Why Languages Matter

By Dana Kapoostinsky

Somehow throughout my life, I’ve always found myself learning a new language; so far, I’m on my fourth. I was born to Russian-speaking parents in Israel, so my mother tongue is Russian. At four years old, when I was old enough to go to kindergarten, I began learning my second language – Hebrew. At the age of seven, I immigrated to Canada; I knew no word of English and once again, I had to start from scratch. It wasn’t until a few years ago, when I began to pursue my studies in French more seriously, that I realized how much I valued knowing all these different languages. As an English major, I developed a deep passion for the literary arts, however, when I began to study French literature, I noticed something very interesting – many ideas, especially those that are more artful or abstract in nature, do not always translate very well from language to language. There are mysterious ways in which language can capture a state of mind or a mood that cannot be captured in the same way in another language. I believe that these subtle differences from language to language allow for a unique form of expression through written art that creates a window into the culture of the artist.

The ability to understand more than one language allows individuals to access different cultures in a more authentic way, through untranslated works of literature or any other kind of medium that makes use of spoken or written language. *Lost in translation* is an idiom we hear all the time and for good reason. Many words do not directly translate from language to language, and in an attempt to translate works of art that carry the significance of an important aspect of a given culture, the subtlety or the nuance of an idea or message is not always preserved. Each language inherently adapts itself to its own respective culture, and the refinement of meaning that its words carry change from language to language; that is to say, language is a dynamic and evolving showcase of the values and experiences of the culture which it pertains to.

Learning a new language allows for the opportunity to enter a whole new world of cultural and literary discovery that would otherwise be out of reach. Anyone who is interested in the arts should not underestimate the value of learning another language. Whether one is interested in the social sciences or humanities, there are many ways which a second language can be beneficial. For instance, an anthropologist doing field work is much better off directly communicating to local individuals, as opposed to communicating through a translator, or a historian studying ancient writings may gain a new perspective by reading them in their original, untranslated form. Finally, an artist or a writer wanting to convey a specific experience might find it easier to do so in one language over another, depending on the nature of his or her experience. Languages matter because they expand the palette of words we have available to express our complex and varying human experiences.