

Natural born linguists: what drives multi-language speakers?



Speaking up for languages: Richard Simcott founded the Polyglot Conference to bring linguists together. Photograph: Polyglot Conference.

Susanna Zaraysky, 36, speaks seven languages and has lived in nine different countries. With Russian as her first language, she now lives in California.

Being multilingual is fundamental to who I am because I think in different languages. My mind starts a thought in one language, then finds a particular word in another language that fits exactly what I am thinking and then may switch to a third language by the end of the paragraph.

Each language resonates with me in a distinct way, bringing out a different part of my character. Russian makes me more melancholic because of its minor tone. In French, I am super pensive. Brazilian Portuguese is a very flirtatious and sweet language.

There's a downside though: when I'm in a monolingual environment for too long, I yearn to switch to a different language. I have to think "will this person understand me if I say something in language X"? That can censor my speech or slow me down. It's fun to be with other polyglots because we just hop from one language to another naturally. We don't do it to show off – it's just how we think.

I had an early start at learning languages. I moved to the US from the former Soviet Union when I was three and learnt English quickly. For some reason though, my teacher didn't think I was good enough at languages to study them in middle school and she checked the "not ready" box on a form. But my parents were adamant that I start learning, so they took the form, changed the answer to "yes" and forged the teacher's signature. It goes to show that academic achievement isn't always a good indicator of one's ability to learn a language.

You have to listen to a language like it's music. For me, the key to learning is being able to listen – paying attention to patterns, the fluctuations of speech and the emphasis in the words. I listen to foreign languages as though they are songs – and that's how I remember words and the melody of speech.

If I had just studied languages the formal way in school, I would never have become a hyperpolyglot. Learning languages is not just about memorising vocabulary and grammar. I supplement my classes and self-study books with lots of songs, movies, TV and radio. For instance, when I learnt Portuguese, I listened to local Portuguese immigrant radio while driving to work each day. I listened to the news and commercials for companies I didn't care about, along with old Portuguese folk music that wasn't my taste.

The hardest part of language learning is remembering boring and complicated grammar rules. Songs help to reinforce the rules, once you find the patterns in the lyrics.

Originally from Chester, Richard Simcott, 36, has studied more than 30 languages and is one of Britain's leading hyperpolyglots. He is the Goethe Institute's ambassador for multilingualism and co-founder of the Polyglot Conference.

I was always fascinated by languages and accents – I tried to mimic them all the time when I was a child. At school I was always drawn to the kids who had some link to abroad and I wanted to find out more. I tried learning bits of various languages from anyone willing to teach me something new and I started buying foreign language books. I got to study languages at school and university eventually, and it grew from there.

Today, my daily life is multilingual. It seems unusual to people who meet me for the first time. It looks like a party trick when they find out that you speak so many languages, especially when they realise that it's not a question of just knowing a few phrases. I often get mistaken for other nationalities and I honestly no longer regard nationality as important. It seems almost odd for me to talk about being just British now.

Learning languages is an endless and ongoing process for me, which I intend to continue for as long as my body will allow. Last month, I went on an intensive Icelandic course, followed by a week in the Faroe Islands, picking up some Faroese. Now I am in Poland, trying to improve my Polish again. And I'm about to start my second year of Chinese studies at the University of Dalarna. When I'm at home I speak Macedonian with my wife and English, French, German and Spanish to my daughter.

When I am really in the zone, I put in some study hours pretty much every day. It ranges from an hour or two up to eight hours a day. Usually, I prefer to go to the country at some point to use what I have

learned because it helps things to gel a little better.

But I don't think about the different languages all at once. If I did, I'd go mad. I can't think how the languages stay separate in my brain – I simply start a new language and don't think about the others, unless I see obvious links to help the learning process and to understand grammar.

I find it rewarding to keep my brain active and I love communicating with people in their native languages. It gives a completely unique view of a country when you can go there and interact with the locals in their language and on their terms. But there is more to it than that though – each language has its own way of expressing thoughts and ideas, so you get a real insight into diverse thinking. Language carries the culture of the country that uses it and when you internalise it, it becomes a part of you too.

Time is my enemy. Time is the hardest thing about language learning: I never have enough of it.

Alex Rawlings grew up in south London and is now studying German and Russian at Oxford University. Last year he was named Britain's most multilingual student, speaking 11 languages.

I'm an only child and I used to have long summers in Greece and Japan trying to play with the other kids, but none of them spoke any English at that age. It struck me how nice would it be to be able to talk to anybody in the world, regardless of what language they spoke. I started asking for language courses for Christmas and, by the time I was 14, learning languages had become my main hobby. I would pick a new language each year and see how far I got with it.

Pronunciation is the most important thing for me – I don't like to barge into another language and impose my way of speaking onto it. So I start off very basic: I learn greetings from free podcasts, websites or YouTube videos and just practise pronunciation and spelling. Once I start to feel more confident I move on to more formal study with grammar books or courses. I make sure I get my hands on a lot of music from the language, or subtitled films, so that my ear is tuned in to the new sounds and intonations. The dead time when you're on a bus or ironing or doing any mundane task is the most crucial time for fitting in subconscious language learning, which will all pay off in the long term.

I can't imagine my life without languages. The enormous number of opportunities I've had to travel and to work are all down to putting in a few hours here and there and making an effort to learn languages. Each new language gives me an entirely different perspective on the world. And exposure to different cultures allows me to see things in different ways, and to develop a whole new understanding of the way things work.

Being able to break out of the English-speaking world and find people who have had nothing to do with the west as we understand it is exhilarating. For instance, I stayed with a family in Albania recently and, if I hadn't been able to talk to them in a mixture of Greek and Italian, I wouldn't have heard their amazing stories about arriving in Italy on dinghies and making their way to London in the back of a lorry.

Learning new languages never stops: there is always more to learn, new places to go, and new people to meet. I don't obsess about mastering one or two languages to near native level, because for the same amount of effort I can get much further and do far more with an intermediate or advanced level in several. But my student days are starting to run out and the prospect of searching for a career is looming closer – so I am thinking about taking a couple of languages to a much higher level. Speaking other languages at native level is an entirely different task with different rewards to just being a polyglot.

Benny Lewis, 31, is a hyperpolygot from Ireland who has been learning languages and traveling the world for more than a decade.

I did poorly in languages in school. I barely passed German and, until I was 21, I only spoke English. I moved to Spain after I graduated and managed to live there for six months without picking up any Spanish. I kept telling myself that I didn't have the language gene.

Eventually I decided to put my excuses aside and dive in. It took a few weeks, but as soon as I had a basic conversation in Spanish I got hooked. That was 10 years ago, and since then I've travelled the world while learning the local language.

I don't think visiting the country of the language you're learning is really that necessary nowadays, because of the internet. But if your goal is to speak the language well then talking to people is essential. For instance, I recently learnt Egyptian Arabic while staying in Brazil by spending two hours a day practicing on Skype. I meet people as much as possible with the only rule being no English allowed. I'll stumble at first, but gain confidence and learn from books specifically to handle particular issues holding me back in those conversations.

I have been travelling the world non-stop for more than a decade and everything I own in the world comes with me and weighs just 23kg. I'm going to carry on for the next couple of years and, with each new country, that will of course require learning its local tongue.

When you're traveling, you really open up so many doors by knowing the local language. I've had Easter dinner with four generations of Italians, heard an elderly Czech lady share her experiences of life during the second world war, got cheap windsurfing lessons on a Brazilian island because I could

take the local rate, and got introduced to basic Kung Fu from the son of a famous master, while in a farming village in China. None of these would have been possible if I'd tried forcing English on the locals.

Getting familiar with a language in the initial stages is the hardest because you have to tune into the noise and distinguish comprehensible sounds from what someone is saying to you. Although everyone loves a quick fix, with software or expensive courses, the only real way to get through this tough stage is to grin and bear it, and put in the time to talk to native speakers. I've learned to get numb to being aware that I'm making mistakes, so this stage has become easier with time, as I become less embarrassed to make mistakes. That confidence allows me to strive onward to the next level.

At first, I had some problems mixing them up. What worked very effectively however was consistent practice and then making body language associations. For instance, European Spanish, Italian and French come from different parts of your mouth, and even postures can vary. I incorporate this into my behaviour as it helps me blend in better, but also helps me to compartmentalise the languages in my mind. Once you get better at the languages, you are much more comfortable and far less likely to mix them up.