

Three Things Studying Foreign Languages Taught Me About English

“Whoever does not know a foreign language knows nothing of his own.” After studying Latin and German, I understand exactly what this quote from Goethe means.

Growing up as a native English speaker, I had little idea of how the language worked. Since I began studying foreign languages, I have learned to appreciate my mother tongue.

I have also learned a great deal more about English’s mechanics and history. Here are three things my studies in German and Latin have taught me about my native tongue.

1. English’s Language Family and Root Words

English is a hybrid between a Romance language and a Germanic one. Growing up, I was always aware that English derived many words from the Romance language, Latin, but I was not aware just *how much* was derived from it until I started Latin lessons. Words like *aqua* (water), *videre* (to see), and *stella* (star) are the roots of words like aquatic, video, and stellar respectively. Additionally, English has borrowed many words directly from Latin, including *de facto* and *ergo*. As for the Germanic roots of the language, many German words are the same as in English, or sound very similar. These include words such as *das Restaurant*, while such as *Hund* (dog), *sehen* (to see), and *müssen* (must) all sound like the English words or something similar.

2. English Mechanics and Grammar

I took grammar classes in grade school, and I learned about proper English grammar, but it never occurred to me how the rules of the language worked. When I learned how other languages decline nouns and conjugate verbs, I slowly began to realize, “Oh, we have this in English as well.” Studying foreign languages and learning about the dative case, the subjunctive mood, and the imperfect tense in Latin and German heightened my awareness of these elements in English. They may be subtle, but they’re still there.

3. English is HARD

Through my study of foreign languages, I have observed the structure and uniformity that many of them have. These straightforward rules make other languages seem like a walk in the park compared to English.

English is not the hardest language (Polish and Chinese are much harder) but compared to languages such as Latin and even German, it is very difficult. Given that English is the most common language in the modern world, and therefore in high demand, I am grateful that I grew up speaking it and did not have to struggle through learning its many irregularities and weird spellings as a second language.

In America, most people do not speak a second language. Language instruction is in decline. Could we be depriving American students of a deeper understanding of their own language, if we do not make foreign language instruction a greater priority?

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