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Article



The Path Hypothesis and Becoming Polyglots

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“Everyone has been made for some particular work, and the desire for that work has been put in every heart.” Rumi

When motivation to acquire languages is discussed, usually only two kinds are mentioned:

1. “integrative” = join or bond with a different culture, either instead of or in addition to your own.
2. instrumental = to meet a practical need, job-related, or study/live in another country.

A few of us have another kind: We are language-lovers. ANY and ALL languages, whether there is a need or not or a desire to bond with another group.

STEPHEN KRASHEN

I never needed to acquire ANY of the languages I acquired. Not even German in order to study piano in Vienna (see below), at least not to the high level I eventually reached. But I now realize that acquiring German was a big part of the attraction of studying piano in Vienna.

WHEN AND HOW I DISCOVERED MY PATH: AT A PARTY IN SWITZERLAND

Early experiences with languages

I had zero interest in other languages until I was 21. I took French in high school and after two years, my teacher said he would give me a passing grade only if I agreed not to take any more French at that school, so as not to embarrass him. He saw my grades in other classes were pretty good, and he didn't want a failure in French to ruin my chances of getting into college. I agreed.

I did not grow up with other languages, only Yiddish which my grandparents spoke to my parents. Nobody in my generation knew any Yiddish - we were not expected to be able to speak it at all. Nor was I particularly interested.

I endured, and hated, several years of Hebrew school, which consisted entirely of reading aloud (learning the alphabet). None of us acquired/learned more than a few words, all from prayers. (My father in fact, was amazed that I could actually understand some of the Hebrew prayers after I had acquired some Hebrew. He didn't think anybody did.)

My mother decided I should go on a bicycle tour of Europe with other young people during the summer after my first year of college. It was a good idea. We cycled down the Rhine Valley and ended the tour at a youth hostel in Switzerland. That evening, there was a big party at the youth hostel, with 30 or 40 friendly young travelers socializing. I watched a young man chat with his friends... some in fluent French, some in fluent German, and members of my group in respectable English. My reaction: “I want to be able to do that.”

This was a turning point in my life. A sudden realization that I not only wanted to be a polyglot, I was supposed to be a polyglot. I realized that time spent acquiring languages and researching how to do it, since that moment, was something I was supposed to be doing. I had discovered my path. There was no practical motivation, no need.

(More accurately, I eventually discovered that being a polyglot (or at least a “junior polyglot”) had to be a necessary and desirable part of my life.)

Gloria Steinem said, “Writing is the only thing that, when I do it, I don’t feel I should be doing something else” (<http://www.gloriasteinem.com/written-works>). That’s how I feel when I am working with languages or language acquisition. Ever since that realization in Switzerland I feel like being involved with language and language acquisition is the right thing for me to do. “The path to my fixed purpose is laid with iron rails whereon my soul is grooved to run” (Melville, from *Moby Dick*). It is irresistible.

FRENCH

After the party at the youth hostel, our bicycle tour was due to end in a few days and we had three weeks left to do whatever we wanted to do in Europe before returning to the US. I started making plans to go to France, and on the advice of our group leader, decided to enroll at the Alliance Francaise in Paris. That felt just right even though there was no practical reason for this.

The classes were of course grammar oriented but were taught in French. They were very comprehensible because they reviewed the grammar I had suffered through in high school. I also made friends with other students and French was the common language— English had not yet become the universal language of the world. I made good progress

GERMAN

A few years after that, I took a break from the university. I had gotten very interested in music and my piano teacher suggested I take a year off and study piano with his teacher in Vienna. Again, my generous parents were very cooperative. That year was wonderful: I thought my focus was on piano and I did in fact practice four hours a day. But I realize now that my focus was more on German than on Brahms. Acquiring German, I now suspect, was my real motivation, but I was not fully aware of this. The German class I took at the University of Vienna was taught in German with a focus on grammar, but again the explanations were in German. My fellow students and I spoke German as our common language, and even recommended novels to each other. And gradually, friends of my fellow students, native speakers of German, became my friends.

(Why did I even take that class? Why was I such a diligent student? I spent more energy on German than on piano. I thought more about German than I did about music.)

YIDDISH

My mother and grandfather met me at the airport when I returned to the US from Austria. I was pleasantly surprised to discover that I understood nearly everything my grandfather said to my mother in Yiddish because German and Yiddish are so closely related. My mother agreed to speak Yiddish to me for the next year! (Decades later: I became friends with the cantor at our synagogue, and accompanied him on the piano during sabbath services. He is from Argentina, but we always spoke English. When his mother came to visit and we talked, I could not understand her Argentinian Spanish. We switched to Yiddish.)

AMHARIC

The next language was Amharic, thanks to two years in the Peace Corps teaching English in Addis Ababa. No classes were available in Amharic for foreigners in Ethiopia – we had classes in Amharic during training before going to Ethiopia, but they were pure grammar-translation. I didn’t hear any comprehensible

Amharic in those classes. Despite the overwhelming power of English, I made some progress through conversation with friendly and patient locals and by listening to more experienced Peace Corps teachers use Amharic. (Actually I had only one model, Brian McCauley, who was unknowingly a tremendous help.)

We Peace Corps volunteers briefly met Emperor Haile Selassie and shook hands with him. I spoke to him in Amharic, and to my disappointment he answered me in English.

While I was in Ethiopia, the seed was planted for my eventual career. I had developed a reputation as a language expert among the other Peace Corps volunteers, as I was comfortable by then in German and French and was one of the few volunteers who made a serious effort to acquire Amharic. One of my housemates (Frank Penta) and I were talking about what we would do when the Peace Corps was over, and I had no clear idea. Frank remarked that it was obvious that my real interest was languages, and he suggested that I consider something to do with languages. I had not thought about that until that time.

HEBREW

Right after Ethiopia, my fiancé and I went to Israel for five months, worked on a kibbutz and studied Hebrew. I was the star of the class, as I could translate for nearly everyone (our teacher spoke German and Yiddish in addition to Hebrew, and I astonished everybody when a student from Ethiopia came to the kibbutz). Again, it was a grammar class, but again it was taught in Hebrew and our teacher spent the last hour of the three-hour class telling her version of Bible stories, which she did very well.

In order to avoid the military draft and being sent to Vietnam, my (now) wife and I came back to Los Angeles, and I entered a program at UCLA to become an ESL teacher. It was wonderful. I was finally taking classes in my true major, in my real interest, Linguistics and Language Teaching. One of my professors, John Oller, was my model of how a scholar can bring empirical research into a field that had not, until then, done this. He was, and still is, a wonderful example of a scholar fully absorbed in and excited about research and the use of scientific methods to make progress in understanding the world.

MORE FRENCH

In 1982, while a faculty member at USC, I was granted a one-semester sabbatical at the University of Ottawa and was invited to cooperate with faculty there on establishing sheltered (content-based) subject matter classes. Ottawa is in English Canada, but borders on French speaking Quebec. As soon as I got there, I started attending an advanced French class taught by a colleague, which provided a great deal of comprehensible input and I read fiction for pleasure in French as well as research papers in French, and I had friendly colleagues who spoke comprehensible French to me.

I taught one class in language acquisition at the university, and I had reached the point where I did my lectures in English and held discussion sessions in French.

MANDARIN

Next came a short but successful relationship with Mandarin, which consisted of a few dozen demonstration lessons in Mandarin at various conferences, done by Linda Li, all comprehensible and interesting, and several classes taught by

Haiyun Lu, both, in my opinion, master teachers.

I have also read several graded readers written in romanization (pinyin), several by Haiyun Lu.

I have probably spent three months of my life in Taiwan, giving presentations, but acquired no Mandarin because, at the time, none of it was comprehensible. But the amount of comprehensible input I eventually got in Mandarin was, however, enough to help me have a 45-minute conversation on the New York subway with a passenger who spoke no English and needed help. I got her to her destination at the airport, and we also managed a friendly conversation about our families, and children (Krashen, 2021).

SPANISH

The most recent: Improving in Spanish, which is happening now. I had acquired bits and pieces of Spanish through attending demonstrations of comprehensible input-based methods (e.g. TPRS) and reading a few graded readers. But I have improved considerably in the last year. A friendly food checker at the local supermarket agreed to speak Spanish with me. (I told him I wanted to learn to speak Spanish the way you (ustedes) do, which is true.)

Fidel and I have been conversing during the last year and a half about once a week, and it is clear I am improving. His speech to me is faster and more complicated than it was at first and sometimes includes a little gossip. He has told other employees about me and they speak Spanish to me as well. I am something of a novelty at the supermarket, and other people with whom I occasionally speak Spanish tell me that I have improved.

But I have not improved because of speaking Spanish with Fidel and other supermarket employees. He is a busy employee, and we have very little time to converse, less than a minute once a week while he checks prices on my groceries. I have also not put in time studying Spanish, no conjugating verbs, no studying grammar or memorizing vocabulary. Fidel does not correct my errors.

But it was at this time, a little over a year ago, that I started reading graded readers in Spanish regularly. In my opinion, graded readers have improved in quality; they have become “literature,” serious fiction (and sometimes nonfiction). I have focused on two authors, Adriana Ramirez and Bill VanPatten, and have been improving steadily. I have not taken any formal tests, but it is obvious to me that I have improved. And I think it is the reading that is responsible for my improvement.

Observations

1. It requires no discipline to do the reading. It has been a pleasure reading.
2. I have made no attempt to remember new words or grammatical features. I don't look up words when reading unless it is necessary. (Polyglot Steve Kaufman tells us that if he looks up words when reading, he forgets the meaning by the time he returns to the page...).
3. There is no real-world reason, no “need” for me to read in other languages. In fact, there has never been a reason to try to acquire any second language.
4. It feels like a natural thing to do: It is right for me. When I am reading in Spanish or other languages, I don't feel that I should be doing something else.

NOOSHAN ASHTARI

In contrast, I had to acquire English due to it being the current international language as well as for immigration purposes. There were also languages that I didn't need to acquire, but chose to because of a variety of reasons that I will discuss in the following sections.

WHEN AND HOW I DISCOVERED MY PATH: BEING TRAUMATIZED AS AN IMMIGRANT CHILD

Early experiences with languages

FARSI/PERSIAN

My native language is Farsi or Persian which I still believe is one of the most beautiful languages in the world (I might be biased). I was born and raised in Tehran, the capital city of Iran and had zero interest in other languages. In fact, during my childhood I always thought it was very strange to spend so much time learning a new language and moving our mouth differently just to say the exact same concepts in different languages. Of course, as I grew older I understood how wrong I was.

ARABIC

The first foreign language we were exposed to in the public school system in Iran was Arabic, the language of religion. Growing up in a family that had the highest level of ethics and moral standards but was not religious at all, shaped how I viewed morality and religions. Early on in life I learned that a person can be overly religious, regardless of the type of religion, but not be a good person, and a good person can have the strongest moral compass but not be religious. However, in the school that I went to throughout my K-11 (the last year was called "pre-university" year and was not considered as part of the high school diploma) emphasized religion and Arabic very strictly. Many of our Arabic classes consisted of us reading religious texts, memorizing them and not understanding them at all. Even though I had learned how to "hack" the education and testing systems by memorizing the texts, storing them in my short-term memory, writing them down on pieces of test papers during exams, and deleting them fully from my memory right after the assessments were over, Arabic was one of my least favorite subjects and further established the view in me that I would not pursue languages at all in the future.

ENGLISH

Many years before I was born, my grandparents, aunts and uncles from my mother's side of the family had moved to the US before the 1979 revolution in Iran. My mother was the only person in her family who decided to stay in Iran and raise her family there. When I was around 11 years old, my mother's permanent residency application got accepted. However, only her children under the age of 21 could accompany her which in our case would exclude half of my siblings and my father. Due to the circumstances, my family told me that we would only travel to the US for the summer and would come back to Iran right before the school year would begin. They even told me to bring my school textbooks for the new year so that in case we had to come back a few days later I would not miss any of my school content. However, when we got to the US my extended family decided that it would be better for our futures if we stayed and enrolled us in an American school in a small town in a state that did not have many immigrants at the time. They also forgot to check the first day that they sent me to school, which happened to be the first anniversary of September 11 in

a school where I was the only Middle-Eastern looking student. I did not know any English other than a simple “Hi” and had very limited knowledge of the English alphabet and I remember the school spent the majority of that day playing videos about the horrific events of the terrorist attacks on 9/11. I remember all the students' eyes staring angrily at me and a few teachers and students came to talk to me, but I could not understand a word of what they were saying to me and their tone sounded angry and accusatory. I remember I spent the whole day trying to keep my head down and crying a river on my notebooks and table and couldn't even ask for a tissue to wipe my tears.

That first day I went back home, cried my eyes out and told my family that I did not want to stay and wanted to go back home to my country where I had a great life, wonderful friends, my siblings and my father and I could speak and understand the language. They told me that things would get better if I continued going to school and sent me back to that school for another two weeks. I kept pretending that I was sick or would in fact throw up frequently due to the amount of pressure and stress at such a young age and would refuse to go to school every other day. Having been a straight A student all my life and now doing so horribly in school, my family eventually decided that if I really did not want to stay in the US, they would allow me to go back home which I happily did shortly after.

I do recognize that I was lucky that I had an excellent life back home in my country and not all immigrants have the opportunities and choices that I have, but going back and growing up in Iran is one of the best life decisions I have ever made for myself and have never regretted it. However, those early traumatic experiences during my childhood as an immigrant led me to another path in my life and career that it felt like I had not planned for myself but was chosen for me instead. Prior to immigration, I was always adamant that I was going to become an electrical engineer and do my Master's and PhD in aerospace engineering and become an astronaut and pilot on the side. After returning to Iran, I still continued trying for that engineering path for as long as I could but eventually those immigration experiences and seeing the needs immigrants and language acquirers have for better resources and treatments led me to pursuing my higher education in languages, linguistics/applied linguistics, teacher training and research.

GERMAN

I started working right after I got back to Iran when I was about 11 or 12 years old. At the time working as a pre-teen in my country was not considered “normal” unless the family was in severe financial need which thankfully my family was not. However, I deeply wanted to have my own money and be as independent as possible from an early age. I tried getting jobs in stores and restaurants but none of them would hire me saying that I was too young to work. I hatched another plan and started tutoring other students in my school and surrounding schools in any subject areas they needed help with. Sometimes the classes they needed help with such as physics, calculus, chemistry, astronomy etc. were for higher grades than my own, so I would get their books, study them and then would teach the content to them. That is when I realized that I was good at teaching. Eventually languages such as English and Arabic became part of the private tutoring sessions I would teach, and a few years later at 15 years old I was finally able to get an official job teaching in a language institute as the youngest teacher they had ever hired in the history of their school. Since my colleagues were all much older and more experienced, I had to work much harder to prove myself and had to improve both my English and teaching skills as quickly as possible. I always think that I acquired English through teaching it.

The language institute I was teaching in also offered classes in other languages such as German and French and as a bonus for teachers they could take classes in other languages free of charge. That is when I started taking German and French classes when I was a teenager which I continue to do to this day. Once I started taking German classes I started loving how strong I felt when speaking in German. It felt like I was discovering a new dimension of myself with every language and each language highlighted a new way of thinking and viewing the world which I have come to deeply appreciate throughout the years.

FRENCH

I fell in love with the melody of French when I first started listening to French music. I remember the first French songs that I heard were Lara Fabian's "je t'aime", "je suis malade", and "immortelle" which took my breath away. I didn't understand a word of the lyrics but knew that this was a language that I should know more about. Also, one of my favorite books growing up was "Le Petit Prince" or The Little Prince by the French author and pilot Antoine de Saint-Exupéry which I hoped to be able to read fully in French one day (and I did!). I began taking French classes from my workplace when I was a teenager, then took some gap years as I finished my Bachelor's degree and moved to the US for my Master's and PhD degrees as I was dealing with the struggles of being an immigrant all over again. However, I have re-started my French journey again in the last couple of years which I wrote about in this paper: <https://tinyurl.com/yt6dae34>

PERSIAN AND AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE

One of my uncles from my father's side had an unfortunate medical accident when he was a child when a medical error by the hospital he went to resulted in him losing his eyesight. Growing up, my father had learned Braille so that he and my uncle could read and interact more together. I started learning Braille as well and later on got interested in learning Persian sign language. There were classes offered in my city for the deaf and hard-of-hearing community which I registered for. I was the only hearing person in the class. All the classmates and teachers, however, were so warm and welcoming that I eagerly looked forward to going to class and interacting with them each time. Unfortunately, my father passed away suddenly shortly after I started taking sign language classes and those classes as well as many other aspects of my life went on pause for a long period of time afterwards. I still think very fondly of my time learning Persian Sign Language and have started taking American Sign Language classes and watching videos after I immigrated to the US again.

RUSSIAN

Around seven years ago my brother married my Russian sister-in-law, who was a recent immigrant in the US at the time. Six years ago my half-Persian, half-Russian, all-American nephew/god-son was born. With these two new additions to the family, I have started acquiring Russian (I have to confess that the majority of my knowledge in Russian consists of terms of endearment and confessions of love). My hope is that as my nephew grows up in trilingual environments, I will be able to acquire more aspects of the Russian language and culture with him and teach him more about the Persian language and culture as well. During the past two decades, I have also been focused on heritage language development and its impact on the current and future generations of immigrants (see also Ashtari & Krashen, 2020, Krashen, Lu, & Ashtari, 2020, Ashtari, 2020; 2022; 2023, as well as Ashtari & Krashen, 2023).

CONSTRUCTED LANGUAGES: PARSELTONGUE AND NA'VI

Similar to many teenagers of my generation, I grew up being obsessed with the Harry Potter books and movies. When the Farsi translations of the books came to my country I was around the same age as the main characters (Harry, Hermione, Ron) and I devoured those books and movies and reread and re-watched them for months on end.

Considering myself half Gryffindor and half Slytherin, one of the things that caught my attention both in the books and movies was the use of Parseltongue as the language of serpents. I used to write down the dialogues and pause the movies when Parseltongue was being spoken and dissect the limited language as much as possible. Created by Dr. Francis Nolan, a Professor of Phonetics at the University of Cambridge, the language has limited structures and lacks voicing and labializing. It also has many imperative forms since the snakes seem to be bossy creatures!

I have always been fascinated by animal languages (for more information see Krashen, (2012) and Krashen, (2014) and Parseltongue was a constructed language that had a deep impact on me. Years later, after I started teaching at the University of Southern California, I had the immense honor of getting to know a former colleague at USC, Dr. Paul Frommer, the inventor of Na'vi, the language of a race of sapient humanoids indigenous to the extraterrestrial moon Pandora in the Avatar movies written, produced and directed by the renowned filmmaker James Cameron. We created a podcast for the CATESOL organization (Frommer, Krashen, & Ashtari, 2020) about this phenomenal, constructed language, its history and structure which sparked my interest in the language and the process of constructing invented languages even further.

Do we need more polyglots?

Clearly, the world doesn't need all of us to be polyglots. It may be that the real value of polyglots is their demonstrating how we acquire language. Successful polyglots confirm language acquisition theory and sometimes serve as "language therapists" to help others with less experience (see the helpful advice given by Steve Kaufman and Lomb Kato in Krashen, (2017).

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