



Auckland Unitarian Church

Love beyond belief

Why should we learn a second language?

Clay Nelson © 20 September 2020

I have to confess to envy. I am in awe of anyone able to converse in more than their first language. I have studied six languages but I can't order fish and chips in any of them, granted two of them are dead biblical languages, ancient Hebrew and Greek, now replaced by modern versions. While I do have a passing ability to read and write in several of them, it might be reasonable to ask why I have bothered.

The most satisfying reason is they reveal a world view and culture that would be closed off to me otherwise.

My first true love in life came to the US from Denmark when she was sixteen. We met at university. She was fluent in the Queen's English having learned it from British television easily broadcast to Copenhagen. Still, we had a sometimes rocky relationship mostly due to language. She spoke English but thought in Danish. For instance, she knew the English names for numbers, but could not actually count in English, only in Danish.

When speaking to each other Danes are very direct. To our ears it can sound brusque, even rude, but they take no offence. I attribute that in part to the fact that they have no specific word for "please". It was not until I studied Danish to improve our relationship that I understood they used their word for thanks, "tak" at the beginning of a request to mean please and "tak" at the end of the same sentence to mean thank you. Until I understood this I could feel the hair on the back of my neck bristle whenever she asked me to do something. To me it felt like an order, to her it was a simple request. Understanding this about Danish filled in some of the potholes on that rocky road we sometimes travelled.

Today is the last day of Te Reo Māori week. It is a reminder each year of the importance of the first language spoken in this country and its place in our culture. It is an invitation to Māori and Pākehā alike to learn a little more of one of our three official languages established by statute. The other being New Zealand sign language.

English speakers may wonder why we should bother learning te reo. If for no other reason, it is sprinkled liberally throughout New Zealand English. On one website there is a list of 50 Māori words with which English-only speakers should be familiar. After 15 years here I was pleased to know 47. Still, I have a long way to go to know the language. Taking a course in Te reo Maori is still on my to-do list.

I have personal reasons for doing so. There are the many cognitive benefits of learning languages. People who speak more than one language have improved memory, problem-solving and critical-thinking skills, enhanced concentration, ability to multitask, and better listening skills. They switch between competing tasks and monitor changes in their environment more easily than monolinguals, as well as display signs of greater creativity and flexibility. If that weren't enough, as we age, being bilingual or multilingual also helps to stave off mental aging and cognitive decline. This is why for the last six years I have spent 15 to 30 minutes every day studying French. I look forward to learning te reo for other reasons as well, as soon as a good online programme becomes available.

Language is the most direct connection we have to other cultures. Being able to communicate in te reo will foster in me an even greater appreciation for the traditions, spirituality, arts, and history of the 16.5% of the population who identify as Māori and have left their indelible mark on this country. Greater understanding, in turn, promotes greater tolerance, empathy, and acceptance.

Perhaps the most important reason for me to study te reo Māori is I am a Unitarian committed to promoting social, economic and environmental justice. Language and power go hand-in-hand. Those whose first language historically is te reo are more likely to live below the poverty line in substandard housing, be treated inequitably by the justice system, be incarcerated at a much higher rate than other population groups, have inadequate health care and shorter lifespans, be victimised by crime, be offered fewer employment opportunities, attend poorly funded schools, suffer low self-esteem, and be kept at a distance from decision-making that impacts their lives. None of this was by accident. It was by design.

From 1860 when colonists dominated the population, they actively sought to assimilate Māori, which meant first killing off their language. And they nearly succeeded. Despite the emphasis on speaking English, the Māori language survived. Until the Second World War most Māori spoke te reo as their first language. They worshipped in Māori, and Māori was the language of the marae. More importantly, it was still the language of the home, where parents passed it on to their children. Political meetings were conducted in Māori and there were Māori newspapers and literature.

The Second World War brought about momentous changes for Māori society. With plenty of work available in towns and cities, Māori moved into urban areas in greater numbers. Before the war, about 75% of Māori lived in rural areas. Two decades later, approximately 60% lived in urban centres.

English was the language of urban New Zealand — at work, in school and in leisure activities. Māori children went to city schools where Māori was unknown to teachers. Enforced contact between large numbers of Māori and Pākehā caused much strain and stress, and te reo was one of the things to suffer.

The number of Māori speakers began to decline rapidly. By 1975 only 5% of Māori knew enough reo to be regarded as native speakers. Even for them, Māori was ceasing to be the everyday language in their homes. Many urbanised Māori people became alienated from their language and culture.

Efforts to secure the survival of the Māori language stepped up a gear in 1985. In that year the Waitangi Tribunal heard the te reo Māori claim, which asserted that te reo is a taonga, a treasure, that the Crown is obliged to protect under the Treaty of Waitangi. The Waitangi Tribunal found in favour of the claimants and recommended a number of legislative and policy remedies. Māori was made an official language of New Zealand under the Maori Language Act 1987.

There are now many institutions, most set up since the 1980s, working to recover te reo. Even so, the decline of the Māori language has only just been arrested. There is a resurgence of te reo, but to remain viable as a language, Māori needs a critical mass of fluent speakers of all ages, and it needs the respect and support of the wider English-speaking and multi-ethnic New Zealand community.

I doubt I can achieve fluency, but I plan to give it a go to add to that critical mass. Maybe I'll even be able to order fish and chips. It seems like the Unitarian thing to do.

Kia kaha te reo.