

Published In Voyager Magazine, the BMI in-flight journal  
April 2006

Mark Lythgoe is a neuroscientist at University College London. You can listen online to his Radio 4 series, *Say What You Think*, at:  
[www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/science/saywhatyouthink.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/science/saywhatyouthink.shtml)

Languages terrify me. If it was a choice between learning a new language and being buried alive, which did happen to me once on a TV pilot, then cover me in earth any day.

Foreign languages are a nemesis that I've faced many times during my life. Before settling in London as neuroscientist, I had a series of unusual overseas jobs - from dog trainer in Israel to mountaineer in South America. I've just about mastered the odd word, like 'walkies' and 'crampon', but ask me to do something more useful, like buying a baguette, and I'm stumped. Even if I can remember the right words, they rarely come out in the right order, or bear any resemblance to how they should sound.

So I was somewhat apprehensive when I was asked to present a series for Radio 4 on the science of languages, especially when the producer, Michelle Martin, told me that I'd have to learn Spanish in a fortnight. I told her straight - it was my worst nightmare. Yet the masochist inside me agreed to do it. Maybe I could find out exactly why I was so bad at languages, and possibly even cure my linguaphobia once and for all.

As a neuroscientist, I've always been amazed at how the brain processes language. It's an incredibly complex task. First you have to transport the sound signals from your ears to your brain, translate them into meaning, and then riffle through your mental dictionary for a response. Afterwards you must tap into your grammatical circuitry to construct a sentence, before engaging your vocal organs ready to perform your reply. The situation is even more complicated for bilinguals, who have two competing lexical systems inside their brains vying for attention. Yet for both mono and bilinguals, this complex mental choreography happens in a split second.

The good news for us humans is that our brains seem to be pre-programmed to learn language. Even by two months of age, babies can tell the difference between the sound of their own language and a foreign tongue. Anyone who has children will know how quickly and expertly they pick up grammatical rules and apply them to new situations. But somehow it doesn't seem as easy for us adults, a fact that I was facing up to as I struggled to learn Spanish during the series. I tried CDs, numerous classroom methods, and even acupuncture to remove the 'emotional blocks' that were standing between me and my new life as a fluent Spanish speaker.

None of the experts I spoke to agreed on why it's harder to learn a new language as an adult. Some linguists insisted that our natural childhood

ability deteriorates with age. If you learn a language after adolescence, they told me, you'll never sound like a native. Others were completely horrified at this suggestion, saying that with enough confidence and motivation I could order jamón with the best of them. All I needed to do was 'expose myself fully' to the language. I felt truly sorry for the locals of Barcelona as I stepped onto the plane.

I have to admit they were right. Being forced to speak or starve in a local cafe definitely works, as long as you can avoid the temptation to just point at the menu and shout in your own language. My motivation was also greatly helped by an intensive course with a rather attractive Spanish teacher called Elsa. Suddenly four hours in a small room didn't seem quite so bad.

I'm not sure I'll ever sound like a native. But I was at least thankful that I hadn't been asked to learn Mazatec, which is spoken in Oaxaca, Mexico. In this language, the same word pronounced with a different vocal tone can have multiple meanings. For example, the word 'ndèh' spoken with a breathy voice means 'horse', whereas 'ndæ~' spoken with a croaky sound means 'buttocks'. Travellers be warned. Especially if you are planning to go horse-riding.

*Say What You Think* was produced by Michelle Martin, who co-authored this article.