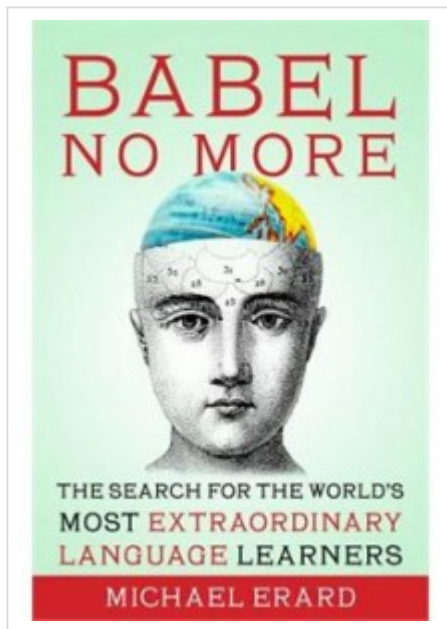


A Q&A with Michael Erard, Author of "Babel No More"

Posted on **February 27, 2012** by **Jessica Sinn**



How do some people have the ability to master a multitude of languages? What makes them tick? Are their brains wired differently from ours?

These are just a few of the questions alumnus Michael Erard (M.A. Linguistics, '96; Ph.D. English, '00) tackles in "[Babel No More: The Search for the World's Most Extraordinary Language Learners](#)" (Free Press, 2012).

While gathering research for his book, Erard traveled to far and distant lands – from Mexico to South India to California to Belgium – in search of hyperpolyglots, people who speak at least 11 languages. In the process, he analyzes the cultural role of language, and where it resides in the brain.

Erard begins his quest by investigating the most famous hyperpolyglot, Giuseppe Mezzofanti, a 19-century priest who allegedly spoke 72 languages. Legend has it, the venerable multilingual defeated Lord Byron in a linguistic cursing contest. And after he died, people all over Europe vied for his skull.

In search of modern-day Mezzofantis, Erard aims to answer the age-old question: What are the upper limits of the human ability to learn languages?

Erard, who considers himself to be a "monolingual with benefits," sat down with ShelfLife to discuss his interest in language acquisition, the mysterious phenomenon of multilingual dexterity, and the importance of breaking language barriers on a rapidly globalized planet.

What spurred your interest in studying polyglot linguistics?

I'd been working as a journalist, writing stories about languages, and a



discussion popped up on a linguistics listserv about who the most lingual person in the world was, as well as the possibility of language learning talent as a heritable trait. Nearly no research or serious writing had been done about people who were gifted language learners and massive language accumulators, though when some people on the listserv said these people didn't exist, it became terribly intriguing.

Why do some people pick up multiple languages so easily?

One reason is that they've already picked up multiple languages – they have a lot of knowledge about the basic patterns they'll see in a grammar, and they know a lot about how they learn. (That is, if they've learned languages from a lot of different families.) Another reason is that they have powerful higher-order cognitive skills like working memory and executive function, which helps them use a lot of languages. They may have the ability to store memories and retrieve things from memory more quickly, as well to hear the differences between speech sounds.

Did you come across any surprising findings during the research phase?

Many, many surprising things on this journey! For instance, when I went to Bologna, Italy, to visit the archives of Cardinal Giuseppe Mezzofanti, a 19th century priest who is credited with knowing dozens of language, I found a lot of documents and other things which hadn't been described before that shed light on his abilities as well as his myth. Going to South India where communities are naturally multilingual was very eye-opening. I loved talking to people who are language

learners of all types and stripes. But I was perhaps most surprised by how difficult it is to say what it means to know a language when one has a very large repertoire of them. A language isn't a unit of measure like an inch or a pound, so does someone with six languages really have more in his or her head than someone who only has one?

What are some interesting techniques hyperpolyglots employ when teaching themselves new languages?

Some were quirky in the sense that you wouldn't encounter them in a standard language classroom, such as eliciting language from a native speaker, as an anthropologist or linguist traditionally would do. You can very rapidly build a mental model of all the language's sounds and basic sentence patterns, all without a textbook or dictionary. Some methods were quirky in the sense that they look and sound odd. There is "shadowing," which involves listening to foreign language material and attempting to reproduce it at the same moment one is hearing it, all while walking around outside making exaggerated gestures with one's limbs. Someone suggested hanging out and playing games with kids who are native speakers in the language you want to learn – the language will be simple and repetitive, and if you're fun to play with, the kids won't care that you don't sound like them.

Are there any downsides to being a polyglot?

One downside is that most professional contexts don't reward you for learning more languages, so the happiest hyperpolyglots were ones in multilingual work settings where learning a language is a part of the job. Another one is that they have to work especially hard to find time for interests besides language, which can quickly consume you and be the only thing that you do. There's the way people are always challenging you to perform in all of your languages, or to divulge the number of languages you speak. That seems to wear on them, because people don't necessarily want to hear the details about what you can do.

What message do you hope your readers will take away from this book?

I hope that people take away the notion that successful language learning happens because of how the brain changes, not because an individual has more willpower, motivation or some other individual trait. I want to take foreign language learning out of the self and put it back into the brain. The goal is to illuminate the neurobiology of learning, which is an exciting area of research right now. One implication is that developing a globally competent workforce requires public support in order to create the environments and curricula for successful foreign language learning – individuals can't be left to learn foreign languages on their own. I also hope that people take away the notion that even as adults they are capable of a considerable amount of learning, if only they abandon the notion that the native monolingual speaker is a meaningful standard or goal.

How did your experience at The University of Texas at Austin shape your interests in becoming an author and studying linguistics?

How did it shape me? Immensely. I received so much encouragement and interest from people both in and out of the classroom – it's incredible. Having access to the library collections was a huge influence too. I spend a huge amount of time in the library for both of my books (not to mention my dissertation). Probably the biggest impact came late in grad school, in 2000, when I realized that I would be happier as a writer, not as an academic. That realization was spurred by my involvement with the Intellectual Entrepreneurship program, then housed on the Graduate School. Then, in 2008, I received the Dobie Paisano Writing Fellowship, a gift that provided what every writer needs: time and solitude.

What are you working on now?

I am going to be promoting this book for a while. I've been working on it since 2005, so I would really like for people to know about it. Then I've got other book ideas to develop. Since 2008 I have worked as a researcher at a think-tank in Washington, D.C., and I would like to be able to focus on writing up some of my ideas in that realm. Writing a book with a day job basically means you have two jobs, and I'd like to have just one for a while.

About the author: A native American English speaker, Erard lived in South America and Asia, where he learned to speak Spanish and Mandarin Chinese. His books and essays on language and culture have appeared in The New York Times, Atlantic Monthly, the Economist and Rolling Stone. His first book, "[Um...:Slips, Stumbles, and Verbal Blunders, and What they Mean](#)" is a natural history of things we wish we didn't say (but do), as well as a look at what happens in our culture when we do (and wish we didn't).

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1 THOUGHT ON "A Q&A WITH MICHAEL ERARD, AUTHOR OF "BABEL NO MORE""



Jacquelyn Poarch

on **July 12, 2012 at 4:52 pm** said:

I am a "hyperpolyglott", speaking 12+ languages, and three additional dialects. I speak six languages with native, or near native fluency, and two additional dialects as a native. My great uncle (Maternal grandfather's brother) was a licensed translator in 6 languages, and all of his brothers(my grandfather included) spoke at least four languages fluently. My grandfather's cousin also spoke 7 or 8 languages fluently, and we often observed her involved in multi-lingual conversations. My father was only fluent in two languages, and my mother, and siblings only speak English, although, my mother's mother spoke three languages fluently(English, German, French).

I believe there is both a genetic and a neurological component to multi-lingualism. I would be interested in corresponding with you on the subject. I am currently reading your book.

Best regards,

Jacquelyn (Kaufmann) Poarch

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