Why Learn a Second Language?

by Tamim Ansary

If you speak English, why bother learning a second language? After all, English is spoken in most countries now, and it's spreading. You don't need French to order a sandwich in Paris, not anymore.

But learning a second language isn't merely about ordering a meal in a foreign country. It's about perspective. Every language is a lens. If you were born wearing pink glasses and could never take them off or exchange them for another shade, you would assume the world is pink without even being aware of pinkness as a quality--pink as compared to what? In the same way, if you know only one language, it's hard to be aware that you are looking through a lens: You think you are simply seeing the world as it is. Fluency in a second tongue gives you a chance to see through a different lens. That can help you realize that some part of what you are seeing is not the world, but the lens--even when you go back to your original language.

Inside two languages

I've been fluent in two tongues for as long as I can remember. My father was a Farsi-speaking Afghan, my mother an English-speaking American. In my family, we borrowed words back and forth between the languages, but I always knew they could not be combined. Each was a world. When I switched languages I switched worlds.

Shortly after arriving in America, I remember, I hit on a "foolproof" scheme for selling fiction to Esquire Magazine: I would, I thought, take a story already published in the magazine and replace each word with an exact synonym. It didn't work. You probably guessed that. Looking back, I laugh at the harebrained folly of my scheme. Yet no one laughs at the translator, who proposes essentially the same project--to replace each word in a written text with its exact synonym in another language.

What's in a word?

Translation assumes that humanity has some finite collection of meanings in common and that each language has a word for each meaning. Actually, of course, words denote things people have noticed, and different peoples have noticed different things.

Last summer, I was in Colorado with a bunch of my Afghan cousins, sitting on a lawn and lazing away the summer afternoon. As the light sank, one cousin said, "Let's go indoors. I'm getting qukh."

My Farsi has faded somewhat in the many years since I left the Farsi-speaking world, and qukh was new to me. "What is qukh?"

"Well," said my cousin, "you know, how if you sit on grass long enough, especially late in the day, the moisture rising from the earth makes the fabric of your pants damp?"

Yes.

"And you know how the damp fabric clings to your skin?"

Uh-huh.

"And when you pull the fabric away, your skin feels kind of bumpy and itchy?"

Yes.

"Well, that's qukh!"

Now, this usage may seem so precise and limited that one would rarely find a use for it, even if the word existed in English. But the very next day, driving to Aspen, my back was sweating against the vinyl seat; it made the shirt stick to my skin; and after a few hours I had to pull over because--well, I was feeling a bit qukh. Since then, I have noticed ever so many instances of this phenomenon.

Part II: The trouble with translation

Of course, English could adopt this word, or any word, if English speakers found it useful. That's what languages do. But once a word comes into English, it is used in real-life English-language situations, in letters and literature and conversations, and thus accumulates associations that make it an organic part of the experience of English-speaking people. These associations and connections, these capillaries of meaning, seat the word in the living flesh of the English language. And every word in a language has such capillaries connecting it to all the rest of the language. We don't see them but if we know the language, we feel them: They are a part of its meaning.

This hits me every time I play around with translation. Once, for example, I was trying to translate a *ghazal*, a sonnet-length lyric, by the 14th-century poet Hafez from Persian (a.k.a. Farsi, a.k.a. Dari) into English. Translated literally, the first two lines of this celebrated poem go as follows:

If that Turk from Shiraz were to capture my heart,

I would give away Samarkand and Bokhara for her Hindu mole.

I suppose it's no use telling you that this couplet thrums with mysterious sensual resonance in Persian. Few English speakers will be convinced, especially about the Eros.

But why is so much lost? After all, practically half the words in this couplet are names. They sound and mean the same in English as in Persian. Samarkand, Bokhara, and Shiraz are cities you will find on any English-language map. And even in English, Turks are Turks and Hindus are Hindus.

Some translators fuss with synonyms to inject rhythm and rhyme into the lines, hoping to recapture the music of the original. It's no use. At the end of the day, you're still left with that Turk. And that mole.

And that's the problem. The Western ear comes to this couplet with associations drawn from Western history and literature. In the West, ever since the Crusades, Turk has meant "brutal menace on the eastern frontiers of Christendom." In real life, Turks include men, women, and children, but in the network of English-language associations, Turk is fundamentally male--a brawny, scimitar-wielding male. Those invisible capillaries of meaning feed all that extra meaning into the mere word.

In the Persian network of associations, Turk is more complicated. Even there, the label brings power to mind, Turks having formed the ruling aristocracy of every Muslim society from Delhi to Istanbul for 800 years. But it's not a shadowy Other looming beyond the borders, it's our own, familiar power elite--kings and queens presiding over courts, doling out patronage and favors. You might say that in Hafez's world, Turk evoked a feeling roughly like American might in today's industrialized West.

And in those same societies, Persians also commanded an authority of their own, based on a supposedly more ancient cultural sophistication. They contributed poetry, art, perfume, an appreciation of gardens--and Shiraz epitomized the romantic Persian city. It was the Venice of the Persian world.

Samarkand and Bokhara may be mere place names to the Western sensibility, but to the Asiatic ear, they evoke the same mythic splendor and decadent luxury aroused in the West by such names as Byzantium, Babylon, or Rome. Hindu filters into the Western sensibility through the British colonial experience, but for Persians Hindus were within a familiar civilization, interlaced, highly relevant, and yet exotic. An analogous figure for Westerners might be the Japanese: clearly industrialized, clearly modern, and yet exotic.

Finally, there's that mole. Westerners don't go for moles. No, no, we just don't. It's no better if they're Hindu moles. No mole at all is the look we prefer. No accounting for taste. Frankly, 30 years ago, I never would have guessed that stylish young American women would one day sport tattoos or that guys would find tattooed women attractive.

In short, to convey any hint of what Hafez was up to in that famous couplet of his, a translator might have to go with something like this:

If that American in Venice were to coo "I love you too,"

I would barter Babylon and Rome for her Japanese tattoo.

But would that really count as a translation? Now you've got the capillaries--maybe--but you've lost the word. You see the problem.

Part III: Kaleidoscope world

And the problem goes beyond vocabulary. A view of the world is embedded in the very structure of a language, any language. Pronouns, for example, have no gender in Farsi. A religious statement never forces or lets you assign a gender to God. In French, by contrast, even bicycles have gender, as do abstract ideas, and their modifiers must conform. What do fluent speakers of this language see? I have trouble imagining.

In Turkish, I am told, the first vowel in a sentence determines what all the other vowels in the sentence will be. Change the first word and the whole sentence sounds different. Hmm.

Tahitian consists almost entirely of separate word parts that stand alone. You need a whole sentence to express all the meanings that English can pack into a single highly inflected compound verb.

By contrast, Finnish lets you combine more or less any number of word bits and affixes to create single words that express what would take whole sentences to say in English. Juoksentelisinkohan, a combination of seven little word parts, is a single word that means, "I wonder if I should run about aimlessly?"

A French teacher in Colorado once said to me, "My students keep asking, 'How do you say this or that in French?' And I'm at a loss because the real answer is, 'You don't.'"

Creating meaning together

Today, we're all doing high-stakes business across the globe with speakers of other languages. These interactions are always conducted in somebody's second language or through translators. I hope I've demonstrated that translation has some limits. Virtually no message can be mapped directly from one language to another because the act of translation severs countless tendrils of assumptions and understandings that wed that message to its entire cultural context.

Any encounter between two languages involves an intersection between two whole frames of reference. Fluency in a second language cultivates an ability to put oneself in another point of view. Monolingualism makes it more difficult to see that one even has a point of view. Communication, I think, can occur only when both parties are able to imagine the existence of another whole frame of

reference. Only then can they approach a conversation as an exploration in which the two parties build a common meaning together--a new and shared frame of reference.

And that is why, in my opinion, the world would be better off if we all knew at least two languages--any two.