Why Languages Matter

By Daniela Smith-Fernandez

Why study languages? After fourteen years and countless hours, I keep asking myself that question. They never stop being a challenge, no matter how in depth we go, or how many we learn. Yet somehow, I’ve gone from dropping French in grade nine to now deciding on a fourth language. What I can tell you is that it was in university language classes that I was first motivated to study a subject that didn’t come naturally to me. I started learning Spanish to connect with my Latin American heritage, and along the way, I fell in love with multilingualism. Since then, I’ve gone on to study in my third language of French both at trade school and university. Speaking multiple languages has provided work opportunities, but more importantly it’s altered my concept of what is possible.

We talk about learning languages in terms of impact on the brain. In reality, language is fundamental to how we process and construct our worlds. Language is vivid, an entity that not only lives in our minds, but is also the way through which we experience emotions. The turning point for me wasn’t being able to decipher a Spanish text; it was when that text was able to touch my heart and my imagination. After spending time using other languages, I return to English more conscious of the poetry of everyday metaphors and speech, and that has revitalized my own creative work.

Language learning requires a lot of humility because we can no longer take for granted that we know how words, sounds, and phrases fit together. Instead, we have to develop a new set of grammatical instincts, and appreciate on a profound level that most concepts and categories won’t translate easily from one language to the next. In doing this we literally create another linguistic reality for ourselves to live through. Initially, I found the fact that we can never completely master another language infuriating. Ultimately, I came to understand this is because each language is so vast, so beautiful, and so full of possibilities, that a single lifetime isn’t enough to experience everything it has to offer.

The process of learning a language requires time. You can’t rush it; as students, we each discover for ourselves that we can’t cram linguistic knowledge in at the last second. Instead, we have to develop a continuous relationship with it over time. Going from basic verb conjugation to reading my favourite writer in the original Spanish has been a fulfilling experience unlike any other in my life. It’s taught me patience and the value of committing to things long-term, be they skills, crafts, or even relationships.

At its root, language is about human connection. What we learn through language classes far transcends a grade. Being multilingual literally expands how many people’s voices we can hear beyond the limits of our own culture. Listening to different perspectives is crucial for participating in meaningful dialogue about what matters to us as humans, whatever what languages we use.