

Transcript: Q&A

English as a Global Language: Are Native Speakers Losing Out?

Professor Michael Worton

Vice-Provost, University College London (1998-2013)

Richard Hardie

Chair, UBS

Humair Naqvi

Enterprise & Education Regional Director, Rosetta Stone

Chair: Rosie Goldsmith

Broadcaster

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Question 1

May I just put it to the panellists that the reason that people aren't learning languages – people that are brought up in England – is that the vast majority of them just don't end up using them. I spent years of my life slaving away over French, Portuguese, German, Spanish, and I've never used it once in a business context. I love going and visiting the countries, and okay, this is just me, but speaking to my friends, this situation comes up again and again. How are we going to change this situation and get people re-learning foreign languages when so many of them aren't using them?

Rosie Goldsmith

Did you intend to use your languages when you left school and university, to use them in business, and you just didn't? How did it work out that you didn't use your languages?

Question 1

I chose my jobs not based on which languages I spoke but what I wanted to do professionally.

Michael Worton

Can I do this in two parts? One is that I don't think the primary reason for learning a language is because it's going to be useful to you in your career. I really don't. I think it is about how you live in the world. It's a bit like, why do you learn music? What good is understanding music going to do you in your career? Zero, unless you happen to be going into the business and you're a performer. But it will make your heart sing. It will make you happy.

What learning a language does is it actually makes you understand or help you to understand that the world isn't just English. It's not just constructed by the way that English constructs things. Very simply, English is one of the most concrete languages in the world. It wonderfully talks about things in a concrete way. It's got more words for laughing, chuckling, sniggering and so on, than any other language in the world. We're very good at the concrete. It's not nearly as good at talking about the abstract. Either you sound like some pretentious theologian or philosopher or people regard you as some kind of eccentric.

So different languages allow you access to different parts of the human condition, understanding that the way that we actually see the world is determined by which linguistic prism we start seeing it with. Unless we learn another way of seeing the world, another way of representing the world, we're actually really caught in a cage of insularity. So I would say it's about being in the world, in a world whereby you can't just – you can live physically in W1, never move out of London ever in your life, but the world is a [indiscernible] you concentrate from around the world. We need to understand difference is difference and is not sameness. Try and understand – jihadis behave in ways which – there are all kinds of reasons. But we need to try and understand them, and part of them is the way in which Arabic has been used, the potential that Arabic has (especially classical Arabic and Quranic Arabic) for the way that we express particular commitment to beliefs.

There is an instrumental argument but I'll leave that to my colleagues to talk about, which is about jobs and practicalities and using it in a day-to-day basis that way.

Richard Hardie

I love that point. It really is important to realize this is not just an instrumental skill. However, since you raised the point – and I do sympathize, because anyone who doesn't speak English can't wait to try their English out on you and it makes it even more difficult. There's a very funny article by Michael [indiscernible] in the *FT* on just that the other day.

Every Brit that I know who can manage another language fluently has had an intensive experience, so either they've been born bilingual or they've been educated overseas or they've gone and spent a year working overseas through the Erasmus scheme, something of that kind. Doing an hour a week and then, if lucky, two hours a week later with an exchange, it really doesn't do. I'm a firm believer – Humair will be pleased to hear it – in the use of technology as an aid in being able to practice and really try to – and you need to do it with a human listening in, so that you're challenged to embarrass yourself and take a risk. I really do believe in that as something that's missing. I think there are ways of teaching grammar, so you can teach English grammar back to back with a foreign language grammar so that people understand what grammar is about. You have to get the grammar. Once you've got the grammar, as we found with our own staff, you can add the vocabulary, but you have to get the framework and you have to get behind the line of thought.

Rosie Goldsmith

But this question of why should you bother, really, which is being asked – Humair, do you want to tackle that?

Humair Naqvi

I was actually going to ask you a question. Actually, let me reflect on what Michael and Richard have said a little bit and extend that a little bit. To me, language is a skill. It's an acquisition of a skill, like a number of different skills I'm sure you've developed over the years. I'm just looking at it from the perspective of social interaction, and ultimately a lot of social interaction we'll have [indiscernible] employment environments as well as our personal environments. To really develop what I would call the kind of skills gap we have in the UK, it's partly social. I'm reflecting on when people recruit, and we deal with HR managers and directors all day long, globally – I compare the methods by which we recruit here and the frustrations companies go through here is that – what language and culture give you more than anything, in a more practical sense from the world that I guess I see it from, is that it gives you a more holistic understanding of how to do problem-solving. So it's not just about your academic qualifications, it's how you use those skills, the language and cultural skills you've acquired, and how that gives you a different prism through which you solve a problem. That creativity and that flair and that kind of interpersonal skills that you develop are somewhat intangible from a job description perspective, but they give you functional, practical skills which are increasing the competitive edge.

That's the difference between graduates that we recruit – and we're a language company globally, yet most of our recruitment that takes place validates what Richard just said. We typically recruit non-British graduates and we typically recruit even middle and senior management type roles, in all facets of our jobs, from non-British-born individuals. It's partly because they speak multiple languages but the interesting difference is, when we go into meetings and discussions, it's the different perspectives they bring in, given the vocabulary they've learned, which is much more abstract and gives you a further mechanism by which to elaborate and become creative. So that's one piece of it.

In terms of 'I don't get to use it', I've got to say candidly, if you've acquired a skill – any skill – if you don't apply it, you're going to lose it anyway. So language should be brought into that skill bucket. Even if you learn to drive a car and you don't drive for ten years, you're going to have a bit of an issue for a few weeks, I'm pretty sure.

Rosie Goldsmith

But that's one of the issues, isn't it? It's including language in the whole armoury of skills.

Humair Naqvi

The armoury of skills, socially or economically.

Rosie Goldsmith

Cognitive, communication. Let's get some more questions, and we can always come back to this one.

Question 2

This is not really a question. What I'd like to do is add one further point to what has been said. Something a lot of people don't realize is that one disadvantage of monolingual native speakers is their inability often to speak English internationally. I'll give you an anecdote. My colleague who has worked as a linguist in the European Parliament has noticed that often when there was a British speaker, a lot of people in the audience would put their headphones on. Even people who are English speakers would find it more difficult to understand British speakers of English compared to other international speakers of English. So what I'm saying here is that the ability to speak another language, almost any other language, will give you a higher sensitivity to what it means to speak other languages. So if you're a monolingual and exclusively use one language, you don't have that. It's a skill set and it's a skill to do with general communication, negotiation of meetings, etc., that you may not be able to fully do.

Rosie Goldsmith

Thank you, a very important point indeed.

Question 3

I'm a business owner here in the UK but most of our operations are in Asia. This may seem rather odd, but when I actually first saw the question, I actually read it as 'native English speakers losing out', so I think that's a little counterintuitive maybe for some of the audience. The reason why is because of what the professor said, which is this differential between native English speakers and adopted English speakers. I would submit that native English speakers are more or less going to remain the same, perhaps even dwindle, and adopted English speakers are going to increase with time. I'd be very interested to hear your thoughts on what do you think the implications of that are, because – and this is just anecdotal – I think as a native English speaker, we have a higher tolerance for imperfect English, which isn't necessarily mirrored in, say, French or Danish or German. With my limited French, I wouldn't be able to work in France and converse in French without completely annoying my customers very quickly. They would prefer to speak to me in English or they would hire a local person. So the question is: is there a tension between native English speakers and adopted English speakers down the road, and what implications does that have for English, as we call it now, as a global language? Will English change?

Michael Worton

I think there are real problems for the UKIP English speaker. But I don't see the same tensions for, if you like, most English speakers. What's happening is this whole issue of code-switching, which is very much part of – especially South Asian English, Pakistani English. The fact that there are more and more people who have learned English as a second language, are constantly switching between the English that they're speaking in a particular context and using words from their own native language. I think that is now becoming something which in the Saturday schools, where your communities are trying to get their children to learn Polish or Gujarati or Somali or whatever, they're encouraging – in their daily lives, where they're speaking English as their first language, they should be dropping in words from Polish or Gujarati or Somali or whatever.

So I think English has always been this incredible mishmash. It's one of the least pure languages in the world, that's why it survived so much. It's this messiness which I think will increase. I've just come off from – in the summer, I had to read 75 novels in English, either written in English or translated into English, about South Asian literature. Virtually all of them were written by non-native speakers of English. It was fascinating to see how these novels were astonishingly original and they were astonishingly true to themselves.

I think we're going to have an English which becomes much more diffuse. We'll find people understanding the importance of a continuous present, which most English people don't think about very much. When you've got virtually every South Asian saying, 'She is liking apples', when most of us would be saying, 'She likes apples', you begin to see that actually that opens up all kinds of new possibilities. So you have an explosion of different – much more use of different tenses, of different tones, of different adjective styles and so on.

Rosie Goldsmith

It's fascinating. You've been reading for a literature prize, haven't you?

Michael Worton

Yes.

Richard Hardie

I'm not sure there's a tension, and I don't think it's just my generation versus the latest generation. But now, in our office, it's practically silent because everyone's sitting at their desk typing. You have to think they might be typing a message to the person next door. The standard of English in emails, Twitter, social media, is appalling and getting worse. It's spilling over into the attempt by – whether it's native English or adopted English speakers – when they're actually trying to write formal English. Punctuation is wrong, spelling is misleading, the tenses are wrong. That's a real worry to me. When you get to the point where you really have to be precise – writing a letter committing the firm or drafting a contract – that's where you make mistakes.

Rosie Goldsmith

There is, of course, the observation that it's not just that more English is being spoken as a global language – the fact that we are actually not speaking English properly from the outset, which is another concern.

Question 4

Just picking up on a couple of things that Michael started to say but the other panellists said as well, about English as a medium of instruction, and how overseas the immersive approach to language is becoming embedded so much younger. If you go from Kuala Lumpur through to Saudi, you're going to have nurseries that are running bilingual, and yet this isn't an approach outside of the Saturday schools that you mentioned, that either seems relevant to our younger generation or is part of our culture. I think it comes back to what Humair was saying about it's a currency. The currency of English is so valuable. So how do we bridge that between the currency, the need, and the demand? It's the demand that's driving those schools, not a policy.

Humair Naqvi

If we're going to use the analogy of currency, then we all kind of agree the concept of the dollar being the currency of international trade, yet the importance of other currencies is integral, right? So in the same way, you just mentioned the schools – I'm just reflecting back on our approach in Seoul. I should have had a screen shot. If I showed you a screen shot of a city, in Seoul, and all it has is lots of coaches parked on the highway, and basically there are children coming out of their traditional school and the first thing they do straight afterward is go for the next two hours to a fully immersive, indoctrinating English approach of teaching. Every single child goes to that school. So the point being, whilst we keep pushing the English challenge and the currency, the reality is the English-speaking, native-speaking countries – and I'll include the US in the context of it, only because I represent the American economy, just to keep them happy – is that American English, British English, Australian English – the native opportunity I think these countries have is that with a step-change in policy, with a bit more of a cohesive approach, our ability to extend our second-language acquisition should, in my view, accelerate the challenges we have from an employability – I mean, let's be candid about it. If we didn't have the economic downfall, we would not be sitting here talking about language being the 'holy grail' answer to the economic problems of the UK. That's how I see that.

Rosie Goldsmith

Do you think languages are the holy grail?

Humair Naqvi

No, not entirely. It's not the holy grail. One silver bullet will never be the answer to anything. This issue around community languages, why don't we speak them – they're not aspirational. They have a negative media presence based on migration policies and the stigma attached to that, so what do you expect from community languages? They're going to be deflated. That's not the case in some other countries. But when you add the aspects of the economic impact, that is what's created the vacuum in the UK in particular. It's the same issue you now face in the US, in Australia, where these jobs are being taken by other migrants. It's because they are multifunctional in their approach. They're aspirational. They're developing countries in the world so they've got aspirations to redevelop and rebuild their lives. So there are multiple facets to the issue. But to me, the biggest catalyst of all this is the economic situation we face. Now, languages – I have lots of reasons why I believe languages are critically important, absolutely. But I think the big polarizing factor is, without a doubt in my mind, the economic conditions we face.

Rosie Goldsmith

So language learning has to be made aspirational.

Humair Naqvi

Absolutely.

Michael Worton

It's about money. The immersive category you're talking about is costly. Our government is only just waking up now to the importance of primary schools so it's set the bar at 7 to 11. If that works, I think it will move backwards. But I think it's also because we're living in a country which has a glorious tradition of philistinism. The importance of learning a language is really to do with major cultural issues which just don't matter to most of our political leaders.

Rosie Goldsmith

And we're just too nice about it and too quiet about it.

Michael Worton

Not for long.

Question 5

The system of French *lycées* in London is hugely oversubscribed. They now only take children with either two French parents or potentially with one French parent. So they are there and there is huge demand for it, but there isn't enough supply, in that case.

Michael Worton

And France is a culture which believes in culture.

Question 6

If you look into the future of the UK, talking about what are the future languages, what do you think is going to be the second most spoken language in 20 years in the UK?

Rosie Goldsmith

So what will be the second-most – the second-most taught or learnt language in the UK in, let's say, 20 years.

Michael Worton

I can tell you what it will be, but I'm not sure I can tell you what it should be.

Rosie Goldsmith

What would you like it to be, and what will it be?

Michael Worton

It will be French. It will take time to change that. There are all kinds of reasons, if you go into it – when I set up an academy two and a half years ago, it was a science and maths secondary school but we wanted to have languages at the core of the curriculum for every child throughout. I suggested, okay, we'll have Mandarin and Arabic, definitely. We consulted with the vast community, which has very immigrant, big immigrant, asylum-seeking community, and they said, okay, Mandarin, but we all want French. It's traditional.

What it should be, I think, is a very different question. I would actually myself go for Arabic rather than Mandarin, in terms of what it should be.

Richard Hardie

I think there's a strong chance it could be Spanish, which is gaining ground very fast.

Rosie Goldsmith

You speak Spanish as well, don't you?

Richard Hardie

No, not that I'll admit in public.

Rosie Goldsmith

But in 20 years' time, you will.

Richard Hardie

I speak Italian. Arguably Spanish is much easier to learn than French. I would prefer that people learn German. I just think that that is an area where we're missing out massively, in not being able to sell to the *Mittelstand*.

Rosie Goldsmith

Of course, German is used in so many other countries of the former east as well.

Humair Naqvi

From an economic perspective, I have to agree with Richard. It has to be German, without a doubt. That's our biggest trading partner. With all our experience of the big global organizations we work with, particularly in manufacturing and services, German is a big player, no doubt. On a personal level, I'm not too sure, to be honest.

Rosie Goldsmith

What other languages do you speak?

Humair Naqvi

I speak Urdu, I speak Punjabi. I speak those languages purely because it's heritage. I've attempted Polish, only because it was a challenge I had with Mike Kelly from Southampton University, when I challenged him on that. I haven't done it very much, if I'm candid on it.

But going back to what could be the languages, I think unfortunately these tend to be due to economic and other factors, which I think dictate the language issue. If you think about Arabic, I personally think the biggest reason for exposure of Arabic is because of the issues related now to what's happening in that part of the world.

Rosie Goldsmith

And the lack of Arabic speakers, too.

Humair Naqvi

Absolutely. To me, it's the impact of migration and the catalyst behind that which impact the importance of languages. If you think about it from a services perspective in the UK, in the next ten years we're probably going to find that our service delivery – retail, banking, you name it – now has big substantial pockets of, as you say, Polish, Arabic. To be able to engage with your customer now is probably prevalent more than it ever was, in any industry, in any business. That whole customer satisfaction piece and – for that, it's communication. Nothing better to communicate to somebody in their language to trade with them, even at a local level, in a retail perspective. So I think that's where the impact will be.

Richard Hardie

Especially if you take them out to dinner on Valentine's Day.

Rosie Goldsmith

I'm glad you brought it back to the main point. On that very happy note, that loving note, we do have to thank our attractive panel very much indeed. Thank you so much to Michael Worton, Richard Hardie and Humair Naqvi. Thank you.