

Worlds Are Created From Words

From the late 1950s through the 2000s, enrollment in foreign language programs at the university level grew steadily. After 2009, language class enrollments began to drop.

[Leigh Jones, from WORLD Radio](#), interviewed several professors to find out why college students are less interested in learning a foreign language. Julianne Bryant, who teaches Spanish at Biola University, attributes the decline, in part, to the recession in 2008, which led students to pursue degrees that might lead to better pay. Students perceive language-learning to be too hard, and they often don't see the payoff in acquiring that skill until they are out in the work world.

The bigger concern of Bryant and other professors is not economic, but cultural. English is the *lingua franca* today, even though most of the world doesn't speak it (only one in five, actually). Students have adopted the widespread cultural assumption that English is the only language that really matters. If you're privileged with English as your native tongue, why put in the time or effort to learn a different language?

The answer has more to do with personal formation than merely the ability to communicate. Donna Summerlin, head of the department of language and literature at Lee University, sees language learning at the heart of a liberal arts education. "We live in a global society and people to be truly educated need to know something about the world beyond their little corner of it."

True. That's why it's ironic to see the number of people who speak other languages increasing in the United States at the same time so many language programs are closing. [Jones's report](#) showed that, due to the need for bilingual people, some professionals find better compensation as translators than teachers.

Languages as Worlds

Not long ago, I picked up the new book from Gaston Dorren (a famous polyglot who speaks six languages and can read nine more). [Babel: Around the World in Twenty Languages](#) opens with a quote from Alok Rai:

"Language is such an intimate possession, something that one possesses in the same measure that one is possessed by it. Language is bound up with foundations of one's being, with memories and emotions, with the subtle structures of the worlds in which one lives."

Language is tightly connected to how we perceive reality. We inhabit a world of language. For

example, in Romanian there are two major words for tree: *pom* and *copac*. One refers to fruit-bearing trees, and the other to any tree. There is overlap with these synonyms (and many times they are used interchangeably), but in order to use them with dictionary precision, one must become an expert on identifying types of trees. Another example would be the more than [a dozen words for snow](#) in Central Alaskan Yupik.

When seen in this light, language learning becomes more than just doing diagrams, memorizing vocabulary, or figuring out the right verb tenses. The more fluent you are in another language, the more you realize that some words are virtually impossible to translate accurately. You come across concepts and shades of meaning that find no one-to-one correspondence. You have to live within the world of the language before you can fully grasp the meaning of a word or phrase.

This is why Bible scholars make the claim that “all translation is treachery.” It’s not that we can’t translate well, but that we can’t translate *all*. Words do not always capture all the particular shades of meaning when going from one tongue to another.

Benefits of Being Bilingual

What’s more, languages provide different structures of thought. Speaking another language is learning how to navigate a different world, with its own expressions, colloquialisms, and linguistic logic. For this reason, the benefits of being fluent in two or more languages go far beyond the “ability to communicate.” Over time, you find you can switch mental tracks in your mind. You think differently when you can enter into another linguistic world and view things from a different mental superstructure.

A few years ago, I wrote about the [“brainy benefits of being bilingual,”](#) and I included [an excerpt from Time magazine](#) that explained a few of the cognitive benefits of knowing another language:

Research is increasingly showing that the brains of people who know two or more languages are different from those who know just one—and those differences are all for the better. Multilingual people, studies show, are better at reasoning, at multitasking, at grasping and reconciling conflicting ideas. They work faster and expend less energy doing so, and as they age, they retain their cognitive faculties longer, delaying the onset of dementia and even full-blown Alzheimer’s disease.

Learning another language stretches our minds and opens up new windows of imagination. It also gives us more words with which to praise our King. *O, for a thousand tongues to sing our great Redeemer’s praise!* (Might we at least try for two or three?)

Turnaround?

Perhaps we will see a turnaround in language learning on university campuses. Surely we need more people who can see the world from various angles—something that fluency in another language makes possible.

Perhaps we will also see renewed enthusiasm among church leaders for learning the biblical languages. One of the best ways to bridge the gap between the cultures of the biblical authors and our present-day circumstances is by entering their linguistic world and engaging their inspired words on their own terrain.

We lose something precious when we lose the desire to speak another language. Let's hope this trend reverses itself soon.

> [Read more from Trevin.](#)
