

On learning languages and the gaining of wisdom

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By Ingrid Piller | January 13, 2014 | Language learning, gender & identity



The National Institute of the English Language in Tehran has used the slogan “A new language is a new life” for more than 50 years

I’m preparing my lecture on “Internationalization and Multilingualism” for a [language teaching conference](#) in Bangkok later this week and I’ve been looking for a pithy proverb or quote about the joys of language learning. I’ve discovered more than I can possibly use and so am sharing some below.

The idea that learning a new language extends your horizons, makes you wiser and allows you to live your life more fully can be found in a number of intellectual traditions. This idea is based on the fact that each language is related to a particular cultural and intellectual tradition and a particular world view. As the language philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein put it:

Die Grenzen meiner Sprache bedeuten die Grenzen meiner Welt. (“The limits of my language are the limits of my world.”)

Obviously, one way to extend the limits of one language is to learn another one. For instance, the medieval Franciscan friar Roger Bacon, who was also known as *doctor mirabilis* (“wonderful scholar”), described language learning as the main way to gaining wisdom:

Notitia linguarum est prima porta sapientiae. (“Knowledge of languages is the main door to wisdom.”)

A Chinese proverb makes the same point:

学一门语言，就是多一个观察世界的窗户。 (“To learn a language is to have one more window from which to look at the world.”)

I have not been able to discover any further information about the context of this saying and maybe one of ^ Chinese readers can help us out! A similar Persian proverb, for instance, [has been used as the slogan of a the Tehran-based language teaching institute *National Institute of the English Language \(NIEL\)* for over 50 years](#) and has since acquired the status of an international proverb:

یک زبان جدید یک زندگی جدید است. ("A new language is a new life.")

There seems to be wide agreement with the idea that a new language is a new life and makes us more human. This Turkish proverb provides another example (again, further details about the context would be welcome!):

Bir dil bir insan, iki dil iki insan. ("One language, one person; two languages, two persons.")

The first president of Czechoslovakia after WWI, Tomáš G. Masaryk, made the same point when he wrote:

Kolik jazyků znáš, tolikrát jsi člověkem. ("The more languages you know, the more human you are.")

While I was looking for proverbs and sayings about the value of language learning, I also discovered a fair number of proverbs that have a more nationalistic tone and celebrate the mother tongue (whichever one it may be ...) as superior to all other languages. I'm not going to reproduce any of these quotes here but will leave the last word to one of the great writers in the German language, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who argued that unless you know foreign languages you are not qualified to speak about your own language:

Wer fremde Sprachen nicht kennt, weiß nichts von der Eigenen. (Those who don't know foreign languages know nothing of their own.)

Do you know any other quotes or sayings about language learning and multilingualism?

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