TA Tomorrow's Affairs

Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

By: Catriona M. Munro, TA Editor in Chief

Learning the Foreign Lingo

The British - and the Americans - are notoriously reluctant to learn foreign languages, generally on the basis that it is unnecessary, given that English is the world's lingua franca.

"I have no idea why you keep learning foreign languages, darling", said an American friend when I told her I was going to study Spanish. "The only words you need to know in another language are "yes", "no" and "taxi". "Bar" is quite useful" I rejoined, weakly.

So I went ahead and studied Spanish - not grandiose Castellano Spanish, but the Latino Americano campesino or "street" version. I was going to be working with Colombian law enforcement, and I still have only a tenuous grasp on subjunctives (far too much is made of those in Spanish in my opinion).

My conversational ambits on my occasional trips to Spain provoked ridicule: I used expressions like 'me regalas un cenicero por favor?" ("May I have an ashtray please", or literally, "would you give me the gift of an ashtray please?" The Castellano Spaniards take no prisoners.

French and Russian

I'm a serial language learner: I began aged 5 when my modern languages- teaching parents took the family plus a bunch of school pupils to south west France for a summer holiday exchange.

I went on to learn the usual suspects - western European languages - because it seemed to be the only thing I was any good at. I went Slavic - Russian - with French for my degree, but unlike many of my fellow workers, I restricted myself to what were considered "simple" western European languages: French, Spanish, straightforward Brothers Grimm Germanic and a smattering of Slavic lingos.

A conclusion I've come to is that an anglophone tends to have to confront unexpected issues when learning foreign languages (I am convinced anyone can learn languages: if you can learn your own one, why can't you learn someone else's? Any language has the power to terrify and bamboozle...

> It is relatively easy for a native English speaker to embark on "learning" French. Russian is a slightly different case

For example, it is relatively easy for a native English speaker to embark on "learning" French. The grammar principles are not too difficult, and you should get your head around the vocabulary without too many issues. But it is actually really difficult to learn to speak a highly sophisticated language like French really well. It is always impossible to avoid the pitiless Gallic shaming of pathetic efforts (which should encourage but often demoralises). That's why I've been "learning" French for 50 years and won't ever stop.

Russian is a slightly different case. It's quite a difficult grammar for an English speaker to grasp, particularly because it is rare to learn it in British schools before you are in your late teens, and the younger you are, the better you will learn a foreign language.

You could describe the grammar as fiendish: every verb has 2 aspects to learn, the vocabulary does not resemble western languages pace the occasional loan word acquired from the French spoken at the Russian Court. But once you have got a grip of the principles, Russian grammar is not horrifically difficult for a native Brit to learn to a decent level.

A magic key

It's a cliché, but learning a foreign language is like being given a magic key that opens a whole new world for you, enhances your cultural Weltanschauung and gives you a massive advantage in many Continental restaurants. You can also have bad luck when people who know you are a linguist expect you to fire off a translation they need done with no

payment or decent acknowledgement, but that is by the by.

A decades-long survey carried out by the University of Edinburgh has established that there are brain-nourishing benefits from studying a new language including enhanced speed thinking, and improvements to reasoning and memory.

So, voilà! No other languages really have their own exact equivalent of that particular interjection but everyone knows what it means. Possibly unlike Weltanschauung. Sorry.