

OPINION:

Me and other languages

Alexandra Aikhenvald 9 February 2008

Marking the United Nations-declared International Year of Languages, as well as its goal to preserve and promote linguistic diversity, the linguist Alexandra Aikhenvald tells the story of her own multilingualism, which reflects the story of a country that no longer exists.

I was born in Moscow, then in the USSR, into a mixed Jewish and Russian family of prominent intellectuals. My immediate environment was monolingual -- my grandparents and my parents spoke only Russian, despising Yiddish which in Russian is known as 'The Jewish language', associated with medieval religious practices and something to be ashamed of.

But the environment was not as monolingual as it seemed. The USSR then was a highly multilingual country -- even the one rouble note had the words 'one rouble' printed in the 15 languages of the so-called Socialist republics (The total number of languages spoken in the USSR was about 150, about the same as Melbourne nowadays). Moscow was full of people speaking languages other than Russian.

I was born in a communal flat (hard to explain to Australians -- a shared accommodation, where five or six families live in a room each, and share kitchen, bathroom and toilet). Our flat had four families -- my parents, both recently released from Stalin's exile, two other families of Stalin's victims, and the family of Soledad Ferreira Rey. Soledad -- whom we called *Sonya*, in Russian -- was one of the 'Spanish' children. From a working class family in Andalusia in Spain; her parents were communist supporters during the Civil War in the 1930s, and they sent her and her sister to the Soviet Union because they could not feed them. Soledad never learned to speak Russian well. It was through her that I learned my first Spanish words, Well, you can guess, it was *merda frita*, literally, 'fried shit', a rather elaborate expression Soledad used when scolding her ever-drunk Russian husband.

We lost touch with Soledad when I was three, and moved to a flat of our own. Since then, I have always wanted to learn Spanish. I never really have, but now I speak Brazilian Portuguese on a daily basis. Spanish and Portuguese are so similar that I can easily adjust my Portuguese to make it understandable to those who speak Spanish. This is a mixture I learned to speak when I lived in Brazil, not far from the border with Argentina -- a mixture known as *Portunhol* -- a word made up of *Português*, for Portuguese, and *Espanhol*, for Spanish. People laugh, but we understand each other.

What I had wanted to be was a classical scholar. At the age of 11, I insisted that a friend of my parents, a lecturer in Latin at the Institute of Foreign languages, teach me Latin. So she did. My room was plastered with proverbs: I still remember them all by heart. Not that I can particularly speak Latin but I can recite quite a few poems. I yearned for classical scholarship, and hated the Soviet school system with its lies, with the result that at the age of twelve I started a collection -- how to say 'I don't want to go to school' in as many languages as I could procure. It reached 60!

My father, who wanted me to learn what he had never had a chance to learn - languages -- tried to enrol me in a school next door to us, with specialized in-depth instruction in English. But I had a Jewish surname, so despite the fact that I already knew the Latin alphabet and could recite and compose lengthy poems and count well, at the age of seven, I was judged not good enough to be accepted. I could not match the daughter of a general, or the son of a chief engineer, whose surnames were Russian. My father complained to a friend, who knew someone somewhere who rang up the anti-Semitic director of the school -- and then I was accepted. But since none of my English teachers were native speakers I will never get rid of my foreign accent. (I only first met a native English-speaker when I was 16 -- an American who impressed me because she had studied Russian literature with Nabokov, a great writer whom I worshipped.)

But my chosen path at university -- to study classics -- was closed to me, since the USSR was not only multilingual and multinational, it was racist. I was -- unofficially -- informed that with my, Jewish surname, there was no way I could get accepted into the Department of Classical Studies at the Moscow State University, the place I had aspired for. So I applied for linguistics -- they were fairer there because the selection was made based on brain rather than on family name.

I had already learned German from the age of thirteen, when I had managed to persuade Olga, my father's student -- who was doing her first year in linguistics -- to teach me. It was my favourite language, until I started learning Estonian. And, while I was still in high school, Olga started teaching me French, which became my main foreign language at the University. I couldn't possibly have even dreamt of travelling to France -- with my Jewish surname and dissident parents this was unthinkable. But we had excellent teachers and, more importantly, a native speaker of French in class. Natasha was partly Bulgarian, the daughter of a diplomat who had spent her childhood in Paris. I imitated her -- and apparently my French pronunciation is better than my English one.

During my university years, I was studying more than half a dozen languages. But the major language I started learning then was outside the University -- Estonian, my first non-Indo-European language. Every year since 1969 we had been to Estonia for summer holidays, then a part of the USSR, having been illegally annexed by Stalin. Estonians plainly hated everything Russian. So I decided that I had to learn the language. This was no easy task. But every summer (until late 1980s when I left) I would go to Estonia and practice -- and this was a pleasure and a challenge. I made wonderful friends, and read great novels and poems. I still subscribe to the Australian Estonian Newspaper, *Meie Kodu (Our Home)*. With Estonian came Finnish -- probably the most difficult language I have ever tried learning -- I can only read it -- and also Sanskrit, Arabic, Italian, Lithuanian, a bit of Latvian and a lot of Ancient Greek, and Akkadian, one of the most ancient languages known to humankind, originally spoken in Mesopotamia, today's Iraq. I have always been attracted to ancient languages: my masters thesis was on Hittite, the oldest Indo-European language.

I wanted to learn Hebrew, but the University's authorities said 'No!'. This was a Zionist language, ideologically wrong and forbidden. But not for me. My parents were friendly with dissidents of all sorts, and I soon found a teacher of Hebrew. She was a refusenik -- someone who had been refused permission to leave for Israel because her husband was an expert in Chinese history, and was judged way too important to

let go. Our lessons were clandestine, the phones were bugged, so we could never make appointments by phone. I would say to her: 'Inna, can I come for a cup of tea?' She would say yes or no. There were police raids on our classes. Once I almost got arrested: we had a narrow escape.

After graduating from the University, I didn't get a PhD scholarship -- for someone with a Jewish surname and no corrupt connections this was simply impossible. But I became a research assistant at the Institute of Oriental Studies and started working on Berber languages from north Africa (which I learned from foreign students in Moscow); my PhD was on Berber. I was taken into the sector of Middle Eastern and North African languages. I had to fill in a form saying how many languages I knew. So I did -- but how could I say I knew Modern Hebrew if I had learned it at underground meetings with Zionists, outlaws? I found a way out: I said I knew Biblical Hebrew only, which I did also know. The head of the sector was an expert in Arabic and a long-standing KGB agent. He immediately assigned me to work on Modern Hebrew, saying that there had not been any grammar of Modern Hebrew in Russian. Which was true: my grammar of Modern Hebrew, finished in 1985 and published in 1990, was the first one (and is widely used in Russia; 10,000 copies of it were printed and sold out in a flash). It amazed him how quickly I, who was only supposed to know Biblical Hebrew, managed to learn Modern Hebrew. He saw through me, I am sure. He was clever enough for that.

This man, himself a Jewish Tat -- this is a group of Iranian-speaking Jews in the Caucasus, also known as Mountain Jews, but he hid this from us -- hated what I was doing. Like many Arabic scholars he thought Berber languages were just bad Arabic, which is as true as saying that Russian is just bad English. Nevertheless, I managed to defend my PhD, and published on Hebrew. In 1985, I was invited to join another clandestine group, the Jewish Ethnographical Commission. In terms of Jewish culture, or cultures, it was an eye-opener. And then I decided to learn Yiddish, the language of my grandparents. My mother was appalled. She is one of those Jews who think that Yiddish is just broken German, which is as true as saying that German is just broken Dutch! Our Yiddish lessons were delightful. We learned poems, and songs, and more importantly, I fully realized what a wonderful language my own grandparents spoke, but never taught me.

Life was tough -- I could not make ends meet as an academic. I had to give private classes in the languages I knew, and do endless translations from Hungarian and Finnish. But, more importantly, there was no future for us, academics with Jewish names. And there would not be any future for my son. Jews will always remain second-class citizens in Russia, no matter how hard we work.

And so, as soon as the Iron Curtain started rusting away and we could leave, we did. In 1989, my son Michael and I went to southern Brazil, where I got a job at the University of Santa Catarina. I learned the language as one should learn it -- from speaking it every day, and so did Michael. Portuguese is the language we still speak, and it is my favourite. The best compliment I ever received was from Mario Vargas Llosa, after his lecture organised by La Trobe University. I asked him to sign a book; he looked up at me and asked : '*Brasileña?*'. I like being taken for someone from the south of Brazil.

I do not sing, do not like soccer and do not dance samba or lambada, but I am fascinated by Brazil's indigenous languages. There are over 200 still spoken. And

since, to be a real linguist, one needs to understand out-of-the-way languages, I learned five that are spoken on the border between Brazil, Colombia and Venezuela, working in one the Vaupes river basin, just off the Rio Negro, a tributary of the Amazon. This is where over ten different languages are spoken, often within one family. One inherits a language from one's father, but can only marry someone who speaks a different language: this is a linguist's paradise. Tariana is my favourite Amazonian language. At meetings I often write comments to myself in it.

The linguistic diversity of Brazilian Amazonia can only be compared to one other place -- the island of New Guinea. In 1995, in Canberra, I met Pauline Luma Laki, and started learning her native Manambu, from the Sepik. When I travelled to New Guinea, I had to learn Tok Pisin -- the major language of Papua New Guinea, a really delightful enterprise. Manambu is my other favourite language, in which I dream every so often. And I now have a huge adopted family in the Manambu village of Avatip.

I have always wanted to be multilingual, and perhaps I now am. We speak three languages at home -- English, Russian and Portuguese -- and some days I have to write e-mails in over ten languages. It is hard for me to speak one language at all times; your expression is so much richer when you can have access to so many different ways of saying things.

I can think of my life as an array of relations to languages: how I learned my first word in each of them, those that I badly wanted to learn, those I never managed to learn properly, those I love and miss, and those I want to have nothing to do with.

Which language next? I have always wanted to learn Abkhaz, a language with over 80 consonants, spoken by a small heroic people forever fighting against Georgian imperialists. But I think I will opt for Modern Greek, trying to regain the classical heritage I was denied by the Soviet bastards.

Professor Alexandra Aikhenvald, Associate Director of the Research Centre for Linguistic Typology, La Trobe University. This talk was broadcast on the ABC's *Lingua Franca* program on 9 February 2008 - you can access both the Transcript and Audio at: <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/linguafranca/stories/2008/2157586.htm>