me?” The American, after wrinkling his brow for a few moments, declared: “From head to toe.”

Sad to say, I’ve fallen in to this trap myself. Presenting in Chinese at a conference, I caused havoc by referring to a short video that my wife and I had produced as a 小电影, or “little movie.” Thinking literally, my meaning was a

11 “Kim Jong-Un Named The Onion’s Sexiest Man Alive For 2012.” *The Onion*, November 12, 2012. <http://www.theonion.com/article/kim-jong-un-named-the-onions-sexiest-man-alive-for-30379>.

“short, simple film,” but what I didn’t realize at the time was that this was also a colloquial term for pornographic films. The audience, mostly linguists and language teachers, then launched into a discussion of whether or not what I’d said was incorrect or offensive, or whether my words were accurate and could only be misconstrued by those in the audience with dirty minds.

A final anecdote: At a conference a couple of years ago, a colleague challenged us to define the differences in usage among the labels “geek,” “nerd,” “dweeb,” and “dork.” The native English speakers among us had the most difficult time trying to articulate these. After a protracted discussion of examples, linguistic semantics, and pragmatics, he finally revealed to us a Venn diagram that shows the different meanings represented by each of these terms. If the *People’s Daily* editors had taken the language of *The Onion* piece too literally, we hadn’t been taking our own words literally enough!

At the end of the day, we all take language a little too literally—and a little too seriously—much of the time. The more we learn about language and culture, and how to recognize and analyze patterns in language and culture, the better prepared we’ll be to spot our own presuppositions and misunderstandings.

For those of us in the language education business, there’s nothing more important and nothing more fun. Indeed, even in looking at a seemingly monolingual world, we can discover a rich multilingualism of sorts and ask what it really means to speak or think in our “mother tongue.”

Mother Tongues

In her essay “Mother Tongue,” Amy Tan sets out to recreate “all the Englishes [she] grew up with.” I used to teach this essay to undergraduates at New York University and I employed it as a jumping-off point for an exploration of students’ own mother tongues. And I’ve often wondered about my own. Is it, for example, the kind of Standard American English I approximate in my speech today, or the Long Island dialect I spoke before about age 18? Or is it perhaps the dialect my wife and I speak at home now—mostly English, with a strong Korean influence and bits of Mandarin and Japanese mixed in?

In graduate school, I did a study of what linguists refer to as evidence of language transfer. The subject was my wife (a native Korean speaker) learning Japanese (her second foreign language, after English); I looked for English influence in her Japanese. While I found a few traces, what’s more interesting is that I now speak English at home with a bit of Korean language transfer, e.g. leaving out articles here and there, and pronouncing words with an ever-so-slight Korean accent. For example, I’ll often soften the “th” in “this” by pronouncing it more like a “d” sound. It’s actually easier to say and sounds better too—just try it. We’ve also naturally—and completely unconsciously—adopted several Japanese and Korean words into our largely English conversations because they’re hard to translate or fully capture in English. For example, if we’re about to miss the train, we’ll automatically say to one another, “*giri-giri*”—the Japanese expression suggesting “it’s going to be tight.” If one of us is hungry and we need to wait a while before dinner, the other will likely say “*chom chama*,” a Korean expression meaning “endure it” or “be tough.”

“The most unique thing about learning another world language is learning to ‘sound funny in your own voice’ — you get to express yourself in a different way than in your native language.”

—Oscar, an International Studies Schools Network student in Denver, CO

While our home language would sound strange to others, to us it's perfectly intelligible and, if anything, richer than the standard variety. Amy Tan observes in her essay that people would criticize her mother's “broken” English, thinking it ungrammatical and nonsensical, but she believes that her mother's speech contained all the nuances and richness of a complete and perfect language. In a similar way, what's often termed “Black English” (or African American Vernacular) is sometimes caricatured as being inferior or imperfect. The reality is that it is a fully grammatical dialect of English in which the verbs, for example, follow precise and consistent rules and patterns. Although those rules may be somewhat different from most “mainstream” varieties of English, they are no less regular or systematic.

But why should we care about these mother tongues in the first place? Wouldn't it be easier if everyone just spoke Standard American English? By most accounts, there are something like five- to six-thousand languages spoken in the world, the majority of which are on their way to extinction. I'm not sure that people appreciate what will be lost if we let these languages die, but one good analogy is to look at ancient languages. When Jean-François Champollion used the Rosetta Stone to unlock the secrets of Egyptian hieroglyphics, that language had long been lost to the world. By learning the language of the ancient Egyptians, we've been able to uncover a tremendous amount of information about their culture, history, and science. Similarly, more recent breakthroughs in deciphering the script of the ancient Maya have opened up new worlds of understanding about the astonishingly complex civilizations of the Pre-Columbian New World.

We continue to put the Maya glyphs and Egyptian hieroglyphics — and written language in general — on an academic pedestal, while ignoring the plight of the many minority languages (most of them largely unwritten) that now face extinction across the planet. We should do what we can to preserve all

of our precious linguistic heritage, and pay tribute to all the Englishes (or Spanishes, Russians, Arabics, or Swahilis) that we speak. In this way, there are lots of misconceptions and misunderstandings about language, perhaps none more significant than the notion of language “fluency.” This term has a very convoluted and complex history—just take the example of former Republican presidential candidate Jon Huntsman.

What Does It Mean to Be “Fluent” in a Language?

Jon Huntsman—former Utah Governor, U.S. Ambassador to China, and a former Republican candidate for president—was once at the center of a discussion that reveals our assumptions about language perhaps better than any other: the idea of fluency.

In an interview with Stephen Colbert, Huntsman, often referred to as a fluent speaker of Mandarin Chinese, drew headlines when he used Mandarin to jokingly ask Colbert to be his running mate in the 2012 election. While his remark was not completely unintelligible to a Chinese speaker, it was not particularly grammatical by most standards (and he clearly misplaced the word “vice” in his sentence). Some commentators then jumped in to debate whether or not Huntsman was actually *fluent* in Chinese, ultimately missing the real point of the matter.

I can’t tell you how many times I’ve had to respond to the question of whether or not I am fluent in another language. My answers usually result in a lot of grimacing from my interlocutor and some regret that he or she has asked the question. I’m likely to respond along these lines: If you want to talk about nanotechnology, for example, then I’m not even fluent in English, though it is my native tongue. Yet when it comes to everyday expressions like “what’s for dinner?” or “where’s the bathroom?” I could assert with confidence my fluency in at least half a dozen languages!

In Mandarin Chinese, which I studied mostly with an interest in literature and history, I can speak quite fluently about the influence of Buddhism on Tang dynasty culture, but don’t ask me to discuss the latest stock exchange figures. In Japanese, which I studied primarily as a diplomat, I can rattle off the names of a half-dozen non-proliferation treaties, but would have diffi-

culty giving a speech on the Chinese Buddhism I thought I knew so well. In Korean, let's just say I can speak well enough to elicit a lot of responses from people that I neither understand nor know quite how to respond to.

The U.S. Foreign Service has a well-known scale for language proficiency that many people use to assert that languages like Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Arabic are three or four times more difficult than languages like French, Spanish, and Italian. What this scale is really measuring is not the inherent “difficulty” of a language, but rather the time it takes for a native speaker of American English to attain a certain level of proficiency in it (leaving fluency aside for the moment). As a native speaker of English who studied Japanese in Tokyo together with a wife who is a native speaker of Korean, I can tell you that Japanese is not an inherently difficult language for a Korean speaker.

Although I'd studied several years of the language prior to arriving in Japan, my wife was, after a few months—with no prior training—able to master tons of vocabulary and even read newspapers with ease. It was only later that I realized I was *not* completely hopeless as a Japanese learner, but rather that Japanese and Korean use much of the same Classical Chinese-derived vocabulary for concepts written about in newspapers. While my wife's fluency in reading a Japanese newspaper quickly exceeded mine, there is a lot of English-derived vocabulary in Japanese that I could master as quickly as she could.

So what, after all, is fluency? I'm not sure that the concept is particularly useful at all the way people commonly use it. It is not like nirvana, a state of mind that you magically reach at the endpoint of some spiritual journey. It's perhaps more like high blood pressure, a spectrum along which opinions and definitions are likely to differ. Is Jon Huntsman fluent in Chinese? For my part, I have no problem acknowledging that he is. He can clearly communicate with people and understand what people are saying to him—maybe not about nanotechnology, but certainly about what time dinner is, or when the Embassy ball begins.

And unlike the vast majority of American political leaders, he displays an engagement with another language and culture, and significant experience living and working in a Chinese-speaking environment. While he may or may not be ready to deliver a stump speech in Chinese—though I'm quite

confident that with some preparation he could—people in China appreciated the fact that he could speak at least some Chinese. Some have taken as evidence for Huntsman’s “poor” Chinese the fact that he did most of his public speaking in China in English. It needs to be understood, however, that most diplomats stick to their native language when addressing policy issues or sensitive topics because no matter how fluent you are in another language, if it’s not your native tongue, there will undoubtedly be subtleties and nuances that you’ll miss. In everyday conversation, these are not usually a problem, but when you’re talking about exchange rates or non-proliferation treaties, it’s important to be precise.

Fluency is very much like another fundamental concept that people get completely wrong—that of a “language” vs. a “dialect,” the best characterization of which is the old linguistic quip that a language is just a dialect with an army and a navy. After all, Cantonese and Mandarin are at least as different from one another as French and Italian, even though both are referred to commonly as “dialects” of Chinese, rather than as separate “languages.”

Though we might well express skepticism about Jon Huntsman’s level of Chinese language proficiency, I for one am not about to give him the Foreign Service language exam anytime soon. At the very least, I think it would be fair to say that his learning of Chinese and interactions with Chinese culture give him a window on the world that many American politicians simply do not have, and for that I think we should be appreciative—and it’s a model we can hold up as teachers or learners of world languages. It’s once again about the skills and insights that being multilingual impart to an individual, and less about how many vocabulary words you have committed to memory.

A later debate in this same vein revolved around whether Huntsman’s Chinese was as good as former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s. Rudd displays a far deeper level of proficiency in Chinese that includes a range of academic and professional vocabulary that I’ve never heard in Huntsman’s Chinese. I think what’s most intriguing about the intense interest in determining whether or not Rudd or Huntsman speaks Mandarin fluently is that it seems to reflect the outmoded idea of the difficulty or “inscrutability” of Chinese. People are still stuck on the notion that Chinese is an incredibly difficult language

that is impossible to learn, unless you're brought up speaking it, so anyone who claims proficiency in the language is immediately regarded either with suspicion, e.g. you can't *really* speak Chinese, or with admiration, e.g. you must be incredibly smart to have learned such an impossible language.

The bottom line is that although developing literacy in Chinese and learning to read and write is a very challenging process—even for native speakers, it should be noted—the basics of Chinese grammar and sentence structure are relatively easy to learn, even compared to languages like Spanish, French, and Italian. While the language has fewer words that are cognates with English and a tonal system that is unfamiliar to English speakers, with some effort, anyone can learn the language, particularly if he or she lives and works in a Chinese-speaking environment.

If anything, this idea of the difficulty of learning Chinese for foreigners is possibly even more widespread among Chinese people themselves. This mirrors what happened in Japan several decades ago when a few Japanese-speaking foreigners made a sizable living appearing on Japanese TV just to demonstrate that they could speak Japanese—the so-called *gaijin tarento* (“foreigner talents”). As Japan's economy grew and the nation became more globally engaged, interest in foreigners solely because they could speak Japanese tapered off, and we are just beginning to see this kind of shift in China—though most foreigners can still impress with a simple “ni hao!”

Rudd and Huntsman represent a first generation of politicians who have developed proficiency in a non-European language, and I think that in and of itself should be celebrated. There have been comments about the Spanish-speaking abilities of George W. Bush or NYC Mayor Michael Bloomberg, but the scrutiny has never been so extreme.

While Huntsman is in no danger of being mistaken for a native Chinese speaker any time soon, we should be thankful to have politicians who have had the experience of learning another language and culture—particularly one as different from English as Chinese—in a deep and meaningful way. Whether or not they can negotiate a trade agreement in Mandarin is simply beside the point.

Getting Back to Patterns

Thus far we have explored the ways in which language and culture are intimately related, and the ways in which deep learning about language and culture—and the patterns underlying them—are critically important foundations for the development of intercultural competency. One of my favorite activities of the year when I taught Japanese was introducing the subject of teaching affirmative and negative commands (“do this” or “don’t do that”). Instead of turning to the appropriate page in the textbook, I’d enter the classroom with a downtrodden, dour look and tell my high school class that I was having a lot of problems with my marriage—and receive looks of stunned silence from this crowd of reality show-obsessed drama queens and social media addicts. I’d then put on a video of my wife (with whom I studied Japanese in Yokohama in the first year of our marriage) following me around the house telling me in Japanese what “to do” or “not to do”: “Don’t drink wine; drink milk! Don’t listen to heavy metal; listen to classical music! Don’t eat cookies; eat an orange!” After the laughter subsided, I would ask my students to analyze the data with which they had been presented: What was my wife saying to me, and how are those forms constructed in Japanese? The students would have to do a lot of analysis to understand the ways in which the forms were made and how sounds changed in Japanese to make them. For example, verbs that ended in “mu” would become “-nde” or “-manai de” in the construction, but verbs ended in “-ite” or “-kanai de,” etc. The most fun came when they constructed their own role-playing using the same expressions to depict their parents, a difficult roommate, or overbearing friend. This is a simple example, but one that exemplifies the key theme of putting the data first and having the students elicit the interpretations and analysis. This skill set is the core of the pattern recognition skills that students must acquire.

Final Thoughts

It should be evident that as both a language educator and lover of languages, I've become frustrated with instrumental and utilitarian arguments for why students should learn another language. While I don't deny that learning Mandarin might help you get a better job in the future, I think that's entirely beside the point. It's not necessarily going to be the fact that you can speak Mandarin and use it for your work that's going to secure your future; it's the fact that the process of learning Mandarin has helped you achieve the kinds of skills employers will be looking for, like mental flexibility, the ability to understand and articulate things from different perspectives, and the capacity for creativity, innovation, and out-of-the-box thinking.

Which is all another way of saying that it's important to enjoy and appreciate the process of language learning. The benefits come from the process and the journey as much as the end result, and I fear that many in the field have put such an emphasis on achieving raw linguistic proficiency that they pay less attention to the development of the broader and more important skill sets that include pattern recognition, intercultural competency, cultural literacy, and metalinguistic awareness.

I recently had conversations with 4th and 5th grade students in both the French and Chinese bilingual programs at my school about the relationship between language and culture. One of their main topics was translation, and they amazed me with their keen insights into the process of trying to find commensurability between the two languages they're using at school. Many of them observed that you cannot translate anything literally and that every act of translation is in fact an act of interpretation. As I listened to them with a big smile on my face, I was reminded of Steiner and Leopardi, and my own journey of discovery as a learner—and lover—of the diversity of human language.

FINAL THOUGHTS

To the next generation that is taking up the gauntlet for a global and multilingual education, I entreat you to appreciate the beauty, the fun, and the insights that you'll meet along the way. And to those of you reading this, I want to offer a call to action. If you are a teacher of languages, begin to include more authentic materials in your teaching, ask your students to make meaning and analyze patterns of language for themselves, and cultivate in your students an attunement and appreciation of the musical beauty of language. If you are a learner of languages, look beyond the immediate necessity of how to order in a restaurant, and consider the formal beauties, grand architecture, and glorious symphony of language. And if you are a parent, cultivate in your children a sense of the possibilities offered by becoming multilingual. Push them to consider the ways that the languages they speak and learn are both alike and different, ask them to confront problems of translation and interpretation, and—most of all—help them have fun with language learning.

No matter what language you learn—even the one you learned from your mother—remember that it's a lifelong journey, and that the trip is as valuable as the destination!

About the Author



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Discover more of Chris's writings on language and culture at AsiaSociety.org/chris-livaccari.



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