

Speaking in tongues

OPINION - Judith Weeldon
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SHOCK! Horror! An Australian government minister has tried to learn some of another language, and a difficult one at that, to assist in her relationships with her Chinese-speaking counterparts. We have spent millions of dollars asking the barely articulate question "Where the bloody hell are you?" and now we complain about thousands of taxpayer dollars and significant personal effort the former immigration minister Amanda Vanstone invested in developing positive relationships with Chinese speakers with whom she was doing government business.

Vanstone has been on the defensive. Instead, we should congratulate her and encourage more politicians, business executives and the public to make a similar effort.

It is often mentioned that Opposition Leader Kevin Rudd is fluent in Mandarin. Whether it is tall poppy syndrome or cultural cringe, the impression communicated at the same time is that somehow learning Chinese is a waste of time and that using it is showing off.

The implication is that fluency in a foreign language is a disqualification for, or at least irrelevant to, leading the Australian people and their government.

After a year of low-level debate about whether intending migrants and citizens should be required to speak English, attention should turn to the obverse issue: should Australians make the substantial effort required to speak a language other than English?

World travellers soon become aware of others speaking our language. Particularly in the Nordic countries, Germany and The Netherlands, our surprise at the accuracy and clarity with which most people speak English is only magnified when it is discovered that English is merely one of four or five foreign languages these people speak fluently. Anglo-Australians, and English speakers generally, should blush at their inability to speak even a second language. Indigenous Australians living in traditional situations, however, compare well with Europeans, often speaking three to five quite different languages in addition to their mother tongue.

English speakers rely on the prevalence of English. How prevalent is English in the world? Mandarin Chinese is the most widely spoken language. English vies with Spanish, Hindi, Bengali, Arabic, Chinese Wu and Portuguese for second to eighth places, depending on which list you look at. With these huge population groups entering the world dialogue and bringing their languages with them, it may make sense if a significant number of Australians who speak English as a first language become thoroughly fluent in each of these and other languages.

Relying on others to speak to us in our language is giving them a great advantage. They then understand better than we do the cultural nuances brought to a discussion while we create the arrogant impression that the other side must do the hard work of learning our language to communicate with us. Experts may write the contract but negotiators should understand negotiations for themselves. Being able to laugh at your interlocutor's joke requires a high level of sophistication in their language but it will reap huge rewards in building relationships.

A thorough mastery of the target language brings an understanding quite different from reading the latest pop culture book on another society. Deeper understanding facilitates solving problems and reaching goals. Yet in our schools and universities it has become increasingly rare to be able to gain effective knowledge even of the easier European

languages, let alone the challenging languages of the Asian, African and European people it is most important for us to know in today's world.

In our schools, Latin has all but disappeared; forget about ancient Greek. French and German struggle to thrive in a small proportion of schools. Spanish almost does not exist. Indonesian, a much easier language than most and spoken by millions to our north, has been lost and forgotten. Japanese, after a first, fine careless rapture, is withering.

What languages should Australians learn? European? Asian? Arabic? African? Indigenous? The answer is "all of the above", but we will have to choose national priorities.

New understanding of the function of the brain in language acquisition makes clear that the earlier a second language is begun, the better grounded the language will be. The Europeans have it right: begin in kindergarten with serious study of a second language and study that same language daily throughout schooling, adding another later. Language study should be a requirement for school graduation and university entrance. The genuine intellectual challenge develops habits of mind that serve all other disciplines and brings personal rewards in abundance.

New pedagogies will allow language courses to vie with courses such as drama and design and technology for the attention of students. The problems for Australia are huge: providing expert speakers of the target language who are also good teachers; finding books, films and resources; providing continuity as children change schools for high school or move intrastate or interstate.

The brave schools that offer serious language programs face almost insurmountable hurdles. They really cannot succeed alone. On a national level it can be done. Labor has announced that its policy is forthcoming. This is the subject area most in need of national co-ordination, so surely a Coalition policy will come out too.

Whoever leads the next Australian government, a national policy that makes language study a top priority for schools and universities and provides the will and the funding to succeed will be crucial to the future of Australia, the supposedly clever country, in the 21st century.

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