

Preface

One morning in my middle age, I woke up feeling disgusted with my monolingualism.

Perhaps it was remembering all the tapping on my shoulder, all the invitations I had declined over the years. Maybe it was traveling around the world and being tired of being the guy in the room who had to be accommodated with English. Possibly it was what compels people, arriving at a certain age, to pick up a paintbrush or sit down at a piano bench. Whatever it was, it hit me hard. It felt like a desperate thirst. I told myself that I *had* to become at least conversational in Spanish, although I didn't know what that really meant.

I don't generally make New Year's resolutions, but that first of January in my fifty-fourth year of life, I resolved to begin learning Spanish. I had no idea what I was getting myself in for.

With an impatience born from decades of keeping my Spanish-speaking self in the waiting room, I threw myself into *español* with a passion.

I bought the 664-page *Spanish for Dummies* and sprang for the complete package from Rosetta Stone. I bought a box of a thousand flash cards from QuickStudy, which also publishes laminated study guides. I bought some of those, too, their cheerful colored boxes showing all manner of dense conjugations and forms of speech. I hired a Berlitz tutor, a monumentally patient woman from Colombia. She came to our house to work with me for forty-five minutes every Tuesday before our family sat down to dinner and then returned home, I imagined, to a stiff drink.

In my car, I listened to the encouraging audio programs of Pimsleur Spanish—three times through. And then I took up the audio programs of Michel Thomas for more hours of speaking where no one could hear me. If there was a way to *buy* my way into Spanish—in dollars and in hours—I was up for that.

But wait: there's more. I watched YouTube videos, including "13 Ways to End a Conversation in Spanish" (I thought up several more). I downloaded all manner of apps on my phone, including apps for children, and the captivating "Duolingo" with its green birdie named Duo. For nine months, I set a half-hour goal with Duolingo and met it. If I could *play* my way into Spanish, I was up for that, too.

DISGUST

SPRING INTO ACTION!

DETERMINED

Being this determined (obsessive, my wife says), I began by brute force to make some progress. But then I would hear some Spanish speakers talking and have no idea what they were saying. That was depressing. I still felt a long way from being able to hold an actual conversation.

Meanwhile, I continued with my regular work and social life, which included attending occasional cocktail parties. When I would casually mention that I was studying Spanish, I heard reactions that almost made me spill my Sam Adams. *Everyone*, it seemed, had an opinion and didn't hesitate to lay it on me.

"Why bother? The whole world speaks English!" pronounced one woman. For evidence, she described the trip she and her husband took to Africa (or maybe it was Peru) where "everyone spoke English!"

SUCH
NEGATIVE
PEOPLE

From others, I heard, "Why bother?" again, this time followed by: "Technology will make language learning obsolete! We'll all have Google implants, or whatever, in our ears doing instant translation from any language."

Yet other people reacted very differently. They would lean toward me and ask in confidential tones, "How are you *doing* it?" I could hear in their voices that they, too, had the thirst. They hoped I would share some method or app that would make it fast and easy.

From yet others, a frown would cross their face. "I took four years of French and can't utter a sentence!" And others stated with authority, "The *only* way to learn a language is immersion!" Their implication being that whatever I might be doing here in the US was a waste of time.

EVERYONE
IS AN
EXPERT

Others would decree: "The *only* way to learn a language is when you're young," and then proceed with a story about some four-year-old who speaks three languages without missing a beat. "Her mother speaks *only* French to her, and her father, being from Germany, only speaks German, and their Korean nanny...."

On occasion a person would respond sarcastically, "Well, *that's* a good idea you're learning Spanish since Spanish is taking over the country!" This might be followed with, "Why don't these people learn *English*? My grandparents learned English when they came to this country—it was sink or swim. Now? It's 'Press 1 for English.' Give me a break! Don't you think everyone who comes to America needs to speak English?!"

JERKS

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I do, as a matter of fact. But some people seemed uninterested in anything I might say about learning *another* language until I first pledged my allegiance to English, the whole English, and nothing but the English, so help me God.

Still other people would help set me straight with a reality check. "You know, in Europe, *everybody* speaks four or five languages. Of course, that's because they *have* to, the countries being so small. But here in the US, well...where would I even *use* French if I could speak it?"

From an engineer I heard, "Well, *coding* is a language, too. *That's* what we should be teaching kids today."

UP HELL
BATTLE

By merely mentioning that I was studying Spanish, I had clearly touched a nerve among my fellow Americans. Maybe it was the alcohol.

I wanted to argue with those who told me I was wasting my time. And I wanted to help those who shared my thirst to learn a language themselves. Yet I didn't know what to say to either group. I decided I had better learn a few things about bilingualism and language learning.

I began reading books like *Bilingual: Life and Reality* by François Grosjean, *The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language* by Steven Pinker, *Is That a Fish in Your Ear?* *Translation and the Meaning of Everything* by David Bellos, *How to Learn a Foreign Language* by Paul Pimsleur, and the many books written by that great illuminator of language, John McWhorter. One thing I quickly learned was that scholars use the term "bilingual" to mean people who speak two *or more* languages; this is easier than trying to specify how many languages people speak and to what degree. That's the practice I'll follow in this book.

GETTING
STARTED

I started asking nearly everyone I could about their own language biographies, so much so that I became quite predictable to my family. "Watch out, he's going to ask you what languages you speak!"

When I took Lyft or Uber, I asked if I could sit up front. Riding shotgun, I heard scores of language biographies from some of our country's newest residents.

CAN I
ASK YOU
A QUESTION?



Pretty quickly, I learned that the languages people learn are driven by the realities of families, migration, and economics—factors quite removed from the technical aspects of how best to learn a language. And I learned much more.

The bilinguals I interviewed all appeared to *love* being bilingual—it seemed to be one of the most important and fundamental aspects of their lives. Conversely, I never met any monolinguals who said they liked knowing only one language. In fact, when I met Americans who sounded like native English speakers and asked if they spoke other languages, the most common answer I got was, “I *wish* I did!”

Sometimes I’d hear, “Well, I can *read* French pretty well, but I can’t speak it.” And a good number of my fellow Americans just shrugged their shoulders and said, “I’m not good at languages.”

I/felt/their/pain.

Yet it seemed to me that we were retelling old narratives. Were they still valid? Are Americans really hopeless monolinguals? Is there no point anymore, in our digital age, in working hard to become bilingual? Is it too late for adults in any event?

The questions began to take over many of my waking hours—and some of the hours I was supposed to be working, too. My day job as CEO of Levenger started to feel burdensome after twenty-seven years. I handed over the reins to someone else and was now free to focus on my newfound passion of bilingualism. But how best to pursue it?

My friend Doug Rauch told me about a year-long fellowship he had taken at Harvard. It was designed for executives who had finished the first chapter in their careers and yearned to do something new, which usually involved saving the world in one form or another. Another friend, Paul Saffo, told me about a similar program at Stanford. Feeling like a high-schooler again, I applied to both programs and, to my surprise, was accepted by both. Greedy for knowledge, I spent one year at Harvard followed by another at Stanford—finally returning to California some forty years after leaving San Diego.

The number of language biographies I collected exploded. But more than that, I was able to interview some of our nation’s leading scholars on bilingualism: linguists, sociolinguists, and language teachers. And I gathered advice from successful bilinguals on how they prevailed in

I WANT
TO!

POWERS

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