

## The real problem with linguistic shirkers



(Source: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2308886/Refugees-learn-German-classes-avoid-losing-benefits.html>)

Germany has discovered a new social type that is causing grief in modern diverse societies: the “Integrationsverweigerer;” literally someone who refuses to integrate, a “Verweigerer” is a “conscientious objector” or a “refusenik.” The principal characteristic of a “Integrationsverweigerer” is that they are not learning German and the German government is now planning to get tough on the type: the country’s main tabloid [headlined a few days ago](#): “Wer nicht Deutsch lernt, fliegt raus!” (“If you don’t learn German, you are fired!”)

As is often the case, Anglophone countries have been on to the problem for a bit longer and in the USA, in particular, public debates about linguistic shirkers – migrants who fail to learn English and are assumed to do so because they are too lazy, too obstinate or too antagonistic towards their new country – have been around since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Ironically, for a long time German immigrants were seen as the most notorious linguistic shirkers of them all; [Benjamin Franklin famously complained](#):

Why should the *Palatine Boors* be suffered to swarm into our Settlements, and by herding together establish their Language and Manners to the Exclusion of ours? Why should *Pennsylvania*, founded by the *English*, become a Colony of *Aliens*, who will shortly be so numerous as to Germanize us instead of our Anglifying them, and will never adopt our Language or Customs, any more than they can acquire our Complexion.

Today, it is more usually [Chinese](#) or [Hispanic](#) migrants who find themselves accused of being English-language learning refuseniks.

Anyone who has ever been in contact with migrants will know someone who has not learned the target language (well); but does that mean that migrants who fail to learn the national language do so because they are too lazy, lack the will power required or simply cannot be bothered?

Unfortunately, most of those who point the finger at migrant language shirkers vastly underestimate the effort involved in language learning. The consensus in applied linguistics is that language learning takes a long time and that the precise duration and final outcome as measured in proficiency level are almost impossible to predict as they depend on many factors, most of which are outside of the control of an individual language learner, such as age, level of education, aptitude, teaching program, language proximity or access to interactional opportunities.

Language learning is not at all a simple task and most people readily forget that it takes about twelve years to learn your first language. The first five or six years from birth are devoted to acquiring oral fluency and then another six years or so are needed to learn how to read and write, to acquire the academic and textual conventions of a language and also to extend grammatical structures, expand vocabulary and refine pragmatic conventions.

First language acquisition may take more time than you thought but its outcomes are relatively uniform (under the condition that schooling is universal in a population). [By contrast, the outcomes of second language learning and the time it takes to achieve those outcomes are much more variable.](#)

Putting a number on how long it takes to learn a new language is a popular exercise and estimates put forward range from a few hours to [the '10,000-hour-rule'](#) provided by some Canadian educators. How is it possible that estimates of how long it takes to learn a second language can vary so widely?

To begin with, one needs to keep in mind that such estimates are often not based on the linguistic evidence but on practical considerations such as how many hours a typical course offered by a teaching institute takes or how much funding is available to cover the cost of a particular program. From a linguistic perspective, there are two problems with attempting to put a figure on how long it takes to learn a language: one is related to what is meant by 'fluency' and the other to learner variables.

### **Assessing the outcome of language learning**

'Fluency' is often thought of as conversational fluency – the ability to have an everyday conversation. Young learners in particular can achieve conversational fluency quite quickly. However, the conversational ease of young learners often fools us into overlooking that they may have continued difficulty with the kind of context-reduced and cognitively demanding language that is necessary to succeed in school and in the professions. Conversely, the proficiency of older learners is often misjudged because even high-proficiency post-puberty learners tend to retain a 'foreign' accent.

Just as the fluency of children and adults is judged by different yardsticks, fluency will seem different for different people and different contexts. To be 'fluent' while shopping is different from being 'fluent' when undertaking university studies; to be 'fluent' as a supermarket check-out operator is different from being 'fluent' as a university student. Overall, the key point here is that 'fluency' means different things to different people and

while we are often all too eager to pass judgment on the proficiency of those who have traces of complex language learning trajectories in their repertoires, our judgments are rarely particularly valid or reliable.



### Language learner variables

The problem that defining the endpoint of language learning is well-nigh impossible is compounded by the fact that a definite judgment on how much effort an individual will require to get to some point on the spectrum that is acceptable to those who pass judgment presents a problem of similar magnitude.

[A BBC documentary about five Syrian refugees trying to learn German in Berlin](#) describes five hard-working people who are keen to learn German; not a trace of refusal or resistance to learning the language can be heard in their voices. Even so, the outcome of their language learning efforts is far from impressive. The youngest in the group, 16-year-old Noor, seems to be making the best progress but even she explains that the “constant worrying” about her family left behind in Damascus makes it hard for her to concentrate. Her father, a man in his mid-40s, is similarly committed to learning German and establishing a future for himself and his family in Germany. Even so, he frequently misses his German language classes because they clash with appointments at the immigration authorities. It is only through these appointments that he can hope to regularize his status and to find a way for his wife and children back in Damascus to join him. So, he obviously has to prioritize bureaucratic appointments over attending language lessons.

Noor’s and Mohammad’s stories are just two examples of the many vagaries of adult language learning; many of which are outside of the control of the language learner. Some of the best-understood learner variables out of a sheer endless list are the following:

- **Age:** Adolescents and young adults [are usually](#) better language learners than older adults.
- **Prior education:** High school graduates and those with prior language learning experience [have been found](#) to make better language learners than those who have not learnt how to read and write in their first

language.

- **Socioeconomic status:** Those who have the time and resources to set aside for dedicated language learning [tend to](#) outperform those who struggle to make ends meet.
- **Gender:** [Some studies](#) have found that men in employment were learning faster than stay-at-home housewives.
- **Race:** [In an Australian study](#), European-looking students received more interactional opportunities than Asian-looking students; these interactional opportunities increased their confidence and resulted in better progress.
- **Religion:** [A Canadian study](#) found that Christian converts were learning faster once they joined a supportive church.
- **Sheer luck:** [An Australian study](#) found that a learner with a caring landlady made better progress than those whose accommodation arrangements were less favorable.

The list could go on and on. The general point is that ***your success at language learning is related to who you are and which hand you have been dealt in life.***

The factors listed above – age, prior education, socio-economic status, gender, race, religion, luck – are by and large outside the control of the individual. What second language learning research shows above all is that learning another language is not an easy feat. It requires a considerable investment of resources and it makes a huge difference whether you are learning in a supportive community or one that rejects you. The ultimate outcome of second language learning efforts is not purely an act of willpower or the result of the learner's personal choices.

### **The discourse around “integration shirking” is one of victim blaming**

Blaming individuals for having made choices outside their control is patently unjust. Not only is the stigma of lack of willpower, laziness and pig-headed refusal to play their part unjust in itself but it also has unjust consequences: instead of seeking solutions to actual problems we put resources into addressing imaginary problems. The imaginary problem is that migrants need to be told that life in Germany without German or life in the US without English is hard; they will obviously know that from experience. What many of them cannot figure out is how to improve their German or English while also starting a new life through the medium of that language. And what receiving societies cannot figure out is how to facilitate the language learning of real people rather than the stick-figures of political slogans.

If you would like to read more about migrant language learning and social inclusion in diverse societies, you might be interested in [my new book \*Linguistic Diversity and Social Justice\*, just out from Oxford University Press.](#)



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