



## **Why learn a language? Professor Tim Connell**

**18 May 2005**

According to the pundits, languages are going through a bad patch at the moment. In contrast to the run-up to the Single Market in 1992 (when there was a significant rise in the number of adult learners and languages finally became available to everyone at GCSE) there has been a sudden drop in numbers. Over the last five years, the take-up of languages at school has clearly declined; a process which has been speeded up by the Government's decision to make languages an option at Key Stage 3 - ironically as part of the National Languages Strategy. The cutback has been nearly 2/3 in two years, which was almost certainly not the intention. At the same time, the number of students applying to read for a degree in modern languages has also fallen, to such an extent that a large number of universities have reduced their languages offer, merged courses and even shut whole departments.

Against that, there has been a major increase in the number of students learning a language as part of their degree. An increasing number are even learning a language quite independently, not necessarily for credit (meaning that they are being taken out of interest or even for pleasure) and they may not even form part of the student's programme of study. Such courses (which tend to go beyond the traditional offer of French, German and Spanish) are located in the university's language centre rather than the academic department, and that centre often adds to the university's widening participation role in offering an eclectic range of evening classes for the general public and tailor-made short courses for local firms. English as a Foreign Language may well be added, given the cosmopolitan make-up of today's university. Of course, that trend might suggest that the way forward is to hope, expect or pray that everyone in due course will speak English, but it has to be accepted that the vast majority of people don't, even if a knowledge of English is beginning to be seen as a sign of an educated person, in the way that French was in the eighteenth century. And I can't help thinking of the Spanish Empire where the gente de razón (or people who were rational) were Spaniards – or baptised Indians who spoke Spanish.

And if the trend towards learning another language is emerging in universities in quite spontaneous ways then it is also instructive to see that language evening classes are going through a quiet boom. Again, it is not a simple story – German has taken a hammering in the last five or six years in a way that is hard to explain, except that few people actually go on holiday to Germany, it is assumed that the Germans all speak English (and if they don't then they really ought to) and Adolf Hitler is on TV every night. Against that, Spanish has been going through a boom, largely because of salsa culture, Antonio Banderas and Penelope Cruz (not to mention little Cruz Beckham). It is a long time since family holidays on the Costa Brava led to an increase in takers for Spanish. Nowadays the more enterprising go to Florida or even Cuba and I come across students who speak fluent Spanish not so much because their parents have a house in Mallorca, but rather because they spent their gap year combing llamas in Bolivia.

Not everyone of course, goes to a class to learn the language. People find their own preferred way of learning and there is no shortage of patent methods. Slogging through the grammar and showing that you have understood it by translating it is out of date now by thirty years. Language laboratories and audio-lingual methods began to teach people by listening and repeating as a means of understanding structure, and I still find it easiest to learn new vocab by recording it and playing it back time after time. New ways of looking at the structure of language have led to different sorts of grammar – the generative, functional and notional. There is even the Silent Way in which the language is taught without the use of words, Suggestopaedia which looks for connections and relationships, and Michel Thomas who followed in the footsteps of Mr Berlitz by designing his own method. You can use the computer, tapes or DVD; there are courses specially designed for use in a car, which works on the basis that you have learnt the language by

the time you get to your destination.

At the lower levels, it is even possible to learn enough of the language to get by without going into any formal study of the structure of the language. Most people find that this is needed if the structures are to gel over the long term – and most people’s experience is that you forget the language at about the same speed at which you learnt it. It is always encouraging to come across that major exponent of language skills in this country – the holder of the rusty O-level, who usually finds after three classes that they don’t want to be in the beginners’ class after all, as everything is coming back to them (as we said it would) and they therefore want to moved up to another class. The kind of diagnostic tests we have been running here today are designed to demonstrate to people that even if they cannot actually generate the language themselves at this very moment, then they do still have a passive understanding and when things get tough it is surprising how much of the language will suddenly re-surface. (If you missed our diagnostics today, incidentally, you can do something very similar by visiting the BBC languages website.)

Personally, I like to have a go at picking up something of the local language if ever I am going to spend more than a couple of days in a new country. I equip myself with a phrasebook plus tape, and if I get serious about it then I go out and buy a Teach Yourself book and a small dictionary. I feel more than tongue-tied if I can’t say a thing, though of course if I remain on the beaten track and stay in an upmarket hotel and venture out on tours with a charming English-speaking guide, then there is not a lot to say. But if I head upcountry, the number of people who can speak English well begins to fade even a few kilometres from the resort or tourist area where I am staying. And of course the best laid plans can go slightly wrong. In Cairo my local contact thoughtfully provided me with a driver, mainly so that I would not have to cross the road on my own. Unfortunately, the driver (who did speak English) was unwell, and sent along his brother (who did not). So the phrasebook came in handy.

As a linguist, I find looking at how the language works quite fascinating. And I always get a thrill when I try out my first few words and I actually get a correct response. Of course, it is not easy remembering everything, and all too often I remember that I have learnt it – and come out with the phrase about ten minutes after I needed it. So I try various tricks and games to keep phrases at the top of my mind. Sometimes I try to get things to rhyme, or I come up with something totally nonsensical, which somehow seems easier to remember than something worthwhile and usable. Thus in Kenya once, I worked out that Kuna kiboko katika jina bafu means “There is a hippo in my bathroom”. It is in fact a simple way of remembering key structures such as “there is” and grammatical forms such as the personal pronoun. It does not, of course, appear to have any practical application, but then I was brought up on substitution drills. But when I went on safari in the Masai Mara, I stayed at a rather fine lodge which was made up of bungalows. They had stable-style doors, designed apparently to keep the monkeys out. However, we got back to the bungalow late one night to discover that a zebra had got in and shut the lower part of the door, evidently while trying to turn round. It was my proudest moment as a linguist: I squeezed past the animal, reached for the phone and said, Kuna punda milia katika jina chumba - there is a zebra in my bedroom...

The other thing about speaking even a little amount of the local language is the psychological advantage it confers. In a business context, it puts a damper on the opposition because they are never quite sure how much you really understand – and whatever you do, don’t let on. And most people are flattered that you are even trying (never admitting that you plan to give up on it the moment you get back home). It is always a good idea, of course, to compliment a foreign speaker on their ability to speak English - as your complete inability to speak much else will probably have been noted already. Equally, it is a good idea to check to see just how much English your visitors really have. Walter Matthau has something to teach us here:

But then notice that the public relations office had evidently got it all wrong: they did not know who the visitors were, how important they might be, quite what they wanted and who they really needed to meet. Poor Walter Matthau got caught out quite unprepared at a moment when he had other things to think about. We can see the funny side of the situation here, but it is not a good thing for PR to indicate that the guests don’t matter or that they are in some way a burden. In organisational terms, it is a good idea to have someone that you can call in (like one of the City Blue Badge guides – trained at City University of course) who actually likes showing people round and can give them a personalised service. And it does not take long to run round and get a doggy bag together with some free leaflets, a map of the Tube and a copy of the A-Z (not to mention a discount travel card and access to the Internet so that they can check their e-mails while they are away from the office.) A great deal of credit can be built up by having a well-worked out routine that seems to be new every time. And knowing how to talk to people always helps.

But international communication goes beyond simply speaking the language. An awareness at least of

other people's cultures can make it easier to get through to people or at least not make unconscious gaffes. A defining moment in my development as a linguist was when I went to see a Carry On film - dubbed into Spanish. I was studying in Spain and a little homesick, so I thought it would be nice to spend an hour or two in the company of Sid James, Kenneth Williams and Amanda Barrie in Carry on Cleo. The audience absolutely loved it - after all, the Carry On films are very visual (and for Society in Franco's Spain not a little daring). I do not recall how the translator coped with Cleopatra's wonderful line "Get your lousy hands off my asp", let alone Kenneth Williams (cast improbably as Julius Caesar) who cries, "Infamy! Infamy! They've all got it in for me..!" And the wonderful vocal antics of Kenneth Williams and Sid James (cast even more improbably as Mark Anthony) were lost as the dubbing artists were the same people I was to get to know as John Wayne, Cary Grant and Tony Curtis. The cultural dimension in film cannot be overlooked either. I saw Carry on Cleo again some years later, way up the Orinoco in Venezuela. In the country, snakes are a constant hazard, so the audience reaction to Cleopatra's Asp (let alone Amanda Barrie's) was far stronger than I would have expected at home. You may remember when Cleopatra hands Mark Anthony a wriggling snake and says, "One bite is fatal," whereupon Sid James bites its head off, scrunches it up, and says, "Yeah, it tastes diabolical". Some of the audience cried out in horror, not mirth, evidently not aware that the snake was made of liquorice. [Show clip?] Evidently those were simpler times.

A deliberately historical setting can, of course, cast fresh light on situations today. Carry on up the Khyber is the Carry On team's own tribute to the works of Rudyard Kipling and the days of Empire. As improbable as ever, Sid James becomes Sir Sidney Ruff-Diamond, governor of the mythical Indian province of Kalabar, and Kenneth Williams (needless to say) is cast as the local maharajah, the evil, scheming Khazi of Kalabar [giving rise to dreadful exchanges, like "I must go to the Khazi again" - "But you've been twice already today..."] Here Sir Sidney is paying his first official visit to the Khazi and is determined not to be out-done by courtesies.

The curious thing, of course, is that here he is trying to show that he knows the correct formulae, and cultural awareness courses to this day abound to show you how to exchange business cards with a Japanese, or to tell you the order of a meeting with Koreans, (most of whom turn out to have an MBA from an Ivy League university). You may also be given a taste of some exotic cuisine - of the sort you can now find in the Yellow Pages of the average English town. The trouble then is that people think that if Anglo-American customs are well-known, and that the hosts know the West and its ways as well as anyone else, then there is little point in trying to take on the finer points of a new and at times alien culture. There is of course the challenge to the average international businessman of trying to find his way around one new culture after another, but then there might be some sense in specialising. There is even a special EU scheme called the Executive Training Programme which gives young executives a chance not only to learn Japanese or Korean in a long-term intensive fashion, but also to go and work in Japan or Korea for a period of six months or so. And the Japanese help with their JET programme that gives young graduates quite surprising levels of responsibility while grappling with a new language and culture. Quite a character-forming experience and rumour has it that they earn enough to pay off their student loans at the same time.

Language skills also reinforce our use of English, not for everyday communications so much as being able to communicate on an everyday basis - especially in situations with which we are not familiar. A few years ago, it was decreed that the Civil Service should drop the use of Latin tags, inter alia because people couldn't understand them any more e.g. terms like sine qua non, ultra vires, sine die etc.

Steps have also been taken in recent years to de-mystify the Law, but (as we can see) with mixed success.

What people say and what they mean can be two different things. But you don't have to learn another language to discover that. Just think of the way that we speak in committees. When somebody says,

With respect, Mr Chairman...

What they really mean is:

I am going to be as rude as I please

Likewise:

With the greatest respect, Mr Chairman..

I am going to be absolutely outrageous

Or:

I wonder Mr Chairman, if you could summarise where we are...

Sorry – I was half asleep

The Chair can always take his revenge:

I have to say to the meeting that we will need to be finished by 5

I know that half of you are desperate to get to the pub

Speaking another language inevitably puts someone on a pedestal: they take calls in foreign languages; put visitors at work at their ease; they solve problems on holiday; they can be kind to tourists.

But we always work on the assumption that the person who impresses us with their virtuosity does actually speak the language - and is giving us a fair and accurate version of what the other side is actually saying.

No-where is this more apparent than in *La Vita è Bella* the black comedy set in a concentration camp, where the father protects his little boy from the dreadful realities around them by pretending that it is all a silly adult game, with a tank as a prize for the winner.

So the guards are threatening the prisoners with dreadful fates if they contravene camp rules, and the quick-thinking father turns it all into a game for the sake of his little boy.

But there is much to learn from this. You have just watched a clip in which German is being translated into Italian - and subtitled in English. We'll make good Europeans of you yet!

On a more serious note, however, it is handy to have some idea of what is actually being said. What if you are relying on an interpreter and it turns out that they don't really speak the other language that well, or quite possibly not at all? You may remember the Monty Python sketch with the Anglo-Hungarian dictionary where the entries just do not correspond to each other. However, the situation may not be as drastic or far-fetched as that. Does the interpreter know the language well enough to convey the nuances of meaning that might make all the difference to the outcome of a court case, for example? In *Cuscani vs the United Kingdom* (European Court of Human Rights 2002) the appeal revolved around whether or not the interpreter and the defendant actually understood each other (as it transpired that one was Spanish and the other was Italian). In the notorious case of *Regina vs Iqbal Begum* (1991) the defendant was actually sent down for murder without her being aware of the charge being made against her. Recent changes in legislation under the Children's Act were prompted by the dreadful case of *Victoria Climbié* case, where a social worker who knew the language and the culture might well have recognised the danger signs and even got a clear picture of the true situation from the child.

There is also the element of confidence. I happened to be stepping into a balloon in Egypt not so long ago, for one of those flights over the Valley of the Kings. The pilot appeared, waved cheerily and said (with a very good American accent), "Hi guys! This your first time in a balloon? That's fine, 'cos it's my first time too." He then leaned over and casually pulled on a string or two and we went sailing up into the great blue yonder, where he demonstrated that he was actually an expert balloonist, wafting us gently from one monument to another with consummate ease. We came down to land eventually in some fellah's field, and a gang of local lads rushed out to tether the balloon. We got out, the balloonist promptly floated off for more people – and we realised that we didn't know quite where we were, we couldn't ask as we couldn't speak Arabic - and no-one could tell us because they didn't speak English. But the Egyptians are a hospitable people and we all had a glass of tea before the escort vehicle caught up with us.

Now, I shall need the assistance of a volunteer from the audience for the next one. There is a general assumption that people in hospitality and catering all speak English. All too often they do – up to a point. For instance, Tunisia is a plurilingual society, given its history: Arabic is the main language, French is the former colonial language, and a lot of people seem to speak Italian because of trading links that go back to the days of the Carthaginians. Some people speak Maltese because Malta is just next door, and a lot of people in the tourist industry speak German as Tunisia is (quite rightly) a popular tourist destination. However, when I visited Tunisia, I found that people could cope with a variety of languages, but largely in a limited or familiar context. The waiter knew his menu, the barman knew his cocktails, the carpet man could sell his carpets. But once they were off their familiar terrain, their grasp of the language tended to fade.

This is where I shall need the volunteer. Here is the situation: I discovered that the chambermaid in the hotel had gone off with my pyjama trousers when she was changing the sheets in my room. Neither her French nor her English could bridge the gap – and nor could my Arabic, as such a situation had not been foreseen by my phrasebook. So all you have to do is explain the situation in sign language... As I said

before, a little language learning can go a long way and may well avoid international incidents.

I think the main thing is that you should never feel inhibited or put off. Folk memories of tedious grammar lessons at school should be over-ridden by the thought of communicative language classes taught by a sympathetic and well-trained teacher. All my staff at City (some of whom you may have met earlier today) are native speakers of the language, they have a teaching qualification and at least two years' relevant teaching experience in the UK. Attempts to re-assure people that there is no effort in learning a language are, however, misplaced. Courses with names like French without tears or Bulgarian made easy, let alone Icelandic in a hurry, are ultimately misleading. The human brain is idle; it can get by happily in the first language it heard (though there is interesting work to be done on the mental processes of bi-linguals, not least of which is what language to dream in).

The brain is resistant to changing fixed patterns. There is no single view as to whether the brain is pre-programmed by evolution to permit language to develop, or whether each and every brain has to cope with acquiring communication skills. Motivation, especially with adolescents and recalcitrant adults, is a key factor. During the War, my Oxford French tutor trained radio operators to be parachuted into enemy-occupied France. Legend has it that he greeted his students by saying, "Unless you pay attention in my class you will be shot in six months' time". (This is an incentive I have tried to introduce into City University – but with only limited success.) Clearly in their situation they had to speak French well enough to get past a roadblock manned by German soldiers. But they also had to look convincing and carry nothing that might indicate that they had not been anywhere except France. (Oddly enough, there was an interesting article in the Telegraph last Saturday on SOE and the lengths they went to in order to make their agents appear to be local.) But this spymaster level of language skill is not necessarily the standard to be aimed at. Ask yourself why you would want to learn another language: we have done various surveys over the years, which by and large confirm our prejudices. Most people want to travel, or they plan to buy a holiday home or even settle in the target country. Increasingly, they want to learn a language for family reasons – they (or a close relative) will be marrying someone from a particular country. One of the most successful special short courses I ever devised was Danish for Fiancés. By sheer coincidence I had a number of enquiries for Danish, all of them planning to marry a Dane. So I found a sympathetic Danish lady who lived locally, she got hold of a Lutheran prayer book in Danish and they all spent Tuesday nights getting married to each other in the Barbican. But I digress.

Work is probably the next most frequent reason for learning a language. Often people are slightly vague. They do sometimes come and say that they are being transferred to a particular country and in the early 90s it was common for people to say that they were going to work for a Japanese firm and at least wanted to know how to be polite. Post-Big Bang and in a more globalised world we find that fewer people need to actually work in the target language. Multinational companies tend to use English, and most City offices are so cosmopolitan that one would be hard put to communicate with everyone in their native tongue. But there is the social aspect, not expecting five people in a group to speak English because the sixth does not speak their language; not going to Paris and expecting a roomful of Frenchmen to want to speak English. People often feel the need to greet visitors in their own language or to at least cope with informal chat and social niceties.

It is widely reported, however, and with some frustration, that attempts to use the other person's language are swiftly over-ridden because the other person wants to practise their English, and it is now generally accepted that English acts as a lingua franca, and is often used by people of different nationalities when they have no other language in common. From there it is a natural step to have documents or signs in English plus at least one other language, which can be quite comforting. I clearly recall the sense of relief in Bratislava when I saw a monument in Latin (actually to the educational reformer Comenius): it was rather like putting on glasses and suddenly seeing things in focus. Of course, there is probably a case for having a set of international signs to cover the main items for travellers – entrance, exit, nothing to declare – and it might go some way to avoiding confusion in Ireland where the Ladies is signposted as Menna and only someone with O-level Irish will realise that Fir means Gents...

On balance, we simply cannot expect everyone to know English or to use it as a matter of course. We have rather come to expect versions in English (though it is interesting to see the number of little flags to click on inside the Easyjet website, which goes to show the commercial advantage of making people feel at home in their own language). One benefit of the electronic age is that it is quite easy to provide multiple data in a range of languages: films on DVD for example, can provide 32 sets of subtitles (28 in a non-Roman alphabet). People talk about English being the language of the Internet which, seemingly, it is. Until you notice how many American sites will come in Spanish for the convenience of the 12% or so of the

population for whom it is their first language, which makes it very convenient for the other 350 million users who are mainly located South of the Border. Chinese sites also abound.

Of course, it depends on what you are looking for. I search quite often in French for details of potential partner institutions, though increasingly Continental universities (especially in the countries of the less widely used and less taught languages) are now teaching at postgraduate level in English, in order to compete with America, Britain and Australia to attract overseas students. Certain subjects, such as medicine, are traditionally taught in English, particularly in Commonwealth universities, although the availability of key textbooks in English means that any professional person will need to have a reading knowledge of English. But that then creates a difficulty when, for example, the doctor cannot communicate with the patient and an interpreter has to be called in, as can happen with Sylheti speakers in London.

A reading knowledge of the language is always useful. The world has moved on since my old English teacher was told at Cambridge that he ought to be able to read Dante in the original and therefore got sent to Italy to learn Italian – in just one Easter vacation. People sometimes prefer to look at the original rather than the translation. Some students even want to come to grips with the language in order to understand its finer points, or to experience the musicality of the original, in much the same way that David Crystal has recently been working with the Globe Theatre on performances of Shakespeare with the accent of the Sixteenth or Seventeenth Century. And I far prefer foreign films with subtitles as the dubbed version (as per the Carry On team) is not always convincing.

Again, there is that slight worry at the back of my mind that what we know as Dostoevsky bears little relation to the original Russian - and how can we gauge how Russians respond to the work in the original? Perhaps, of course, we could begin to understand thought processes, and the finer points of the language, by studying the language and literature of other people, though literature has suffered in recent years from the demand for the practical and prosaic. Gone are the days when a grammar school boy had a reasonable grasp of French Literature and a lycéen had an equivalent knowledge of the great English authors. Where O-level prepared us to come to grips with French literature from the Seventeenth Century to the present day, GCSE is firmly practical, taking students through everyday situations in the target language that they are only too familiar with in their own. The horizons, the insights, the idea of a shared culture into which one is gaining the first few glimpses, are no longer there. But then, to judge by the crocodiles of adolescent schoolchildren visiting London from all over Europe, there is perhaps a greater uniformity, when people play the same computer games, listen to the same music and support the same football clubs. My brother-in-law in Caracas is a staunch supporter of West Ham, and watches all our Premier league matches – on cable TV. (He is one up on me there as I have never sat through an entire West Ham match in my life.)

This perhaps is the downside of the European ideal. (People here tonight might even be able to think of a few others...) The cultural diversity that might indeed have led to misunderstanding and strife in the past also created worlds within worlds, that attracted the curious outsider without having to travel too far. Now that people think nothing of going to the Caribbean for a long weekend, or flying all the way to the Indian Ocean for a stretch of beach that they could find on one of the Costas, the world is indeed a smaller place, though I rather suspect that we have all been programmed into being a different sort of consumer along with it. The menus (apart from the local speciality) are not so different and legend has it that the menu in English shows prices way above what the locals pay when ordering from the menu in the local language. Some holiday destinations (like Cuba ) even become a pale imitation of the Club Med, with its own local currency that visitors are expected to use on-site. In the same way that my foreign visitors to London all want to “do” the main sites and then go shopping in Harrods instead of going off to discover gems in Kent like Scotney Castle or the Chagall windows at Tudeley, let alone the Romney, Hythe and Dymchurch Railway, I suspect that we have little real opportunity to get out of the bubble that surrounds us, and leaves us actually feeling quite comfortable. It is rather like the Bomas of Kenya attraction near Nairobi, where you can go and visit re-creations of genuine Kenyan villages in a single morning, staffed by genuine Kenyan villagers who don't mind being photographed a hundred times a day.

In this pragmatic world, perhaps a reading knowledge is more important in order to have access to the foreign press. I often find that the Spanish press diverges from what we read in terms of the stories covered or the attitudes expressed. During the Barcelona Olympics I found the British commentators rather irritating as the UK team was not doing too well and there were only so many ways of saying it. The Spanish commentators, on the other hand, were much more upbeat as the Spanish team did remarkably well on home ground for the first time. But the tone was completely different because the Spaniards were enjoying the event for what it was, not frenetically looking for reasons for failure or desperately analysing

why someone had just missed bronze. And with Spain's highly publicised withdrawal from Iraq last year, the whole take on the War on Terror is different. It is odd on occasion to read more in the Spanish press about British troops in Basra than gets reported here.

Basic reading skills are also to be encouraged because it is increasingly common to find items on the supermarket shelves labelled in an array of languages - though you might, in an idle moment, care to compare the instructions, which never seem to quite coincide. But multilingual instructions can benefit us as well. We were on holiday in Greece one year, and my wife went off to the supermarket and simply bought items which looked the same as they did at home. (I wonder if they call bleach powder " Ajax " for example....) I had managed to get sunburnt on the first day and so took the tube of cooling cream with me to the beach, and spent the day crouched under a parasol sloshing the stuff into my shoulders. I happened to notice that a rather nice Greek lady was looking at me, and I assumed that she was admiring my bronzed Olympian physique. However when we were standing at the water's edge closer to sunset she came over - to enquire why I was putting hair conditioner on my sunburn. (And very effective it was too...)

And if you don't believe me about multilingual signage, go and have a look at Waterloo station. I find myself bewildered by the logic not only of which signs are in a foreign language, but also which foreign language they are in. The ticket barrier and ticket office are in English and French. Directional signs to the outside world are in English. Uniquely, there is nothing in German except for the warning sign about luggage on the escalator. Only the British can be fined £200 for improper use of the escalator alarm and in case of any doubt, the warning appears twice, whilst I suppose that the French and Germans can abuse British escalators to their hearts' content. Where is bitte nicht rauchen? Why does verboten not figure at least once? It would make them all feel so much at home, and as for achtung, well...

The luggage trolleys have picture signs to show how they should be operated. So why do instructions have to be added in French, German and Italian? This is the only place in the entire station where the signs are even in Italian - what's the problem? Do they think that Italians cannot be relied on to drive their trolleys safely? Do they not realise that Fangio came from Argentina and Fittipaldi came from Brazil?

Even Stand on the Right is in English - there is no Tenez la droite, not even Rechts fahren (and both of those have been on the Dover road probably since the days of the invasion scare - I refer to the Napoleonic one, not Hitler's...) We really ought to have signs in foreign languages even so. School parties could then steal them off the wall as trophies without having to go to all the trouble of travelling abroad.

In the underground ticket office and the Waterloo station concourse everything is firmly in English. The Continent stops (if ever the matter was in doubt) at the top of the escalator. Serving baguettes and croissants or changing the name of the cafeteria opposite platform 16 to "Napoleon's" is simply not enough. (Anyway, shouldn't that be Chez Napoléon, Au Chapeau de Napoléon or even Trattoria Buonaparte?) Why can't people arrive in London and be given the impression at least that they are still in Europe? I suspect that most English people would prefer to be in the middle of the Atlantic rather than just offshore, rather like Atlantis. (And just look what happened to that.) What was the famous headline? "Fog in the Channel - Continent cut off". Waterloo is not far behind.

So why bother to learn a language in a world where English is supreme and where we are of such high standing that I recently heard a student say, "Why do I need a visa for China? I'm British."

As Noel Coward so notably put it,

*"There isn't a rock*

*Between Bangkok*

*And the beaches of Hispaniola,*

*That does not recoil*

*From suntan oil*

*And the gurgle of Coca Cola.*

(Sail Away 1961)

Indeed, why bother when everyone else is desperate to learn English and practise it on us? Well, look on it as an intellectual exercise – there was even research recently which indicated that learning a foreign language prevented the onset of Alzheimer's.

Think of the social kudos when you are the only person who can welcome the one lone Japanese guest standing in the corner at a cocktail party

Impress your workmates by downloading data from a French website (having cunningly clicked on the Union Jack first and downloaded the text in English)

Look forward to going to a country where people smile and bow at you because they are so stunned that a foreigner is actually trying to communicate with them

Talk yourself out of a corner because you think you can speak the lingo and the local official just can't face the prospect of arguing with you

Above all, strike out towards a new horizon, make new friends, visit new places and learn something you didn't know before. Who knows, you might even enjoy it!

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