

Gastautor: Daniel Peyronel / / English

»Sex was the lingua franca – we learned to talk later«

28. August 2018

This professor claims that learning languages changes us – and our society – for the better.

I met Amanda at a Spanish beach on a hot August day: She was funny, self-confident and so beautiful that I didn't know, if my throat was so dry because of the heat or because of her. We smiled at each other, talked for a while and our conversation went so well that we planned a date for the evening.

But already when ordering drinks, I should have noticed that there was something fishy about the evening.

Me: »Una cerveza por favor.«

Barkeeper: »Una jarra chico?«

Me: »No, solamente una cerveza por favor.«

Barkeeper: »Jarra o caña?« ^{*1}

While I tried to focus on my Spanish, I missed Amanda's next question. She smiled at me. And while I interpreted her deep look as being fascinated by my Italian eyes, she was really just waiting for an answer to

her question. Of course, I realized that too late and couldn't help feeling insecure about my poor Spanish. The evening was ruined.

Later, when walking back alone at the beach, I wondered: Would the evening have gone different without our language barrier? Was I simply unable to express my feelings »properly« in another language? Or was I maybe even a different person in another language; is there a »Spanish Daniel«, an »Italian Daniel«, and so on?

To find out, I talked to Jean-Marc Dewaele. Not only did he raise his daughter in 3 languages, but he is also a renowned Professor of Applied Linguistics, Multilingualism as well as a book author. Based on the research he and others did, he is convinced that multilingualism has a huge potential – not only for each individual, but also to contribute to a better society.

First, there was the sex ...

Given my little holiday adventure, how would you explain what happened there: Do we express emotions differently, when we speak a foreign language?

Jean-Marc Dewaele: Yes, obviously! I guess it is part of the exotic attraction of falling in love with a person who speaks another language. Everything is different and exciting. At the start, communication will be relatively superficial because you don't necessarily know the subtleties of emotional expressions in a foreign language. Some of my participants said, when they started to have a relationship ^{#1} with partners they didn't share a language with: »Sex was the *Lingua franca* ^{*2} – we learned to talk later.«

But before having sex, we should say something. What if we are too anxious to speak in a foreign language?

Jean-Marc Dewaele: (*laughs*) Then you'll need an extra drink to overcome the verbal communication problems! The research I did on this topic reveals that most intercultural couples had experienced emotional communication problems in the first few months of their relationship

Gastautor: Daniel Peyronel

»Sex was the lingua franca – we learned to talk later«

perspective-daily.de/article/610/wvpmCRyC

after which they faded. #2

But even with a solid relationship, they remain aware that the partner could do things that they would find strange.

Like a participant in one of my studies: a Japanese explained that her western boyfriend could not understand that when she was angry she would go silent, and that silence was the sign of anger. It took him a while to realize that. In certain cultures, you will not express anger explicitly, but you will show it in a non-verbal way and it could be through silence.

But how can we communicate, if the partner remains silent?

Jean-Marc Dewaele: It's not just about languages, it's also about cultures. In some cultures, it's okay to talk a lot about how you feel, in other cultures it's not. You are supposed to read the other person's emotional state. Talking about feelings is considered inappropriate or childish in the Japanese culture.

So, if you fall in love with someone who expresses their love in a way that is different from the way that you are familiar with, you might wonder:
»Does she really love me?!«

And the answer is?

Jean-Marc Dewaele: »Yes, obviously!« But she expresses her love in a way that is culturally appropriate to her. It isn't easy to switch cultural values as quickly as you can switch languages.

Is it possible to accelerate this process in order to fully »be ourselves«, when we flirt and communicate in a foreign language?

Jean-Marc Dewaele: It's only possible through exposure to authentic communication around you. I would say you can get some good advice at school from your teachers, but they won't tell you the script for love or extreme anger. That would be inappropriate. It's something you need to

Gastautor: Daniel Peyronel

»Sex was the lingua franca - we learned to talk later«

perspective-daily.de/article/610/wvpmCRyC

find out by yourself.

Seeing how people interact with each other, observing people in your environment, listening to the formulas they use, what body language goes with certain words and what intonation is in place. Do they express compliments by a smile? All these little things make the message complete.

... and then the children arrived!

Supposing I would have been successful: My relationship with Amanda lasted more than 9 months and the first child, Maria, was on her way – how should we raise our child as a multilingual couple?

Jean-Marc Dewaele: I think once you have children, even with a partner from your same language group and culture, you realize that you don't necessarily agree on how to raise children. Should you be strict with them or should you be *laissez-aller*. ^{*3} Sometimes as a parent you need to make the rules up as you go.

Still, I guess it's more difficult if partners come from different cultures or from different religions. As parents, it is crucial that you have solidarity on how you want to raise your children and to discuss the issues and plans before. A child is quick to realize that you don't agree on something, and also quickly learns that you have not just different languages but also different ways of expressing your feelings or behaving.

So, given the 3 of us – Amanda, me and our daughter Maria – would move to Berlin and Maria visited a German school, which language should we speak at home?

Jean-Marc Dewaele: I encourage all parents to make sure to have a *minority language* ^{*4} at home. Even if the child doesn't answer in that language – don't give up!

The imaginary case you described would in fact be the ideal, because if 2

Gastautor: Daniel Peyronel

»Sex was the lingua franca – we learned to talk later«

perspective-daily.de/article/610/wvpmCRyC

minority languages are spoken at home, there is more chance that the majority language will remain outside and hence that the child will grow up as trilingual.

That's exactly what happened with my daughter Livia. I speak French with her, my wife Dutch, she grew up in London and maintained her 2 minority languages French and Dutch. Also during French hours at school, she could see the benefits: she felt rather good about knowing a language that others had to learn at school.

Are multilinguals the »better« humans ...?

Can languages themselves influence the way our children and generally multilinguals switch between languages?

Jean-Marc Dewaele: All languages are equal, but the perceptions of these languages vary across the people who use them.

You can acquire languages later in your life. Like I started to learn English when I was 14 and now English is my dominant academic language, while French and Dutch remain my dominant languages for family interactions.

*5

What would be another example of a »language domain«?

Jean-Marc Dewaele: An example is mental calculation. I would bet that you make your mental calculation still in Italian, even if you have a German e-mail address. Do you?

Guilty as charged! – In fact, I've tried to count fast in my 4 foreign languages German, French, English and Spanish and it's really difficult!

Jean-Marc Dewaele: In fact, it is. I did some research on that and it turns out that multilinguals typically do their mental calculations in the language in which they learned mathematics.

Gastautor: Daniel Peyronel

»Sex was the lingua franca - we learned to talk later«

perspective-daily.de/article/610/wvpmCRyC

Still, after a while you might be able to do mental calculation in the language of the country you live in – but then typically for smaller sums.

Again, we are flexible: Just like emotional inner speech and our language for spontaneous swearing, our language preference for mental calculations can shift over time. But we keep a preference for our first language, especially when it comes to emotional topics.

So is my inner speech simply too »lazy« for a foreign language?

Jean-Marc Dewaele: Inner speech doesn't change quickly. It involves hearing and thinking back of conversations you had during the day. It's like an echo of social interactions, something you pick up quite easily but takes a while before »it« starts to happen in a foreign language.

What role does multilingualism play here? I know from myself, that I usually wonder (in Italian) how all the languages in my mind affect my behaviour.

Jean-Marc Dewaele: In my research, I showed that if you grow up as a multilingual, you typically score differently on a number of personality dimensions.

For example?

Jean-Marc Dewaele: You are typically more relaxed, more open-minded, you have a little bit more cultural empathy and you are probably more aware that not everybody shares the values that you have in one language, one culture. The other way around, it's harder for monolingual-monocultural individuals to imagine that some people might think differently.

Is there also a difference between languages in the sense that there is an »Italian me«, a »French one« and a »German one«?

Jean-Marc Dewaele: When you switch languages very often, you also switch certain behaviour, like you Italians are known to have a lot of waving of hands and gestures. ^{#3} (laughs)

Gastautor: Daniel Peyronel

»Sex was the lingua franca – we learned to talk later«

perspective-daily.de/article/610/wvpmCRyC

So, if you switch from German to Italian, you may notice that suddenly your hands go up higher whilst you learned that the Germans don't use their hands that much. So, when you switch to German, you inhibit the movements of your hands and keep them under control.

But does that mean that you change your personality at that point?

I would say probably not. You may feel that you are acting a little bit different but it's the same »you« speaking.

You mentioned many positive effects of multilingualism – are there any negative ones?

Jean-Marc Dewaele: Some people may argue, we should stick to our national horizon and not »contaminate« it with foreign languages and cultural values.

To me, that sounds like a joke, because no culture and no language is »pure«. All languages have influenced each other. We have had immigration ever since humanity started. Claiming to want to stick to some pure ideal language and culture is simply absurd.

I think any multilingual and multicultural person would agree with that. Having foreign words, values and cultural products is not a threat to any national identity. It is an enrichment of the national identity.

... and is the EU helping to build a »better« society?

Are you saying that a society with more multilinguals is the better society?

Jean-Marc Dewaele: Yes, absolutely! And that is one of the goals of the European Union. The EU is strongly recommending that learners in the various member states should learn their mother tongue but should preferably also learn 2 foreign languages ^{#4} – so not only English. If

Gastautor: Daniel Peyronel

»Sex was the lingua franca – we learned to talk later«

perspective-daily.de/article/610/wvpmCRyC

everybody learned more languages, our societies would probably be more tolerant of their neighbours and less anxious about the potential threat that other languages and cultures might constitute.

So, the European Union is helping us to build a better society?

Jean-Marc Dewaele: Yes, and it teaches us receptive multilingualism, too. That means, you don't necessarily have to speak the other language but are at least able to understand someone speaking that language. If that's also the case for the person you are talking to, you can both answer in your own language. ^{#5} This phenomenon is called *translanguaging*. ^{#6} It can be done everywhere from language classes at school to political interactions at the European Parliament and can create a positive group dynamic.

Don't we all end up with no »proper« language skills at all then?

Jean-Marc Dewaele: No. In fact, the research shows that children who are literate in their home language typically do better in the dominant language or in the school language.

It is also false to think you have to force immigrants to speak the language of their host country at home in order to integrate them better. It's much better to encourage them to use their home language to become good readers and speakers in it. These kids can then take advantage of it at school because their concentration and memory benefit from it. ^{#6}

Can your daughter – Livia – confirm that?

Jean-Marc Dewaele: *(in French to his daughter)* »Would you like to say something about the advantages of being multilingual?« No, she can't now – but I'll send you a list!

[You want to read this article in German? Click here!](#)

Gastautor: Daniel Peyronel

»Sex was the lingua franca – we learned to talk later«

perspective-daily.de/article/610/wvpmCRyC

Zusätzliche Informationen






- *1 In English: Me: »One beer, please.« Barkeeper: »A pint, boy?« Me: »Erm no, just a beer, please.« Barkeeper: »Yes, a pint or a small one?« Ordering a beer in Spanish can be difficult: A »Jarra« is the Spanish word for a 0.5-liter-mug. If I had known the correct word for a large beer, I wouldn't have ordered a beer (»cerveza«), but would have simply agreed.
- *2 A lingua franca is a common tongue used by people from different language groups for daily exchange needs. Originally, the term denoted a simple mixture of 5 Romance languages which, starting in the 17th century, was used mainly by prisoners, traders and diplomats on the North African Mediterranean coasts for communication.
- *3 In English: let it go. This means an open and anti-authoritarian way of bringing up children.
- *4 Minority languages are languages that are »traditionally used by part of the population of a state, but which are not official state language dialects, migrant languages or artificially created languages«.
- *5 This is a theory that Francois Grosjean has explained in his book on being bilingual: bilinguals don't use all their languages in all the contexts. It depends on the discourse domain, meaning that you feel most at ease in a specific discourse domain in the language that you typically use in that domain.
- *6 Translanguaging describes the idea of a common language toolbox which 2 multilingual people use to communicate successfully. The boundaries between the languages are blurred.

Gastautor: Daniel Peyronel

»Sex was the lingua franca - we learned to talk later«

perspective-daily.de/article/610/wvpmCRyC

Quellen und weiterführende Links

- #1** Loving in a foreign language is difficult at the start. You can find the study
 »Loving a partner in a Foreign Language« here (2018)
[https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0378216616302946?](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0378216616302946?via%3Dihub)
[via%3Dihub](#)
- #2** What are the pragmatic challenges in the communication of emotions in
 intercultural couples? (2018)
[https://www.degruyter.com/dg/viewarticle/j\\$002fiprg.2018.15.issue-1\\$](https://www.degruyter.com/dg/viewarticle/j$002fiprg.2018.15.issue-1$002fip-2017-0029$002fip-2017-0029.xml)
[002fip-2017-0029\\$002fip-2017-0029.xml](#)
- #3** How well do you know Italian gestures? (2016)
 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eiQ8toYUDIo>
- #4** What role does the EU play in promoting languages?
- https://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/multilingualism_en
- #5** The book »Translanguaging« written by Ofelia Garcia (2014, Paywall)
 <https://www.springer.com/de/book/9781137385758>
- #6** In »Raising Multilingual Children« you can find all the benefits resulting
 from a multilingual childhood (2018, Paywall)
<http://www.multilingual-matters.com/display.asp?K=9781783097562>

Gastautor: Daniel Peyronel

»Sex was the lingua franca - we learned to talk later«
perspective-daily.de/article/610/wvpmCRyC