

## The Significance of Multilingualism in the Age of AI

The ability to communicate and collaborate with individuals from diverse backgrounds has become increasingly important. Yet, with the rapid advancement of the translation tools like Google Translate, the necessity of being multilingual has come into question. While flicking through newspapers, it is not uncommon to see a diverse spectrum of opinions on the necessity of learning new languages. It has sparked much controversy among the public and hot debates have become more and more ubiquitous. While translation apps can greatly improve the efficiency of communication, the value of learning new languages cannot be replaced by translation technology. There are several reasons why learning new languages is valuable.

Learning other languages is beneficial to our brain development. Learning new languages is a complex process. Not only do individuals have to learn news items of vocabulary and grammar structures, but they also need to acquire communication strategies and use an appropriate tone while talking with others. Research done by Ellen Bialystok showed that bilingualism enhances brain function by improving attention, memory and problem-solving strategies.<sup>1</sup> Thus, it can be concluded that individuals who acquire more than one language may have a better memory and be more sagacious than those who are monolingual since the cerebrum is able to make memories, process information and come to judicious decisions by relating to past experiences and memories quickly and easily. Acquiring new languages can also develop critical thinking skills, enabling individuals to think from diverse perspectives and come up with creative ideas and thoughts. Furthermore, multilingual people may delay the onset of dementia more effectively than monolingual individuals who speak only one language. Research has shown

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<sup>1</sup> Bialystok, E, *Reshaping the mind: The benefits of bilingualism* (2011)

that multilingual people can recover better after a stroke.<sup>2</sup> People who acquire more than one language can prevent memory loss due to aging more easily, enabling individuals to maintain good judgement skills and problem-solving strategies.

In contrast, although modern translation technologies can produce accurate translations and make conversations more convenient and efficient, they cannot replicate the advantages of being multi-lingual. Translation tools cannot enhance one's brain function and stimulate our minds. Instead, they may lead to an over-reliance on these technologies, lowering the opportunities for thinking and learning, which in turn have detrimental repercussions on one's brain activity and critical thinking skills. As a consequence, the chance of getting Alzheimer's disease, dementia, and other cognitive illnesses will be higher. All in all, acquiring diverse languages can greatly foster our brain activities and lower the risk of getting cognitive diseases—benefits that cannot be attained through translation technologies.

Aside from benefitting one's brain activities, learning new languages can also enhance self-esteem. Mastering a language is an uphill battle and is no easy feat. It requires not only effort but also long-time discovery and learning. Learning English is a striking example to illustrate this situation. Individuals have to pay attention to the grammatical structures like tenses and sentence structures. It is indispensable for individuals to cultivate habits such as listening podcasts or reading newspapers so that they can handle the language well. It is not uncommon for people to face diverse obstacles on the road to learning new languages. Thus, should they be able to communicate with others or listen to podcasts successfully without barriers and difficulties by using their target languages, this will produce a sense of fulfillment, increasing

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<sup>2</sup> "Why being bilingual is good for your brain", uploaded by BBC Ideas, 23 12 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nzHY-muy2Mw>

their self-confidence and motivation to acquire other new languages.

When individuals acquire diverse languages, it becomes more convenient and comfortable to travel around the globe, exploring the cultures and building connections with people from around the world. This can broaden their horizons and simultaneously produce a sense of joy. The contentment gained from learning other languages cannot be replaced by translation tools. Translation tools fail to highlight the significance of ‘practice makes perfect’ while the process of learning new languages exemplifies this point. While translation tools can make translations, they cannot provide the sense of joy and pride or the global connections that acquiring new languages can foster. Thus, it can be concluded that learning other languages can offer a sense of happiness once they are mastered successfully, which will consequently boost their self-esteem—something translation technologies cannot achieve.

Language acts as a tool for communication. Being multilingual can enable us to communicate with various people globally, allowing us to collaborate and make new friends. Acquiring different languages is a fundamental requirement for individuals to collaborate and interact with others, enabling them to achieve success in their careers. Merchants will be a case in point. In ancient times, in order to make profits, merchants had to travel around the globe and meet different people to establish good relationships and conduct trade and business. Therefore, being multilingual was indisputably indispensable. Look back to modern times, acquiring various languages and possessing good communication strategies can help companies to cooperate with foreign firms, opening new doors to new markets. Employees who are able to speak more than one language can ensure efficient communication and collaboration, facilitating a company’s entry into foreign markets. As a result, this can contribute to increased sales and successful partnerships.

On a personal level, learning more than one language can significantly increase job opportunities. Companies nowadays often seek individuals with strong communication skills. Being multilingual makes individuals more competitive and attractive, providing more career options and advancing their career development. Additionally, individuals can reach a broader range of clients who speak different languages, increasing the livelihood of partnerships and maintaining good relationships with clients from around the globe. I have a friend from Australia called Jackson, who is multilingual. Because of this, he has secured a well-paid job, working and cooperating with various clients. His skills have made him highly appreciated by his boss, who often assigns him to follow different projects, giving rise to his successful career. Thus, translation technologies can facilitate rapid translations, but they cannot strengthen one's communication skills or career prospects.

Beyond personal growth, language plays a critical role in preserving cultural heritage and maintaining cultural diversity. The document entitled "Language Vitality and Endangerment", which was published by UNESCO in 2003, establishes six degrees of endangerment. According to the research done by UNESCO, at least 43% of the world's spoken languages are endangered.<sup>3</sup> Minority languages are endangered compared to widely spoken languages like English or Chinese. Each language has its own stories and values, reflecting the wisdom of the ancestors. Therefore, acquiring these languages is the most effective way to preserve them, preventing extinction. By learning and speaking these languages, we can ensure that their values are not lost, enabling future generations to appreciate the traditional culture and wisdom of their ancestors.

Furthermore, preserving the minority languages is indispensable for maintaining cultural

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<sup>3</sup> UNESCO Project: *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger* (2011), p.6

diversity. By safeguarding different languages, individuals are able to appreciate different cultures around the world. This also enables people with various cultural beliefs to come together, fostering understanding and promoting unity among people of different backgrounds. In contrast, modern translation technologies like Google Translate focus on widely spoken languages such as Spanish, English and Mandarin, neglecting minority languages. This omission conveys the message that minority languages are not necessary, accelerating their extinction. Each language has its unique idioms and expressions that showcase histories and stories. Acquiring these languages can ensure that such expressions will not be forgotten while translation tools often fail to capture their meanings accurately, making it difficult for individuals to understand the expressions completely. Language represents culture. Without language, a culture may easily disappear. In fact, preserving languages and cultures is just as significant as safeguarding wildlife in nature so as to maintain the stability of the ecosystem. Thus, learning new languages is an act of preserving cultures and maintaining cultural diversity, which technologies cannot replicate.

Apart from cultural aspects, language can preserve historical knowledge. Historical events and activities are often recorded in books or documents written in ancient languages that are no longer spoken today. Learning these languages can enable individuals to explore the histories through ancient texts. This ensures that historical events are studied and remembered, preventing the loss of historical knowledge. Learning another language can enable individuals to connect with the past and gain a deeper understanding of historical events from different cultures. I have experience learning French. While learning it, I was able to appreciate Western literature and gain a deeper understanding of the French Revolution and other historical events in France. This not only broadened my horizons and enriched my knowledge of French history but also enabled me to think about societal issues from various perspectives and

enhance my critical thinking skills. While translation technologies can provide quick translations, they lack the ability to convey the historical knowledge or motivate individuals to explore history and develop a better analytical skills—benefits that multilingualism achieves.

In a nutshell, learning new languages is important for personal growth, cultural preservation and historical understanding. The advantages of multilingualism cannot be replicated by modern translation technologies. While translation tools are able to translate quickly, over-reliance on them may hinder our personal growth. Considering this, we should embrace multilingualism with a view to preserving heritage, fostering global connections and ensuring holistic development in this age of AI.