

# WHICH IS THE BEST LANGUAGE TO LEARN?

(website link)



**Once a mark of the cultured, language-learning is in retreat among English speakers. It's never too late, but where to start? Robert Lane Greene launches our latest Big Question ...**

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For language lovers, the facts are grim: Anglophones simply aren't learning them any more. In Britain, despite four decades in the European Union, the number of A-levels taken in French and German has fallen by half in the past 20 years, while what was a growing trend of Spanish-learning has stalled. In America, the numbers are equally sorry. One factor behind the 9/11 attacks was the fact that the CIA lacked the Arabic-speakers who might have translated available intelligence. But ten years on, "English only" campaigns appeal more successfully to American patriotism than campaigns that try to promote language-learning, as if the most successful language in history were threatened.

Why learn a foreign language? After all, the one you already speak if you read this magazine is the world's most useful and important language. English is not only the first language of the obvious countries, it is now the rest of the world's second language: a Japanese tourist in Sweden or a Turk landing a plane in Spain will almost always speak English.

Nonetheless, compelling reasons remain for learning other languages. They range from the intellectual to the economical to the practical. First of all, learning any foreign language helps you understand all language better—many

Anglophones first encounter the words "past participle" not in an English class, but in French. Second, there is the cultural broadening. Literature is always best read in the original.

Poetry and lyrics suffer particularly badly in translation. And learning another tongue helps the student grasp another way of thinking. Though the notion that speakers of different languages think differently has been

vastly exaggerated and misunderstood, there is a great deal to be learned from discovering what the different cultures call this, that or *das oder*.

The practical reasons are just as compelling. In business, if the team on the other side of the table knows your language but you don't know theirs, they almost certainly know more about you and your company than you do about them and theirs—a bad position to negotiate from. Many investors in China have made fatally stupid decisions about companies they could not understand. Diplomacy, war-waging and intelligence work are all weakened by a lack of capable linguists. Virtually any career, public or private, is given a boost with knowledge of a foreign language.

So which one should you, or your children, learn? If you take a glance at advertisements in New York or A-level options in Britain, an answer seems to leap out: Mandarin. China's economy continues to grow at a pace that will make it bigger than America's within two decades at most. China's political clout is growing accordingly. Its businessmen are buying up everything from American brands to African minerals to Russian oil rights. If China is the country of the future, is Chinese the language of the future?

Probably not. Remember Japan's rise? Just as spectacular as China's, if on a smaller scale, Japan's economic growth led many to think it would take over the world. It was the world's second-largest economy for decades (before falling to third, recently, behind China). So is Japanese the world's third-most useful language? Not even close. If you were to learn ten languages ranked by general usefulness, Japanese would probably not make the list. And the key reason for Japanese's limited spread will also put the brakes on Chinese.

This factor is the Chinese writing system (which Japan borrowed and adapted centuries ago). The learner needs to know at least 3,000-4,000 characters to make sense of written Chinese, and thousands more to have a real feel for it. Chinese, with all its tones, is hard enough to speak. But the mammoth feat of memory required to be literate in Mandarin is harder still. It deters most foreigners from ever mastering the system—and increasingly trips up Chinese natives.

A recent survey reported in the *People's Daily* found 84% of respondents agreeing that skill in Chinese is declining. If such gripes are common to most languages, there is something more to it in Chinese. Fewer and fewer native speakers learn to produce characters in traditional calligraphy. Instead, they write their language the same way we do—with a computer. And not only that, but they use the Roman alphabet to produce Chinese characters: type in *wo* and Chinese language-support software will offer a menu of characters pronounced *wo*; the user selects the one desired. (Or if the user types in *wo shi zhongguo ren*, “I am Chinese”, the software detects the meaning and picks the right characters.) With less and less need to recall the characters cold, the Chinese are forgetting them. David Moser, a Sinologist, recalls asking three native Chinese graduate students at Peking University how to write “sneeze”:

To my surprise, all three of them simply shrugged in sheepish embarrassment. Not one of them could correctly produce the character. Now, Peking University is usually considered the “Harvard of China”. Can you imagine three phd students in English at Harvard forgetting how to write the English word “sneeze”? Yet this state of affairs is by no means uncommon in China.

As long as China keeps the character-based system—which will probably be a long time, thanks to cultural attachment and practical concerns alike—Chinese is very unlikely to become a true world language, an auxiliary language like English, the language a Brazilian chemist will publish papers in, hoping that they will be read in Finland and Canada. By all means, if China is your main interest, for business or pleasure, learn Chinese. It is fascinating, and learnable—though Moser's online essay, “Why Chinese is so damn hard,” might discourage the faint of heart and the short of time.

But if I was asked what foreign language is the most useful, and given no more parameters (where? for what purpose?), my answer would be French. Whatever you think of France, the language is much less limited than many people realise.

As their empire spun off and they became a medium-sized power after the second world war, the French, hoping to maintain some distance from America and to make the most of their former possessions, established La Francophonie. This club, bringing together all the countries with a French-speaking heritage, has 56 members, almost a third of the world's countries. Hardly any of them are places where French is everyone's native language. Instead, they include countries with Francophone minorities (Switzerland, Belgium); those where French is official and widespread among elites (much of western Africa); those where it is not official but still spoken by nearly all educated people (Morocco, Lebanon); and those where French ties remain despite the fading of the language (Vietnam, Cambodia). It even has members with few ties to French or France, like Egypt, that simply want to associate themselves with the prestige of the French-speaking world. Another 19 countries are observer members.

French ranks only 16th on the list of languages ranked by native speakers. But ranked above it are languages like Telegu and Javanese that no one would call world languages. Hindi does not even unite India. Also in the top 15 are Arabic, Spanish and Portuguese, major languages to be sure, but regionally concentrated. If your interest is the Middle East or Islam, by all means learn Arabic. If your interest is Latin America, Spanish or Portuguese is the way to go. Or both; learning one makes the second quite easy.

If your interests span the globe, and you've read this far, you already know the most useful global language. But if you want another truly global language, there are surprisingly few candidates, and for me French is unquestionably top of the list. It can enhance your enjoyment of art, history, literature and food, while giving you an important tool in business and a useful one in diplomacy. It has native speakers in every region on earth. And lest we forget its heartland itself, France attracts more tourists than any other country—76.8m in 2010, according to the World Tourism Organisation, leaving America a distant second with 59.7m. Any visit there is greatly enhanced by some grasp of the language. The French are nothing but welcoming when you show them and their country respect, and the occasional frost that can greet visitors melts when they come out with their first fully formed sentence. So although there are other great languages out there, don't forget an easy, common one, with far fewer words to learn than English, that is almost certainly taught in your town. With French, *vous ne regretterez rien*.

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Which do you think is the best language to learn? Have your say by voting in our [online poll](#)

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