

Dancing with languages

Complexity and riches

Today's leading executives of corporate and public organisations are challenged by daunting tasks in rapidly changing contexts, where strategy and planning have to incorporate multiple sets of variables that seem to contradict the very concepts of planning, or strategy.

To us it appears as if this context allows language learning, while adjusting to this moving environment, to finally reveal its true store of riches.

Could it be that because of its complexity as a learning adventure, your acquiring better language skills is actually facilitated by the diversity of the changes that as an executive and a leader, you are addressing? We believe so.

As you can read elsewhere on this site, key to your success as a language learner is the fact that you can tap all resources of your motivation.

Your language-learning coaches that we want to be for you, have long since figured out that your success is vitally linked with the tightest and most subtle dovetailing of language material (words, phrases, structures) with your actual concerns: the topics, horizons, goals, issues you have to discuss, decide and act upon.

So let them be complex, challenging, ever-changing, unforeseeable and stunning!

Isn't that also what can be said of language itself? We have witnessed that as long as the human tendency to oversimplifying prevails, i.e. both oversimplifying the management tasks at hand and oversimplifying what we have to learn from the language, results of the learning experience are at best barely acceptable.

But when we as coaches open up to you as our “coachee” so that you can see us as your partner with whom you feel confident to share even your deepest concerns and doubts, but certainly also your hope and resolve, then we can invite you to open up to the fact that languages by their very intricacy are meant to allow you to express the fullest spectrum of your work and your personality.

That is a promise. And there is good news.

The good news

We have discovered that this sincere meeting of rich content (your life as a responsible public or corporate leader) with rich form (the bedazzling cornucopia that language is) actually is not only the goal but also the means that leads to attaining that goal.

Goals are anticipated effects. Our focus on them causes the effects to happen. Our identification with our goal to be reached, our actual anticipation of its successful attainment (although yet in the distant future) gives us the energy to make it happen. It is as if a future event, wanting to happen, causally propels us to make it real and achieve.

In the sphere of the mind, time tends to circularity.

That is so true for our challenging professional assignments, and even for the goals set to our wider life's scope and concerns - and it is also true for language. Like we occasionally say: 'Your real teacher is not Your Master's Voice but your own future, language-proficient Self, which you can be sure to become one day. Believe in yourself.'

There is another challenge that is an opportunity as well. Possible realities tend to become so numerous and so shape-shifting these days that we may feel like losing control. Yet by temporarily yielding control in the narrow sense, by provisionally letting be all the alternatives, we discover that this pause given increases our capacity for attention and observation.

Hypotheses seem to fluctuate before our very eyes, showing in fleeting colours as it were their diverse potential for realisation. And while we witness this peacock-tail show of potentialities, our appreciation for their relative probabilities and outcome grows - so that suddenly, at the right moment, we just know what is the right decision and take it.

Also this is mirrored by language learning. As our mastery grows beyond the intermediate stages and we reach what the "Common European Framework of Reference for Languages" calls the Vantage level, where sitting on one of the buttresses leading to the top of the mountain, we start figuring out the horizon - we may wish to pause and glance over the entire landscape lying at our feet, not yet deciding which particular sight we want to take a closer look at through our binoculars.

Or, to apply this metaphor to our professional lives: as we are in the midst of this half-improvised presentation, playing with our mind-map of its content, with various phrases and expressions bubbling up from the sea of possibilities expressing this or that idea - without knowing why at the propitious moment we take full control and embody for our audience this specific idea in this specific wording.

That is why learning a language, or languages, at whatever level of mastery, need not be a chore that pops up on your already overlong to-do list. It can be the very shape in which your own thinking and imagination deploys itself because you will be able to use it as a means to invent meaning. Thus the very thinking and imagining in another language may enrich your mind with the content you had been looking for all along.

A dance taking many forms

Practically it is our experience that for today's corporate and public leaders this dance with languages takes many shapes.

- What we have said above is especially true for the general language-learning adventure, where you as an expatriate executive for instance, or as a regional manager, confronted with several languages, gradually improve your comprehension and expression skills. We as LTC's coaches will fully and completely focus on all content matters of your work and life, helping you to express them meaningfully and mindfully in the language you learn.

At the same time all things cultural in the widest sense: pertaining not only to custom, habit, interaction with people, but also to the history of the culture you are busy adopting (including economy, art, science and letters), will be there for you to be welcomed to and initiated into by us as LTC's coaches.

For such long-track learning adventures we will fully play our role as guardians of your motivation and focus, be 'flexible beyond flexibility' when it comes to adjusting to your schedule and invent with you ways to maximise opportunities for your learning adventure.

- As you can read elsewhere on this site, we have also specific ideas about multilingualism. As you probably experience its reality every day, you will have discovered that also this challenge holds an opportunity.

Everywhere in the world, our experience has shown, native speakers consider it more of a merit when a non-native speaks their language than when a native speaker does. They do so because they intuitively know that this feat is proof of sustained interest, sincere curiosity and empathy on the part of the learner, and hence a token of his basic attitude of outgoingness and acceptance.

People will forgive your tiny 'intercultural gaffe' when they can hear you speak their language.

In the multilingual setting where you, in the course of a meeting or during a road-show or whole-day event, at a conference or think-tank or users convention, are confronted with many languages simultaneously, you will, and to the extent that you

show some versatility with handling them, prove the riches of your empathy and interest, your broad-mindedness and genuine human interest many times over.

Do we have to quote Goethe's words about being so many times a human being with each language that you speak? And - if we may add: to whatever extent? Because language mistakes will always be forgiven!

We, as LTC's coaches, have known this, and that is why we are increasingly coaching top executives and leaders not just in one language, but in two or three at the same time. That could be typically a shared mother tongue, a language in which your proficiency is already conquered, and a language where it is about to be born.

Needless to say, giving birth to content in a few languages concurrently increases your, the learner's, grip on reality, in how you give it shape, and in how you communicate this shape to others.

- This is also the level at which we help you speak and write important public communications, be they speeches or stories, mission or executive policy statements to be told or to be written. Deftly switching between discussion of thought and dreams on one hand, and their wording in the language(s) you are growing into on the other hand, and doing so repeatedly, through a series of iterations - we co-create your mastery in general, and the quality of this specific communication you have in mind.

“It is so difficult to think in the other language”, learners tell us, “I keep thinking in my mother-tongue”. Well: here is the answer to your doubts. On one hand: please do continue to think in your mother tongue. Never stop. It is always useful to check your thinking in one language you master less, with your thinking in the language you master most. It is, because - this is the other side of the coin: it is not true that you do not think in the other, new, language. You do, but not like in your mother tongue - you think differently. And precisely that difference is your opportunity for change, for growth. Keep balancing those two thoughts, and those two utterances. You will enrich your vocabulary (in both the language you are learning and your mother-tongue!) and your thinking!

Doing this repeatedly, will increase the quality of all your essential communications - the ones that you need to inspire and to lead.

- Finally we would like to say something about a topic developed elsewhere on this site. Regionally, like for people in Western Europe, in the Middle East and in India, a relative mastery of a few languages is not uncommon.

Yet you know better than we do that the entire world is your scope and the place where you play. Doing so you are confronted with exotic languages: in China, Japan and East Asia, in India, and in the Muslim world. Mostly those exotic languages come with illegible or difficult writing systems. Although the world's lingua franca is an easy solution, you are aware - as are more and more persons among your colleagues - that

the seminal token of intercultural interest, speaking the language, is a key to those cultural realms as well.

We at LTC bring to your attention our original development of initiation courses into those linguistic and cultural worlds, in which we help leaders and executives to muster the courage to break the reading, and to some extent also the writing, barriers, and obtain a first grasp of the language and how it distils its culture.

While your initiation prepares you for fuller development of your communication skills later, it already now gives you ample opportunity to follow up on your desire to understand the other culture from the inside, and prove your mettle getting familiar with the basics - so that, again, you will have shown your genuine empathy and interest for the men and women whose culture it is - and, doing so, opened to you and your message a great many doors.

Our new frontier

What is our ultimate perspective?

We think that language learning will increasingly be a life-long adventure for all of us who work at high levels of complexity and challenge - in part because these very challenges will be produced by an increasingly “multipolarly multipolar” world in which multilingualism will become the norm - and in part because our own desire at discovering, conquering and mastering complexities pushes us to even more exciting challenges, and hence welcomes multilingualism as the “real”, because the “tough”, stuff.

A multilingualism that will fluctuate over time, shifting and changing shape, giving temporary dominance during part 1 of our lives to language A, and then to language B during part 2 and so forth, and in the process also adding layers to the already mastered language strata. Again, may we add: to whatever extent.

It has been said that as long as one speaks and understands just one language, one is not really able to think - instead, one is thought by one's language. Concepts and words coincide when one is unilingual: it is impossible for us to see how our mother-tongue's words do not exactly cover the same meaning as what first seem to be their equivalents in another language.

But as soon as this different language confronts us with the relativity of our words, we start building concepts, by trial and error, that are independent of language - and thus we enter the unending process of recalibrating our concepts each time we are challenged by a new language's representation of reality.

At that moment, real thinking and genuine imagination arise - because we can, yes, “play” with language, rejoice in their mastery of known languages' resources - but more so even because, more humbly, we know that their independence is essentially due to the diversity of languages and cultures and therefore will always bow down for the next cultural world that presents itself.

At the end of antiquity the Eastern Mediterranean was a trilingual or even quadrilingual world, where scientists and merchants, sailors and political leaders, spoke Greek, Latin and Aramean - the “language of Jesus” - and occasionally Egyptian as well. It was in this crucible of quite dissimilar linguistic cultures that Hellenistic science made giant leaps forward, building sophisticated machines like the “Antikythera mechanism” which you may have read about *.

Farther to the East, the world of mathematics and incipient industrialisation bloomed on the Indian subcontinent with its Indo-European and Dravidian linguistic cultures – in the Islamic crucible with its Semitic, Greek and Persian heritage – as it did in “the empire of ideograms”: China, Japan and Korea, which around the end of the 1st millennium had invented practically all technologies that gave birth to the West's Modern Times.

And how could, in the West, humanism's extraordinary scientific explosion have been possible without the constant mutual projection of concepts and words among European cultures and languages?

It is at such a juncture, *worldwide this time*, that we find ourselves again - and that *your leadership and your managerial effectiveness will be enhanced by your rewarding encounters with new cultural worlds*.

You can count on us to be your devoted companions and trusted guides in your brave endeavour, as you explore the riches which the men and women of our world have stored in the treasure-chests of their languages **.

* for your enjoyment, please discover more about the Antikythera mechanism at <http://www.antikythera-mechanism.gr/>

** we also invite you to cast a glance on our essay *Towards Trans-Cultural Excellence*.