

***Unsere Mehrsprachigkeit* – a collection of impressions published for the 10th anniversary of the Language Centre of the University of Zurich and the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich.**

A personal review by Nick Byrne, Director of the Language Centre at the London School of Economics and Political Science

Time and Academia work closely together. Time is both help and hindrance to all engaged in higher education. At the start our activities, the one year proposal, the three year project, the five year PhD, all stretch out like bodies on a beach with eyes fixed on a distant horizon. Then with the shock of a rainstorm, time, which has been creeping up, ambushes you and transforms those leisurely timelines into stressful deadlines. Terms, trimesters, semesters, academic years clunk by from autumn through to summer – *New Year is Not-so-New Year for us* – measuring out our lives in report-size chunks. Thus ten years pass by in an extended academic moment. When a new department is set up or an established centre re-configured, the clock may well be re-set but ticks on recording the passage of termly feedbacks, annual reports and five yearly reviews.

The Language Centre at the University of Zurich/ETH has passed this ten-year timeline, and has come up with an appropriate and touching way of marking this pivotal point, not with a high-volume event, but with a book that records the people who both work and have studied in the centre. Its title “*Our Multilingualism*” gives an immediate indication of the feel of the publication. It is multi-faceted and *multilingual*, letting the reader enjoy the visual sensation of changing typefaces, changing scripts and changing senses. It can be read logically from start to end, or can be dipped into like the *I Ching* revealing new thoughts and ideas.

The common thread that runs through the publication is the importance of the emotional dimension of language learning. It is the glue that binds together the disparate elements of the learning process, and tries to make sense of the conflicting demands on the learner’s personal time. Most contributors discuss the value of their own multilingualism through the prism of memory, feeling and communication. There are many examples of concrete reasons why they chose to learn a language or indeed a particular language, but even then, these quick and simple reasons become more complex and consequently more interesting to the reader. There are stories of wives and lovers, of first trips, first emotions and first times in cities, countries and long dreamt of places where the sense of their pre-linguistic experiences is palpable. Language teachers speak in terms of passing on a gift as well as a talent to the learner, and there is an almost mystical and ritualistic sense of this “*knowledge transfer*” as we say in our harsher 21st century way. One contributor writes of the deep sensual pleasure he got from the inner absorption of learning, understanding and hearing himself speak Latin.

Yet it is far more than mere “*knowledge transfer*”, as the stories and personal journeys evoked contain far more than facts, rules and conjugations. They contain the transfer of memories, feelings of a sense of potential belonging to places still to be visited, a sort of *Heimweh* where the *-weh* is sensed in advance and yet the new *Heim* is yet to be seen. They show how language study can three-dimensionalise both practical and cultural aspects of area studies and create the sound-track to a movie yet to be filmed but with the starring role already allocated. Contributors both bilingual and those in the process of learning another language use expressions which underline and recognise these shifts in identity. They point out how they “feel different” when they use another language, how they are sometimes not sure “*who they are*” or which language “*is more them*”. It is amazing how

complicated shifts in personality and character worthy of a psychiatrist's report can be indicated in sometimes very simple ways: *"I felt different"..."my view changed"..."I got a different perspective"*. Furthermore the transformational power of language learning is present throughout – a light-touch *corpus analysis* would repeatedly show associated words and phrases to do with *feelings of change, shifts of attitudes, altering of mind-sets, improved understanding*.

Transformational aspects aside, the stories which emphasised the more practical reasons for language learning journeys nevertheless highlighted the effect on previously static mind-sets. Although the common term is **multilingualism**, my feeling is for a newer spin on this established word/concept called **flexi-lingualism**. Flexibility is a theme that runs throughout, where flexibility is embedded in the contributors' lives and life-choices where language learning is both a by-product of this flexibility but also a driver and indicator of flexibility. Flexilingualism is a logical and desirable outcome of *flexibility-through-necessity* in times of economic hardships. If mobility and a mobile workforce within Europe were previously seen as a desirable and worthwhile goal, then the economic climate since 2008 has turned this into a harsh and unavoidable reality.

Finally the other element which is found in the publication is the confirmation that we live in a globalised world. It is clear that the Language Centre in Zurich acts as an international hub for the transfer of ideas, experiences and learning. International students come to the university and bring with them their need for language acquisition - *be it English or German for Academic Purposes, or indeed any other language for any other purpose* – along with their own experiences, worldview and yes, language. The language centre acts as a microcosm of potential connections and can channel the energy of this potentiality to encourage an exchange of ideas, a commitment to diversity, and encouragement to integrate. This publication should be read by anyone wanting to be cheered up by the positivity that leaps out from every page, and could act as a model for all language centre directors who want to mark the passing of time with something more intellectually collaborative than the opening of a celebratory bottle. As one contributor wrote:

Mehrsprachig zu sein ist auch eine Reise zu sich selbst, zu seiner eigenen Sprache und eigenen Identität.

...this is indeed a journey worth making.

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