

STORIES FROM THE GLOBAL MENNONITE CHURCH

Lessons from language learning

IN THE SPRING of 1978, shortly after my 18th birthday, I left college to see the world. The “world,” as it turned out, was concentrated mostly in a tiny village in Lower Austria, where I lived with a kind, hardworking family who gave me food and shelter in return for my labor in their fields. Since the family spoke little English and local villagers communicated only in a strong Austrian dialect, I spent the first several months in a linguistic fog, struggling to make sense of even the most basic exchanges. At one point, I recall, my family was astonished to learn that I could drive a car; my verbal interactions were so limited that they had come to regard me as a child. To this day I can still recall the exact setting in which I learned many specific words, largely because the learning was associated with some form of acute embarrassment.

There is no doubt my time in Alberndorf changed my life for the better. The process of learning a new language opened up a new world, and my friendship with the family endures. But the experience of being completely immersed in a foreign context left me shaken. Indeed, it called into question my very identity.

Some 20 years later, those memories of learning German came flooding back when our family moved to Costa Rica, where my wife and I led Goshen (Ind.) College’s Study-Service Term for a year. Once again, I found myself in a completely new linguistic and cultural context. As I tried to carry out my responsibilities—at banks and

government offices, in meetings with host parents, organizing field trips or sharing in churches—I was constantly frustrated by my limited Spanish. As a writer, I cared deeply about nuance and precision. Now I heard myself stammering, resorting to trite phrases, grasping desperately for verb tenses that frequently eluded my reach. Often, just when I thought I was making progress,

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an unexpected encounter left me fumbling for the most basic words.

Learning another language is hard work, not just because verb tenses are difficult but because the only path to success goes through the valley of vulnerability, confusion and repeated failure. In order to grasp a new language, we must let go of the cognitive grip that anchors us to the familiar comfort of our mother tongue. Language learning calls us to inhabit the mental and cultural space of a world very different from our own and to recognize that all along native speakers have been perfectly at ease in this world, assuming it to be the norm.

Like others who grew up in a superpower—but unlike the great majority of the world’s population—I did not have to

learn a second (or third) language as a child. That is a profound deficit in my education that I am still trying to recover from.

By one reckoning, Mennonite World Conference member groups speak more than 60 different languages, which calls for enormous patience, creativity and forbearance whenever we gather for conversation and worship. Nevertheless, in our gatherings a remarkable number of people are able to communicate in one of the three official MWC languages—English, French and Spanish.

Recently, I received an email from Duolingo, an online language-learning platform, that a basic program for learning Bahasa Indonesian, which they had promised long ago, was finally available. In 2021, MWC will celebrate its 17th assembly in Semarang, Indonesia. I know from experience that the best way to learn a new language is full immersion. But since that is not possible, I’m hoping 15 minutes a day will yield enough basic phrases to enter, even if modestly, the linguistic world of my Indonesian brothers and sisters by the summer of 2021.

What about you? It’s never too early—or too late—to learn a new language.



John D. Roth is professor of history at Goshen (Ind.) College, director of the Institute for the Study of Global Anabaptism and editor of *Mennonite Quarterly Review*.