

Beyond Harmony Day

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Cabramatta, Australia

Last week an email was sent around my office about our upcoming [Harmony Day](#) celebration on 21 March. The email suggested that to mark the occasion, interested staff could bring in food from their culture and engage in sporting activities, because this year's official theme is Sport, [‘a universal language’](#).

While eating ‘ethnic’ food is pleasurable and playing sports with people from different cultural backgrounds is undoubtedly positive, it got me thinking that the Harmony Day initiative has severe and rather obvious limitations. Without unduly criticising well-intentioned strategies to promote multiculturalism in Australia, this type of superficial community building echoes a previous blog post that suggested that the way French is taught in schools focuses on [“stereotypical and pseudo-cultural information about France such as the fact that the national dress includes the beret or that French people love pancakes”](#). (Incidentally, I can vouch to having an extremely similar experience with learning Italian from 1990-1992. I learnt more Italian being on holidays in Rome for three days than three entire years at my Sydney primary school, such was the nature of the poorly developed curriculum.)

Official communiqués always mention that [Australia is home to a population that speaks almost 400 languages between us](#), and given this sexy statistic, why is that in 2012 national initiatives around multiculturalism still focus on superficial engagement with the actual cultural and linguistic diversity of Australia? One way to switch to more active engagement is to promote multilingualism and encourage the study of languages of significant cultural groups here. Imagine an Australia where a much wider cross-section of society had some knowledge of languages such as Arabic, Greek, Mandarin; how different it would be if people were able to engage more actively with other cultures – and perhaps even develop more empathy and intercultural competence through the process of learning languages.

Australia, as an imagined monolingual nation, has a poor understanding of the multilingual reality of many parts of the non-English speaking world, where people often learn the

languages of the country they are living in, as well as languages of neighbouring countries. Yesterday I visited a local and humble Asian grocery store in Sydney's very culturally diverse suburb Marrickville. During the 15 minutes I was in the store, it became apparent to my ears that the family running the business had spoken at least three different languages – English (from living in Australia) , Vietnamese (the national language of their previous home) and Cantonese (their home language). Furthermore, I found out that they also spoke some Teochew (another minority in Vietnam they interacted with) and could also speak Khmer because they used to live near the border with Cambodia. As another example, last month I spent a day in Cabramatta, another culturally diverse Sydney suburb, and fell into conversation with a Thai business owner who, since migrating to Australia, had made the effort to also learn some Vietnamese because that was the dominant language of business in the suburb.

At a time when [language studies of neighbouring Indonesian has dropped to critical levels](#), the official focus should shift from feel-good and passive multicultural celebrations, to strategies that emphasise learning community languages, which could actually have more of a lasting impact to further tolerance and understanding within Australian society and far beyond.

[Harmony Day](#) is celebrated on 21 March 2012 and coincides with the United Nation's International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.

The sociolinguistics of nail care

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Have you recently had a manicure or a pedicure? I haven't. In fact, I've never been to a nail salon in my life. Until about a decade ago that would not have been unusual among my friends and acquaintances. Today, however, this fact makes me an exception. Most of the women I know nowadays visit nail salons and here in Sydney little girls have 'nail parties' for their birthdays where they and their friends get their nails 'done.' If you haven't bucked the trend and have been to a 'nail bar' recently, chances are you were served by a Vietnamese nail technician and/or the store was Vietnamese-owned. In the USA, for instance, less than 1% of the population are Vietnamese but 80% of nail technicians in California and 43% nationwide are Vietnamese. No surprise then that [this 2008 Los Angeles Times article](#) claims "it's hard to meet a manicurist who isn't Vietnamese." Vietnamese nail technicians also dominate the market in the UK and most of continental Europe, in Australia, New Zealand and other parts of Asia including, unsurprisingly, Vietnam.

I was curious to find out whether the emergence of a new industry (nail care) and the transnational domination of that industry by a specific ethnic group (Vietnamese) had anything to do with language? Sure has, as I've learnt from a 2011 article in the *International Migration Review* (Eckstein & Nguyen, 2011).

Migrants often find that lack of proficiency in the local language is a barrier to workplace entry in their field and/or at the level at which they are qualified. They also often find that they can't wait around till their language has improved sufficiently before having to make a living. The Vietnamese leaving Vietnam in the 1970s were no exception to this.

Linguistic barriers to employment are highest in the professions, where usually (part of) the qualifications and training process needs to be re-done and/or certifying and registration exams need to be undertaken in the local language. That's why migrant lawyers are rare. Linguistic barriers to employment are lowest for self-employment in areas with little state regulation. That's why migrant-owned corner stores are frequent.

Within a particular industry, the same rules apply. Let's take the beauty industry: if you are a cosmetic surgeon and want to move to another country, chances are you'll never work as a cosmetic surgeon again. Depending on where you are from and how your previous qualifications are assessed, you are facing years of re-training, qualifying exams in the new language and other hurdles to re-gain your license to practice in the new country. At the other end of the beauty industry, you'll find nail technicians: [to practice as a nail technician in Australia, for instance, you don't need any formal qualifications whatsoever](#). Limited proficiency in English thus poses no or only a minor obstacle to workplace entry as a nail technician. However, speaking Vietnamese might confer an advantage, as I'll explain now.

In the 1970s, the family of a former commander in the South Vietnamese Navy found that there were few opportunities for them and fellow Vietnamese refugees in California. Like many others in a similar position, they tried their luck in all kinds of ways and opened a beauty school, the [Advance Beauty College \(ABC\)](#) in Garden Grove, CA, an area aka 'Little Saigon.' They taught in Vietnamese and after a short course, students could go and start their own nail salon. Many of them did because in addition to the lack of linguistic barriers, the financial investment was low, too.

At that time, nail salons hardly existed and manicures and pedicures were a preserve of the rich and famous. However, the emergent supply of Vietnamese nail technicians and nail salons meant that manicures and pedicures suddenly came into the reach of Californian women of lesser means. Vietnamese nails-only shops revolutionized manicuring in much the same manner that McDonalds revolutionized inexpensive, fast food service. Like McDonalds, the nails-only shops appealed to busy Americans who wanted quick, dependable service, when convenient to their schedules, and who were content with the provisioning of the service in an impersonal manner. (p. 654)

Vietnamese entrepreneurs thus did not fill an existing market but created a new one. Once established, this market spread easily through franchises. [Regal Nails](#), located within Walmarts, for instance, was founded by a first-generation Vietnamese, as was the Australian market leader, [Professionails](#).

Once established, linguistic necessity became a virtue for Vietnamese nail entrepreneurs, as ethnic networks ensured a continuing supply of first-generation workers with few other options. As such the continuation of the business model depends on continuing emigration from Vietnam because with better education and bilingualism, the second-generation does not need to rely on their ethnic ties and have many other employment options.

As I've explained it was the absence of regulation combined with the availability of training in Vietnamese that made California that birthplace of the Vietnamese creation and subsequent domination of the nail care industry. Furthermore, when the State of California introduced licensing exams for nail technicians in the 1990s, there was the option to take the certifying exams in Vietnamese. Thus, the Californian state chose, in this instance, not to erect a linguistic barrier to employment for its Vietnamese-speaking citizens.

Once established, and as the nail care industry expanded beyond California, across the USA and, later, went global, Vietnamese domination had the effect of excluding non-Vietnamese from the industry so that today lack of proficiency in English is rarely a barrier to becoming a nail technician but lack of Vietnamese does constitute such a barrier. As the industry

transnationalized, it moved back to Vietnam and many nail technicians now train there before emigrating and have jobs already lined up before they even leave the country.

In case any of our non-Vietnamese readers are inclined to feel jealous, consider that it is only the continued 'Vietnamization' of the supply chain that makes your cheap manicures and pedicures possible.

[...] they work in the least skilled, least revenue-generating segment of the beauty industry. Most typically, when Vietnamese entrepreneurs expand their business involvements they do so by opening additional salons of the same sort, not by diversifying their beauty care offerings to include those that are most profitable. Similarly, nail technicians do not invest in additional training to qualify for the better paying jobs in the beauty industry. Vietnamese, accordingly, are creating conditions that work against their own longer-term interests. They are fueling intra-ethnic competition that is likely to drive down their earnings, unless they further increase demand for their services. (p. 666)

Reference: Eckstein S, & Nguyen TN (2011). The making and transnationalization of an ethnic niche: Vietnamese manicurists. *The International migration review*, 45 (3), 639-74
PMID: [22171362](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/22171362/)

Learn English, Make Friends!

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How to make English-speaking friends is one of the perennial hot topics for new overseas students and new migrants. Advice on how to make “native” friends circulates like an underground currency: “Move in with English-speaking flat-mates!” “Avoid co-ethnics!” “Watch footy and next day ask the person at the bus stop what they thought of that tackle.” “Take up a sport, a hobby, a religion and join in.” The list of what is and is not supposed to work is endless and so is the hidden sense of failure nourished by many whose English isn’t as good as they think it should be and who don’t have as many local friends as they think they should have. There is a facile assumption that language learning and making friends are connected in a virtuous cycle: English makes it easier to make friends, which in turn improves your language proficiency, which in turn allows you access to ever more widening networks and so on and so forth to the happy point where you speak perfect English and have a wide, dense and complex network of social contacts.

A recent network study of Polish migrants in London (Ryan 2011) goes beyond these beliefs and examines how newcomers actually establish networks in a new place. The case studies are unsurprising and will sound familiar to anyone in the field. We meet people such as Marek, a single university graduate in his 20s. Through a Polish network, he had accommodation and a job lined up when he arrived in London. So, his ethnic network allowed him to get a foot in the door. However, Marek soon realized that that was the end of the potential of his Polish network: living and working with other Poles, he had no opportunities to improve his English and the job opportunities that particular network had access to only extended to low-skilled, low-paid jobs but offered no avenue into a career or work consistent with his qualifications. Marek decided that learning English was a priority and a precondition for seeking alternative employment. So, he moved out and moved into share accommodation with Australians and New Zealanders. They got on like a house on fire, Marek’s English has improved and he has acquired an ever-widening circle of mates from down under.

However, Marek’s success in learning English and making English-speaking friends has not translated into other social benefits such as career advancement that are usually expected to flow from improved language skills and improved networks. In a sense, Marek has backed the wrong horse: his English-speaking friends are newcomers like himself but in contrast to him,

they have no desire to “make it” in London: they are there to fill a gap year, to see the world, and to party. Marek reflects on the fact that his English and friendship networks have not provided him with a way in:

I didn't have here in London people, if I had a problem, for example . . . to sort out at an institution, to go somewhere, sort something out . . . I never had a person, who I could ask, who could tell me: you'll do it like that and everything will be OK. No . . . all the people, I was surrounded by, didn't have a clue about anything. (Ryan 2011: 716)

Another group who found that acquiring English and English-speaking friends did not necessarily translate into social capital in their new environments were moms. Migrant mothers of young children often find it relatively easy to access local networks through school, and the Polish women with children in the study were no exception. Practically, such mothering networks translated into play-dates and so childcare support. However, because of social dislocation in the migration context, they didn't translate into desirable ways into British society, either. Two of the Polish mothers featured in detail were university-educated and could have been considered middle-class in Poland. However, in London they lived in a working-class and underprivileged neighborhood. While they made friends with local mothers, they found that they didn't actually have much in common with the other mothers in their local area, and, like Marek's Australian backpacker friends, local mothers didn't have a clue, either, how to gain access to the professional worlds the migrant women aspired to.

It is not only language learners who buy into the assumption that learning English and making friends are part and parcel of the same package of settlement success. Language teachers and applied linguists often seem to share these socially naïve assumptions. The study of Polish migrants in London I have described here reminds us how much we can learn from migration studies. Linguistics continues to need the sociologist as Dell Hymes pointed out all those decades ago.

Reference: Ryan, Louise (2011). Migrants' social networks and weak ties: accessing resources and constructing relationships post - migration *The Sociological Review*, 59 (4), 707-724 : [10.1111/j.1467-954X.2011.02030.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2011.02030.x)

The cult of personal responsibility

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Ads for a campaign to speak German are currently all over Germany. [The campaign is called “Ich spreche Deutsch” \(*I speak German*\)](#) and aims to convince migrant youths to learn more German or learn German faster. The campaign’s clever slogan “Raus mit der Sprache” (lit. *Out with language!* Meaning *Speak! Confess! Out with it!*) accompanies images of so-called “ambassadors:” German pop stars, TV personalities or sports stars with a migrant background who pose with their tongue sticking out and painted in the colors of the national flag. The campaign is headed by the Federal Minister for Migration, Refugees and Integration, [Professor Maria Böhmer](#), although it does not seem to be a governmental campaign but is organized by the “[Germany Foundation for Integration](#).” This foundation is [headed by a group of politicians and media people](#) none of whom know anything much about language learning or migration as far as I can tell.

The campaign is based on a number of questionable assumptions. To begin with, it is based on the assumption that in order for migrants to succeed in Germany they have to speak German. Second, that migrants haven’t noticed that most educational and job opportunities in Germany require German and that therefore they need to be informed of that fact through advertising. Third, that few migrants and their children learn German and, fourth, that they don’t do so by choice. Migrants are assumed to be too lazy to learn Germany, as is made explicit by one of the “ambassadors”, the [TV moderator and model Collien Fernandes in a tabloid interview](#):

Q: Why is there so little desire to learn German?

A: Many people are too lazy. [...] I hope the campaign motivates some people to attend a language school. All you have to do is go to the campaign’s homepage. There’s a great data base and it’s easy to choose a school.

Q: And that’s enough?

A: You can't make it any easier than that. All we can do is get people to think and then we have to say: "Ok, you've got to do the rest yourselves." (my translation)

The *I-speak-German* campaign is ostensibly concerned with [enhancing "opportunity justice" \(*Chancengerechtigkeit*\) for migrants](#). The choice of the word is telling: not for them, the social-democratic "equality of opportunity" (*Chancengleichheit*)! How can an opportunity be just if it is not equal?!

In order to have **equal opportunities** a society needs policies that minimize inequality and re-distribute opportunities. In order to have "just opportunities," it seems that it's enough for the rich and privileged to exhort the poor and disadvantaged to get off their bums because it's all their own fault. That such a conception of justice is nonsense had been the societal and political consensus in Germany ever since World War II until neoliberal market fundamentalism started to wreak its havoc there, too. As Brian Barry explains in [Why Social Justice Matters](#), a distinction between the deserving and the undeserving poor has long been a feature of capitalism but was tempered throughout most of the 20th century through the New Deal in the USA and strong welfare states in Western Europe. The distinction has made a come-back in the guise of "personal responsibility" in recent decades and has served to justify the widening inequalities of recent years: we are supposed to believe that the emergence of an über-rich millionaire caste and the fact that the middle class is fast slipping into precariousness is due to the excellent choices made by the former and the irresponsible ones made by the latter.

Just like finding and keeping a job in the age of downsizing and outsourcing or holding on to your mortgage and house when the housing bubble burst are not purely acts of will power or the outcomes of your personal choices, successful language learning is not just an act of will power or the outcome of personal choices. The consensus in applied linguistics is this:

- Language learning takes a long time: four years in the best-case scenario and from there up to "never" (Collier 1989 continues to be the most concise overview). However, the exact length and final outcome (as measured in proficiency level) depends on many factors, the most important of which are outside of the control of an individual language learner, including age and bilingual education provision.
- Age: while it is possible to learn a language at any age, it is almost impossible to modify your accent after puberty. However, non-linguists most often judge proficiency on the basis of pronunciation.
- Interactional opportunities in a new language do not simply appear because you try for them, as Yates (2011) shows. Even migrants who followed all the advice on how to strike up conversations in English did not necessarily find willing interlocutors. Furthermore, for adults, the imperative to work and earn an income or to care for children often simply take precedence over seeking out opportunities to practice a new language.
- Bilingual education: up to puberty, the only safe way to learn another language is to maintain the first. Stunting development of the L1 by switching exclusively to the L2 has negative effects not only on language learning but overall cognitive development and academic achievement. Post-puberty learners have almost no chance to catch up to the proficiency levels of their peers without special language support (e.g., García 2011 for an overview).

There is only one lesson to be learnt from this: if policy makers are serious about equal opportunities for migrants through learning the majority language, there is no way around bilingual provision. German policy makers have by and large failed in this regard. The *I-speak-German* campaign may be their attempt to shift the blame. However, politicians and media stars who fail to educate themselves on basic aspects of language learning before scapegoating a large segment of the population as too lazy to learn surely deserve to be reminded of their own personal responsibilities: too lazy to get informed!

Reference: VIRGINIA P. COLLIER (1989). How Long? A Synthesis of Research on Academic Achievement in a Second Language *TESOL Quarterly*, 509-531

García, O. (2011). Educating New York's bilingual children: constructing a future from the past *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 14 (2), 133-153 DOI: [10.1080/13670050.2010.539670](https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2010.539670)

Yates, L. (2011). Interaction, language learning and social inclusion in early settlement *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 14 (4), 457-471 DOI: [10.1080/13670050.2011.573068](https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2011.573068)