

In “Why Learn a Second Language?”, Tamim Ansary makes a powerful case that all people should learn a second language. He makes one point by drawing back to his Farsi-American roots. He recalls “[borrowing] words back and forth between the languages, but [always knowing] they could not be combined.” In his opinion, the languages were representative of different worlds, which existed independent of one another. He conjures up the Farsi word “qukh” as a prime example. “Qukh” which means the rash left by damp clothing on skin, has no correlating English word. Ansary draws the point that without knowing Farsi and being introduced to Farsi culture, he would have never known the word “qukh”, and the phenomenon might have never reached his conscious radar. In other words, knowing a second language introduced him to new ideas. Ansary’s second point reverts to his career as a translator. Here he describes trying to anglicize a Persian sonnet which alludes to Turks, as well as the beauty of exotic moles. To an English-speaking audience, Ansary argues, Turks are frightening warriors, not lovers, and no mole could be beautiful! Hence, in his opinion, an exact translation, even with rhythm and rhyme preserved, loses the beauty of the original. Ansary offers an altered ‘translation’ that substitutes Americans for Turks, and tattoos for moles, but he claims that this is not a true translation, for the references can never hold the exact same connotation. He claims that the only way to truly understand the poem is to understand the “capillaries” of culture that lead into it – to truly know the beauty of a mole to the Persians. Knowing a second language empowers people to enter the mind of someone who speaks another language – not just the language that they’ve learned, but any other language, because the skill of entering a different culture is acquired. Ansary’s final point is that even the structure of languages determines the meanings they impart. In Farsi, for example, pronouns are gender-neutral, hence God can be a gender neutral entity. In Spanish or French, however, all nouns have gender! According to

Ansary, the worldviews held by speakers of either language must be very different. He reiterates that by knowing another language, one can enter this other mindset, and see things in a different light. Having a second angle gives more depth to our understanding of the world around us.

I agree with Ansary's case that learning another language imparts a new frame of reference, however, I believe that we absolutely must go farther. Simply knowing Farsi wouldn't give me the understanding I need to appreciate the Persian sonnet of moles and Turks. I need to understand the Persian culture. Agreed, this is probably easier done in the Farsi language, where I can build a web of words such as "qukh" that might not exist in English texts on Medieval Persia. Knowing these words and concepts will certainly help me understand the poetry better. That said, I strongly believe that language is only a part of a culture – an important part, yes, but just a part nonetheless. I need to know the history of the Persians, their mythologies and beliefs. Only with these tools can I truly understand the poem. I do agree though that learning the language is a good place to start. I also hold some contention with the point that different languages are different worlds, and one can never intersect with another. In Latino communities around America, Spanglish abounds. In the office, my parents might even converse with their coworkers in a mixture of Hindi and English. I believe this only tightens the bond between two places and two cultures. Our world isn't filled with isolated capillaries of culture running parallel to one another, it's the heart which all these capillaries feed into. Without the input from each capillary, the heart doesn't beat. If the capillaries were to stay separate, then no one could ever explore every one. For example, take restaurants, after all, cuisine is a vital part of a culture! If I had to know Japanese to eat sushi, I would never know the wonders of good Volcano Shrimp Tempura Roll. I would never have that aspect of Japanese culture. I'm always confused on questions that ask about my mother tongue. For as long as I can remember, my family has used a

mixture of Marathi and English, substituting in words and combining them as and when needed. I've earned some funny looks in public because while talking to my mom in the supermarket in Marathi, total gibberish to an outside listener, I'll casually drop a word like "strawberries" because I don't know the Marathi equivalent, then resume "gibbering" away. The two worlds are one for me. I believe that when acquiring new languages, and new worlds, we shouldn't try to keep them independent from one another. The more worlds we combine, the greater our cultural knowledge will be.