

Not so Lost in Translation

Lorraine Thornquist

Could the word 'lost' be in danger of dying out in languages of the future? As Deidre Macken pointed out so aptly in her article "The future is mapped out for us" written for the Financial Review Perspective in February, maps have taken on a life of their own. (Macken, 2009, p. 31). Map folding can be consigned to the past as the digital era creates not only new forms of maps but also new uses in a myriad of situations to satisfy our human fascination with maps and finding our way.

What does a map do for us? Knowing a destination at which we want to arrive and knowing where we are to start from, the map is then our guide to show us the pathway to and from our destination. Somewhere in the going, we take in new sights, new ways of knowing, and we arrive the wiser for the journey if only in a very concrete and often unacknowledged way.

While Tom Tom and Google might help us know our physical context and find our way geographically, our most valuable social and cultural map is still language. Languages are our life maps. Languages locate us in a space and time, of self and others. Knowing another language is our means of exploring that place which is ours as well as providing directions to new experiences and perspectives.

We have heard of the 'knowledge' that London taxi drivers must acquire to hold their licence, an extraordinary ability to not only know destinations but to plot the street routes without recourse to physical maps. Neuroscience has shown that these drivers have enlarged hippocampus areas in their brains that deal with spatial relations because of this enormous mapping ability, veritable proof of brain growth. Such enhancement of brain capacity and capability is also evident in bilingual people, and not just those who have been hearing and speaking another language from an early age.

Much has been written over the years arguing that learning a second language develops brain power. Now this argument is substantiated with recent neuroscience research on mapping of the brain and indeed on the plasticity of the brain, its ability to grow at all stages of life. The process of learning a second language, even for older language learners, maps different pathways in the brain and achieves this in different ways. The brain is finding and creating new connections, growing and re-shaping its capacity.

While it may be easier in many ways for younger learners to acquire second language skills, older learners, including adolescents, acquire these skills in different ways, no less dynamic. The mapping and reorganisation that needs to occur in later language learning takes place in a different area of the brain from that of first learned languages and could be said to require a more deliberate and dramatic process. In this case the brain and the mind are indeed discovering new landscapes. Patterns of language shape the brain, contrary to the originally accepted theory of fixed language brain.

This is a huge physical transformation and extension of brain activity but even more importantly, our sense of identity and our vision of the world are inevitably altered and expanded. Herein lies the profound impact of language learning. Language goes beyond a simple means of representing and manipulating the world. Learning other languages is a voyage of discovery offering us the potential to perceive ourselves and the world in larger and different ways.

We may learn words and constructs and even cultural appreciation, but the explosion of experience and thought connection is a complex, multi-faceted and subjective resonance

of self and the other. Not only might we have heightened insights about who and where we are in our own language cultural map, but the map of other language cultures is given life in our mind and soul.

The other language map may not always appear to have clear or expected routes. There are times when we may feel we are walking in an alien place but new destinations are constantly revealed through this other language and the moments of turning a corner and finding a new window on the world that excites or satisfies or challenges is a unique experience. It belongs only to us yet is equally a shared experience where we walk inside the collective responses and understanding of another culture.

It has been some time now since it would appear that Australia has lost its way in preparing people to navigate in the world through the cultural connection of other languages. The dismal level of language learning in Australian public high school education and beyond has been clearly identified in recent surveys and papers. A recent study undertaken by the Lowry Institute for International Policy recognises this lapse at an industry level, in relation to language training for our diplomatic staff. As a member of the international community seeking deep engagement, Australia needs to maximise its human resources and potential to ensure we can contribute effectively to strategic directions that do indeed impact on our lives. Other language skills are a critical element in this engagement.

Just as geographic maps can serve as a universal, so our knowledge of other languages and culture is our means of walking the world and negotiating some of the obstacles and difficulties of our differences across the globe. Languages may offer a necessary spiritual dimension that humanises our ways of interacting with others.

Learning other languages can be challenging intellectually and personally, but we seek to stimulate our Brisbane Girls Grammar School students. We hope for them to be world travellers, not merely as tourists and traders and not merely in a physical sense. We hope for them to willingly expand the horizons and plummet the depths of their minds and spirits, to explore, to imagine and even echo and understand other ways of seeing and being, to ultimately share common pathways and make this a world inhabited and inhabitable by all.

Lorraine Thornquist is Director of International Studies at Brisbane Girls Grammar School (BGGGS). This article was first published on the BGGGS website in May 2009
<http://www.bggs.qld.edu.au/?p=5396>

References

Blue Ribbon Panel Report, Lowry Institute for International Policy. (March 2009).

Australia's Diplomatic Deficit. Reinvesting in our instruments of international policy, Retrieved 20 April, 2009 from <http://www.lowryinstitute.org/>

Doidge, Dr Norman. (2007). The Brain that changes itself: stories of personal triumph from the frontiers of brain science. Melbourne; Scribe.

Macken, Deidre. (2009, February 21-22). The Future is mapped out for us. Financial Review Perspective. P.31.

Troein, Caroline. (2006). If You Change Your Mind: The Effects of Learning on the Brain Serindip. Retrieved 30 April, 2009 from <http://serendip.brynmawr.edu/bb/neuro/neuro06/web3/ctroein.html>

Weinberger, David. (27 March, 2006). The Landscape of Language. KMWorld. Retrieved 23 March, 2009 from <http://www.kmworld.com/Articles/Column/David-Weinberger/The-Landscape-of-Language-15408.aspx>