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Written by Maureen Younger

VOICES

The Upside of Being A Cunning Linguist

September 26 was International Day of European Languages. Did you notice? Mais non? Then *Maureen Younger* wants a word with you.

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Despite being 100% British, I speak five languages. I say five – I only admit to speaking Russian if I'm pretty certain no one else around me does. (It is a very difficult language). After studying German and Russian at university – mistakenly thinking the latter would be similar to German – I went on to live in Spain and France. As you can no doubt surmise, I've always had a rather focused life plan.

Thanks to learning languages, I studied in the Soviet Union (yes, I'm that old), met Egon Schiele's nephew in Vienna who, despite his advanced years, jokingly asked me to marry him; I lived in Paris, Berlin, Frankfurt and worked as a holiday rep in Spain (you can't win them all). My life has thus been enriched by opportunities I would have missed out on otherwise.

More importantly, learning languages opened my mind to new possibilities and ways of thinking. You say things differently in other languages. You learn concepts and ideas that don't exist in your own language. And by dint of this, you also learn to accept things are different simply because they are. In the process, you gain a greater understanding of different countries, cultures and peoples. It's then harder to make glib statements about all three when you've lived in those places and soaked up their culture.

I remember a comedian who had a joke along the lines that the only two famous Austrians were Hitler and Josef Fritzl. That's a bit like saying the only two famous Brits are Cromwell and Fred West. Now, I can bore for Britain on Austrian culture – and sometimes do. And while the writer Stefan Zweig is undeniably not a household name in the UK, most Brits have heard of Kafka, Freud, Mozart, Schubert, Strauss, Mahler, Schiele, Klimt, Billy Wilder, Fritz Lang, Rilke and Arnold Schwarzenegger. When you hear a comment that basically reduces Germanic culture to the 12 years of the Nazi period, it's a pretty safe bet the person saying it didn't learn German at school.

"Admittedly, English has become – and excuse my Latin here – the lingua franca of the modern world."

And it's thanks to learning German that I've come across some amazing literature and ideas that might have passed me by. Now, obviously, you don't have to be fluent in a language to read foreign literature. However, I'd argue you are more likely to do so if you speak the language and/or have a keen interest in the culture.

Unfortunately, a lot of people in the UK still believe they don't need to learn languages. Admittedly, English has become – and excuse my Latin here – the lingua franca of the modern world. This has clearly annoyed the French, whose language held that position for years. You only have to flick through a Tolstoy novel to see how the Russian upper classes would prefer speaking French to their own tongue. (Or just take my word for it – it's a lot quicker).

Another argument I've heard Brits use is that they can't learn a language. This is clearly untrue. They've all learned English so they can learn a language; it's that it's often badly taught. I know this from experience. I went to a rather rough school in North London, where I did my German A-level in one year for the simple reason I was the only one in the class.



Between the ages of 11 and 13, I too thought I was rubbish at languages. I was learning French or, more accurately, I was attending French classes. But my French was appalling and I couldn't wait to drop the subject. At the time I loved history. Having Scottish parents but growing up in England meant I was fed on a diet of Scottish history and Scottish heroes such as Wallace and The Bruce from a very early age.

Then, at 13, I had to choose another language to learn. Spanish was full so I opted for German. And then something amazing happened which literally changed the course of my life: my German teacher was brilliant.

I have no idea what Mrs Jacobs was doing teaching at our school but she was an inspiration. She taught German in a way that made me love the language so much I would buy German grammar books and study them at home. (Yes, she was that good). She would use words like conjugate which we'd never heard of despite having learned French for two years. She so inspired me and empowered me into believing I could learn, I started buying French books and working on my French. Needless to say, it began to improve.

Mrs Jacobs showed me I could learn a language. It was old school – we learned grammar. I think this is what makes learning foreign languages so seemingly impenetrable to the average Brit. Britain is probably the only country in Europe where grammar isn't really taught. It's not unusual to meet well-educated people in this country who struggle to define what conjugate means or a phrasal verb. (If they know the latter, nine times out of 10 they've taught English as a foreign language). This lack of knowledge would be unthinkable in Germany or France. Brits tend not to understand the mechanics behind their own language, so not unreasonably balk when it comes to learning the mechanics of another.

Thanks to Mrs Jacobs, when it finally came to choosing my O Levels (again, yes, I know, I'm that old), I dropped my former great love, history, and continued to study French and German. My school tried to get me into Oxbridge but I refused on the grounds I didn't want to mix with posh people. (I implied I was clever, I never said I was a genius.)

Nevertheless, I've still had some amazing opportunities and built some great friendships. I've studied and lived abroad, had some unusual jobs, including playing an angry German housewife in *Band of Brothers* and receiving a Christmas present from Tom Hanks! And if nothing else has persuaded you of the usefulness of learning languages, maybe this will: I remember simultaneously flirting with three different men in three different languages at a party. Yes, being a cunning linguist opens up

exponentially the number of people you can have a really good flirt with, and if nothing else, can be incredibly good for your love life!

[@maureenyounger](#)

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WRITTEN BY MAUREEN YOUNGER

A London-Scottish, multi-lingual, much-travelled stand up comic working on the mainstream, urban and gay comedy circuits, actor and writer. www.maureenyounger.com @MaureenYounger

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