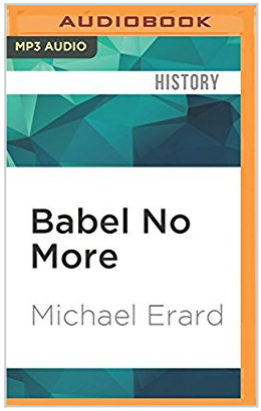

Babel No More: The Search for the World's Most Extraordinary Language Learners

By Michael Erard

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A "fascinating" (*The Economist*) dive into the world of linguistics that is "part travelogue, part science lesson, part intellectual investigation...an entertaining, informative survey of some of the most fascinating polyglots of our time" (*The New York Times Book Review*).

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On his way to tracking down the man who could be called the most linguistically talented person in the world, Erard meets modern language-superlearners. Among them is Alexander, who shows Erard the tricks of the trade and gives him a dark glimpse into the life of obsessive language acquisition. "Others do yoga," writes Erard. "Alexander does grammatical exercises."

With his ambitious examination of what language is, where it lives in the brain, and the cultural implications of polyglots' pursuits, Erard explores the upper limits of our ability to learn and to use languages, illuminating the intellectual potential in everyone. How do some people escape the curse of Babel—and what might the gods have demanded of them in return?

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Babel No More: The Search for the World's Most Extraordinary Language Learners By Michael Erard Bibliography

- Rank: #7070563 in Books
- Published on: 2016-05-17
- Released on: 2016-05-17
- Formats: Audiobook, MP3 Audio, Unabridged
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 6.75" h x .50" w x 5.25" l,
- Running time: 9 Hours
- Binding: MP3 CD

Editorial Review

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About the Author
Michael Erard has graduate degrees in linguistics and rhetoric from the University of Texas at Austin. He's written about language, linguists, and linguistics for "Wired", " The Atlantic", " The New York" "Times", and many other publications and is a contributing writer for "The Texas Observer" and "Design Observer." He is the author of "Um... Slips, Stumbles, and Verbal Blunders, and What They Mean".

Babel No More

Chapter 1

typical midtown Manhattan lunch crowd was packed into the Japanese restaurant around me. Behind the counter were the cooks who had produced the fragrant bowl of noodles I was now eating.

The boss, an older Japanese man, read from waiters’ slips and shouted orders to his crew in Japanese. Two heavy-set, young Hispanic men, with tattooed arms and baseball hats worn backward, moved from pot to pot through the steam-filled space, ladling this, mixing that, all so smoothly I couldn’t tell when they had finished one order and started another. In the quieter moments, they filled containers with chopped herbs and wiped down counters, talking to one another in Spanish and addressing a third cook, another Japanese man, in the pidgin English of the restaurant kitchen.

Three languages, two of which weren't native to the people speaking them, and the rhythm of their immaculate noodle ballet never stuck or slowed.

It's amazing that the world runs so well, given that people use languages that they didn't grow up using, haven't studied in schools, and in which they've never been tested or certified. Yet it does. The noodle scene was probably reflected that same day hundreds of millions of times all over the world, in markets, restaurants, taxis, airports, shops, docks, classrooms, and streets, where men, women, and children of all skin colors and nationalities met with, ate with, bought and sold with, flirted with, boarded with, worked next to, served, introduced, greeted, cursed at, and asked directions from others who didn't speak their language. They did all this successfully, even though they might have spoken with accents, used simple words, made mistakes, paraphrased, and done other things that marked them as linguistic outsiders. Such encounters between non-native speakers have always textured human experience. In our era, these encounters are peaking, as the ties between language and geography have been weakened by migration, global business, cheap travel, cell phones, satellite TV, and the Internet.

You may be familiar with the stories of languages, such as English or French or Latin, that are (or were) valuable cultural capital. This book tells another story, about a kind of cognitive capital, the stuff you bring to learning a new language.

We once lived in bubbles, disconnected from the hubbub of the world. But more of these bubbles, where one or only a few languages used to be spoken, are connected each day, and more and more of us are passing between them. It is clear that multilingual niches are proliferating, and that monolinguals (such as myself) need to live and act multilingually. But that's not what I'm writing about.

Something else is happening as well: we've begun to want to naturally move among these bubbles unimpeded. Maybe you're a Dagestani woman living in Sharjah, one of the United Arab Emirates, who speaks Russian to your husband while he speaks Arabic to you. Maybe you're an American project manager leading phone meetings, in English, with engineers from China, India, Vietnam, and Nigeria. Maybe you're a Japanese speaker working next to two Hondurans in a noodle shop. Maybe you're a Beijinger finally realizing your dream to see the Grand Canyon. Ideas, information, goods, and people are flowing more easily through space, and this is creating a sensibility about language learning that's rooted more in the trajectories of an individual's life than in one's citizenship or nationality. It's embedded in economic demands, not the standards of schools and governments. That means that our brains also have to flow, to remain plastic and open to new skills and information. One of these skills is learning new ways to communicate.

If you could alleviate people's anxieties about language learning, you'd solve what has shaped up to be the core linguistic challenge of the twenty-first century: How can I learn a language quickly? How well do I have to speak or write it for it to be useful? Whose standards will I have to meet? Will I ever be taken as native? And are my economic status, my identity, and my brain going to be changed?

How adults learn languages is central to the emergence of English as a global lingua franca. In fact, the spread of English is the signal example of the reconsideration of "native-like" abilities in a language. In the coming decades, as many as two billion people will learn English as a second language. Some large fraction of them will be adults who are attracted by the prestige and utility that has made it the most popular language to learn over the past five decades.15 In China, the size of the English market has been valued at $3.5 billion, with as many as thirty thousand companies offering English classes.16 It's said that on a daily basis, as many as 70 percent of all interactions in English around the world occur between non-native speakers. This means that native English speakers have less control over determining the "proper" pronunciation and grammar of English. Some experts in China and Europe now advocate teaching standardized foreign Englishes that

wouldn’t fly in the language’s home countries.

English may be the only global language with more non-native speakers than native ones. However, it isn’t the only additional language that people are learning in the $83 billion worldwide language-learning market—a figure that doesn’t include spending on schools, teachers, and textbooks in educational systems.17 In the United States, 70 percent of college students in foreign-language classes study Spanish, French, and German, though Arabic, Chinese, and Korean are increasing in popularity.18 If you live in Brazil, you’ll learn Spanish, now compulsory in schools. If you live in East Asia, it’s Mandarin Chinese. In Europe, thanks to the European Union, it’s French and German. Hindi in India. Swahili in East Africa. Tok Pisin in Papua New Guinea. But speaking like a native, at a moment when people need extra languages to make a living, is a standard to which adult speakers literally cannot afford to be held.

Also, pumping new life into endangered or extinct languages depends on teaching them to people who have lost the moldable brains of youth. And when ancestral tongues die out, their communities don’t become mute—children and adults learn to speak something else, often a language connected to the demise of their ancestral one. I say this not to glibly dismiss the issue but to point out the full scope of the problem. Also, exciting new technologies for translating speech and text between languages don’t eliminate the need for people to learn languages. But they might enable multilingual transactions—for instance, by using free machine translation tools, I can get a rough gist of a web page in a language I don’t know.

The fragmentary, improvised, simultaneous use of several languages all at once that I witnessed in the noodle kitchen doesn’t occur only in New York City, London (named in 1999 as the most multilingual city in the world), Mumbai, Rio de Janeiro, and other major world cities.19 No longer are borders, universities, and transportation hubs the only linguistic crossroads: this morning, my Twitter feed featured updates in French, Spanish, Korean, Mandarin, Italian, and English. That same feed reported fraudulent email scams, called 419s, that have begun to circulate in Welsh, German, and Swedish.

Anyplace on the globe, you can surf through television channels in many languages; on the news channels, you’ll see political protesters half a world away carrying signs written in English. Pop stars learn other languages in which to sing songs, to win ears in more markets. And it’s not just in the flow of digital information that we’re encountering more languages. Signs on the streets in your city are appearing in more languages than they used to, and on any given day, your local hotel might be home to a trade delegation from Kazakhstan, Brazil, or Bulgaria.

With so many languages to learn and so many reasons to learn them, it’s easy to miss the sheer humanity of the undertaking, which is evident in the biological equipment—brains, eyes, tongues, and hands—that every adult brings to the task. And if you’ve ever tried to learn a language, you already know that adult brains have limits (though not absolute ones) that constrain their efforts. As a result, people will speak their new languages with a lot of variety. They won’t sound like native speakers. And yet they may need to speak new languages and dialects in order to survive in this economy. What should they do?

Imagine a person who can learn languages very easily—someone who can navigate the multilingual hullabaloo by leaping language barriers with a single bound. Someone for whom learning a language is easier than relying on a translation. A role model, in other words, for these globalized times—someone who, like Mezzofanti, learns without effort, remembers huge amounts, and has amazing powers of recognition and recombination. Not a parrot. Not a computer. A human superlearner.

One of Mezzofanti's gifts was an ability to learn a new language in a remarkably short time, using neither dictionaries nor grammars. Even without a shared language to help him translate, Mezzofanti would ask a speaker to repeat the Lord's Prayer until he grasped the language's sounds and rhythms.20 Then he would break it into the parts of speech: nouns, adjectives, verbs. Honed by thousands of hours of practice, his ability to extract a picture of the language from a small slice of it was unusually keen. He combined this sense of structure with a perfect recall for vocabulary, which he could combine into new sentences.

Because aspects of both memory and pronunciation can be sharpened through training, perhaps these weren't gifts of birth. Yet he possessed other, inborn, gifts. He admitted that God had given him "an incredible flexibility of the organs of speech."21 Visited by fluent speakers who were amazed by his accent, his knowledge of literature, his humor, and his love of wordplay, Mezzofanti was a social chameleon. Even in languages in which he sounded like a learner, he engaged quickly and authentically. If a dozen people spoke to him, in a dozen different languages, each one left the encounter feeling that the cardinal had spoken his or her language the most fluently. What modern science can't explain is how he could switch from one language to another without confusing them. Numerous accounts exist of his carrying on simultaneous conversations in more languages than he had fingers. One writer compared it to "a bird flitting from spray to spray."22

Let's suppose that Mezzofanti was a myth. Could someone actually do what he was supposed to have done? Could someone represent all the peoples and places of the world in one body—in whose body they coexist without confusion or conflict—because they have more languages than allegiances, either political or cultural?

In the biblical story of Babel, the people of Babel set out to build a tower to confront God in heaven. Sharing one language allowed them to communicate perfectly and move along with the construction of their tower. But God put a stop to their tower—and its arrogance—by scrambling their shared language. In the ensuing miscommunication, the humans began to disagree, the building halted, the people scattered, and the tower crumbled. In the Sumerian version of the same story, a god named Enki, jealous about humans' fondness for another god, Enlil, cursed humans with many languages.

A language superlearner could embrace this curse of disparate languages and whisper in its ear, "Babel, no more."

Every adult of normal intelligence on the planet, about six billion people, has learned at least one language as a child. A sizable (though uncounted and, interestingly, uncountable) number also speak an extra tongue. In some places, many individuals speak four or five languages they learned, even as adults. But that's not the sort of person I have in mind.

I'm talking about those rumored language superlearners, glimpsed here and there, widely separated in time and space. Some, like Mithridates, lived half in legend; some, like Giuseppe Mezzofanti, lived in a bygone age. Some supposedly live among us right now. They are "hyperpolyglots." Some can speak or read to varying degrees in many dozens of languages. According to one definition, a hyperpolyglot is someone who speaks (or can use in reading, writing, or translating) at least six languages; this is the definition around which I built my early investigations. Later I found that eleven languages may be a more accurate cutoff.

I was originally drawn to hyperpolyglots for the way they reflect and refract ideas about language, literacy, and aspirations about language learning and cultural capital in the modern world: who has it, who wants it, who gets it. It's easy to find someone with a ready anecdote about an uncle, a high school professor, or someone met on an airplane who speaks a lot of languages or who can learn them very easily. "Picks them

up," it's said, as if languages had handles or could fit into vacuum cleaner hoses. Because we know how hard it is to learn even one foreign language, we receive the tales with awe. Then we repeat them with a skepticism or wonder that we save for stories about saints, healers, and prodigious lovers.

At the outset, all I had were such stories, the tantalizing tales told over the centuries about people with remarkable linguistic gifts. Most of the stories are legends, unreliable as wholes. Yet hidden in them are kernels of truth that are subject to discovery, assessment, and testing, which in turn can guide further exploration. Do such language superlearners really exist? How many are out there, and what are they like? What could this gift for learning languages amount to, if it's real? And what are the upper limits of our ability to learn, remember, and speak languages?

Babel No More is an account of my search for solid answers to these and other questions. I decided to write as a curious adventurer rather than as a scholar, seeking the freedom to move across intellectual borders. Because this journey had no predestined end, I couldn't write as if I knew what I'd find. I drew on published research literature, my interviews with scientists, my investigation in historical archives, memoirs by—and, of course, my interviews with—hyperpolyglots. An invaluable amount of information was gathered via an online survey of people who say they know six languages or more. All this was necessary to see why these souls have escaped the curse of the gods—and what the gods might have demanded of them in return. Would the secret of speaking many languages provide a key to the secret of speaking any language at all?

During my explorations, I grappled with the question of how best to make sense of what hyperpolyglots do in their lives with their languages. Whose standards would I use to judge their abilities, if indeed those need to be judged? I also had to confront why language scientists have refused to consider hyperpolyglots, talented language learners, and language accumulators as anything more than curiosities or freaks. For instance, Carol Myers-Scotton, a linguist who is an expert on bilingualism, recommended in one of her books, "When you meet people who tell you they speak four or five languages, give them a smile to show you're impressed, but don't take this claim very seriously."23 I'm not exaggerating when I say that no one has critically looked at people who have learned as many languages as hyperpolyglots claim, though scientists have studied people who have learned one or two "second" or "foreign" languages very well. They prefer one kind of talent over another because of an obsession with native-likeness as the sole goal of language learning and an assumption that the native speaker is the sole model of success as a linguistic insider. Over and over I was told, sure, someone could learn the vocabularies of many languages, but no one could learn many languages at a native level. But, I wondered, could they be fluent in many languages? How fluent? What are the limits? These are questions that motivated me.

On my way, I'd have my own brain scanned. I'd make a fool of myself—and have fun doing it—in Hindi, Italian, Spanish, and some other languages. I'd also travel the world, from Europe to the United States to India to Mexico, talking to people who, one way or another, are making their way through Babel. Tracking down experts and rooting out facts and theories from scientific publications didn't prepare me for the amazing specimens I'd meet. Some hyperpolyglots are human sponges, able to absorb or inhale languages unbelievably quickly. Others are human cranes who can lift many languages at once. Still others are human slingshots, using their experience in a few languages to fling them further.

These aren't geniuses, but they do possess unusual neurological resources. They have a penchant for conspicuous consumption of time and brainpower that appears to be linked to the brains they possess. What makes them who they are is not merely genetic; they're influenced by the same trends as the rest of us. They're choosing the same languages most people would. And they're using them for the same purposes. Their personalities defy generalization—I didn't find it necessary to mistrust them as crippled egos who require the salve of attention. Nor did I dance too often with their veracity. A healthy skepticism got me

through, in particular because I didn’t profile in depth anyone with a financial interest in hyping their abilities.

By the end of my journey, I realized that hyperpolyglots are avatars of what I call the “will to plasticity.” This is the belief that we can, if we so wish, reshape our brains—and that the world impels us to do so. Two quick examples of the impetus for high-intensity language learning should suffice. “I want to be a polyglot,” someone posted on Twitter; I asked him why. “Because I want to be able to go anywhere and be able to communicate with anyone,” he replied. Then there was a news story extolling ten-year-old Arpan Sharma, a British boy who supposedly speaks eleven languages, who explained that “When I’m an adult . . .24 I want to be a surgeon who can work in all the hospitals of the world and speak the language of the country I’m in.” Whether you have learned one additional language or a dozen, you have emulated this same desire. I hope I’m not glorifying them too much by saying that the hyperpolyglot makes visible the myriad strands of our linguistic destinies, whether we speak only one language or many.

Some of these strands and destinies take shape in the group of people who form what I call a neural tribe. They’ve developed along neurological paths distinct from the rest of us, journeys that have given them a sense of mission and personal identity as language learners.

Linguistically, they’re out of time, place, and scale. Could they be an advanced specimen of the species? It’s tempting to think so. They are not born; they are not made; but they are born to be made. We’d need more advanced neuroscience to explore the nuances of the linguistic brain. I hope to be around to see it.

It’s an odd tribe—there is no unified voice, no leaders, and no rules. In many ways, it’s a lost tribe, belonging to no nation. Yet, their dislocations seem reminiscent of everyone else’s. They have something to tell us about what our brains can do and what we must do to make our peace with Babel.

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