

Episode 21: Living Languages

Summary

Nick's friend and former boss Zsuzsa talks about the FIVE languages she speaks every day, and she teaches Nick a thing or two about Hungarian.

Transcript

Nick: Today I'm talking to my colleague and, in fact, my boss, Zsuzsa, uhh, who is the head of the English department of the school where I teach. And so today we're talking about all the languages, Zsuzsa, that you speak, which is very impressive. So let's begin with English. This is actually not your native language.

Zsuzsa: No it's not.

Nick: But it's almost a native language for you, so why do you speak it so well?

Zsuzsa: Well, I started to learn ... I'm Hungarian, that's my native language. I started to learn English at school when I was eight, I think, and it was my first language probably, my first foreign language, sorry. Umm, I went to a school where languages were really important, it was a special class for languages. So we had, I think, five lessons a week from the very beginning. And then I continued in secondary school, where I was, again, in a special language class. Uhh, I think, well, we had criteria to be accepted to this school, so I think when we started at the age of 14, we had around something like FCE (First Certificate in English) level.

And then, umm, we just continued and then I went on to study English at university, umm, I'm not sure if I took any ... yeah, I think I did the advanced exam before going to university, and then basically I did, uhh, five years. The system in Hungary is that you, at that time, you couldn't do a Bachelor's straight away, but you did five years, which was accepted immediately as a Master's degree. And a year and a half or almost two years were devoted to language teaching. So my official degree says secondary school teacher of English literature and linguistics. Not sure if I'll ever teach literature, but I could.

And I spent four months in the UK, in Birmingham, as an exchange student - well, Erasmus. And I worked, which is where I learnt most of my English - not at university. It was a strange experience at university. The foreign students were better than everybody else, but in real life it was difficult to understand the Brummie

accent (the accent from Birmingham). So that's where I ... I worked in a pub in a football stadium, so that's where I learnt natural English, so to say. And also, one more thing, I worked for about 10 years, I think, in total, for a language school in Hungary where we taught Hungarian, uhh, Hungarian, yeah, as a foreign language. So there I met all kinds of people from all over the world, so I still have friends from Canada, the US, the UK, so that's where it comes from. And, yeah, and then I did a PhD in English, too.

Nick: Wow, so you've been working in and studying English your whole life.

Zsuzsa: Yeah!

Nick: So did your parents specifically want you to be good at foreign languages?

Zsuzsa: Well my parents both, uhh, graduated, umm ... well, they are language teachers, they both graduated in Russian and Hungarian as a foreign language. My Mum still teaches Hungarian actively. Uhh, my Dad ... both of them, they're course book writers, basically, so they've been working their whole lives in this context, but they don't speak English. My Mum speaks a bit of English but they ... it doesn't come from the family.

Nick: OK but your path as a language student was laid out for you.

Zsuzsa: Yeah, yeah. I had, uhh ... I listened to kids' songs when I was three in Russian and Finnish and whatnot¹. But, uhh, so, yeah, it was kind of there in the family, yeah.

Nick: OK, so turning to Hungarian, as you said, which is your native language. So if I understand correctly, this is a Turkic language...?

Zsuzsa: It's not.

Nick: It's not a Turkic language?

Zsuzsa: It's not, it's not. It's a Finno-Ugric language, which comes from Siberia, actually.

Nick: OK, I knew it wasn't a Slavic language but I thought it was a Turkic language.

Zsuzsa: Yeah, no no no, no. It's called Finno-Ugric and, umm, basically, it's a big other language family just like the Indo-European. OK, it's not at all related to any other language in any, let's say, language that is an official language in Europe, because it's related to about twenty other languages, but they're minor, except for

¹ whatnot: et cetera, more of the same

Finnish and Estonian which are spoken in, obviously, Finland and Estonia. But the other languages are minor, local languages still spoken in the north of Russia. Some of them have only a few hundred speakers left so they're disappearing, but the three major languages are Hungarian, Finnish and Estonian.

Nick: Wow, that's really interesting. And so is it close at all to those languages?

Zsuzsa: No, not at all. I can confirm that because I went to school in Finland for a while, and I used English at the beginning because I had no idea whatsoever². I always say it's something like, I guess, as close as English to Russian. It comes from the same root, linguists can prove that they're related but they're not at all similar, not at all.

Nick: OK, and are people in Hungary proud of their language?

Zsuzsa: I think they are. I think they're proud of the fact that it's so difficult to learn, and it's so different from everything else. So, you know, there's always these, umm, urban legends³, so to say⁴, yeah, it's the second most difficult language after, whichever, Chinese, I don't know, which is, yeah, obviously has no linguistic foundation whatsoever. But it's said to be a difficult language to learn and I'm also, umm, a teacher of Hungarian as a foreign language so I can prove that it's ... if you want to start learning Hungarian as a foreign language, your learning curve⁵ will be much, much slower than any Indo-European language, basically.

Nick: And why do people typically learn Hungarian as a foreign language?

Zsuzsa: Well, mostly ... it's changed quite a lot. There's a generation whose parents left Hungary in the fifties (1950s), so immigrants, typically Canadians, people from the US, Germans - so it's second or now even third generation Hungarians who didn't learn it or learnt it a little bit when they were kids - that's one group. Umm, the second group is Hungarians living in, or people who have Hungarian origins, living in countries around Hungary, where there are still some Hungarian settlements. And thirdly, now that's the newest, the latest group, maybe, people who work in Hungary, so businessmen. Budapest is quite a trendy⁶ city

² whatsoever: at all, in any way (usually used in negative sentences, as in this example)

³ urban legends: modern stories that are mythical or not factual

⁴ so to say (or: so to speak): as you might say, in a manner of speaking (used after you have said something in an unusual way)

⁵ learning curve: how quickly you learn something

⁶ trendy: fashionable, popular

today for expats⁷. Some of them want to learn Hungarian. And also some ... I've taught some translators and interpreters from Brussels, so people who work for the EU, they need an exotic language, apart from the million other languages that they speak.

Nick: OK, and so you have also a German-sounding last name. So that's another one of your languages, and so how did you learn German?

Zsuzsa: Yeah but it's got nothing to do with my name. So my name is Hoffman. In Hungary there are quite a lot of families that have Hungarian ... err, German names, sorry. It goes back to, I don't know, the 16th, 17th century, I'm not even sure. It's got nothing to do with my language knowledge. No, just wanted to learn another language at school and German is still quite popular because it's close to Austria. So in Hungary it's definitely the second most popular foreign language after English now. Umm, and so just picked that (up) at school and learnt it, and went to Germany first and then Austria and then Zurich, and became a German teacher too.

Nick: And then you married a Spanish speaker, and so then you had to learn Spanish.

Zsuzsa: Yes, I ... yeah, no no, it was before. No, I'm not sure I'd be married to a Spanish speaker if I hadn't spoken Spanish already. No, I ... at university I decided that I wanted to learn another language and, umm, uhh, I was ... I didn't like French, which is strange because now I speak it because I have to.

Nick: I also didn't like French for what it's worth⁸, but...

Zsuzsa: Now I got to like it but anyway, so I didn't want to choose French. I was a bit hesitant between Italian and Spanish. And I had some Spanish friends, so that made me decide. I just started to learn for fun. And after English I found it relatively easy to learn, so I, yeah, I learnt it just partly on my own, partly with a teacher, so in a group. And then, now it's become the family language at home.

Nick: OK, and then you had to learn French because you moved to Geneva.

Zsuzsa: I had to learn French, yeah, but there's one that we forgot. I learnt Russian at school because it was compulsory⁹ at that time. I learnt Russian for eight or nine years or something. Umm, I used to speak really well. I even have an exam that

⁷ expats: very common abbreviation for expatriates; people who live in a different country from their home country

⁸ for what it's worth (fixed expression): if that's useful or important

⁹ compulsory: mandatory, obligatory

proves that I was a B2 speaker (on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) at some point but I just totally lost touch with¹⁰ the language so I don't speak it anymore. I understand a little bit but I'd rather say it's passive for the moment being. And French, I learnt it because I live in Geneva and I thought, "It's not very nice to live in a place where you don't speak the language," so I learnt it.

Nick: Of course. But, apart from Russian, the other five you really use every day.

Zsuzsa: Yes, I do, I do, I do.

Nick: So that's great. You've sort of created this life where you are able to use all these languages day by day, it's great.

Zsuzsa: I do, I do use them, yeah, partly, some of them more at work, some of them more in my private life but I use all of them on a daily basis, yes.

Nick: Alright, well thank you very much.

Zsuzsa: Well thank you Nick.

¹⁰ lost touch with: didn't stay in contact with

Comprehension Questions

1. What are the five languages that Zsuzsa speaks on a daily basis?
2. Where did Zsuzsa study in the UK and what work did she do there?
3. Why did she choose to learn Spanish instead of Italian?

Exercises

Use the words and expressions in the footnotes of the transcript to fill in the gaps.

1. In most countries, it's _____ to wear a seat belt while in a car.
2. English-speaking _____ sometimes don't try to learn the language of the country they're living in.
3. Don't believe everything your schoolmates say. Most of the things they say are just _____.
4. If you want to learn a completely different language, there will probably be a steep _____, especially at the beginning.
5. Unfortunately I've _____ many of my friends from school. I haven't talked to them for a long time.
6. Personally, I think Spanish is easier to learn than French, _____.
7. We might hire a maid to help with the cooking, cleaning and _____.
8. She doesn't wear any makeup _____. She really hates it.
9. Rundown areas of cities can become _____ after a bit of restoration work.
10. I've been going to the gym with my friend John. He's become my personal trainer, _____.

Discussion Questions

Discuss these questions with a partner or in the [English in 10 Minutes Listeners group on Facebook](#):

1. Would you like to learn Hungarian or another 'exotic' language? Why or why not?
2. In your country, do you think more emphasis should be placed on learning foreign languages at school? Why or why not?
3. If you were going to start learning a new language the way Zsuzsa did with Spanish, which one would you choose? How would you decide?

Answers

Comprehension Questions

1. Zsuzsa speaks Hungarian, English, German, Spanish and French every day.
2. She studied in Birmingham and she worked in a pub.
3. She chose Spanish over Italian because she had Spanish-speaking friends.

Exercises

1. compulsory
2. expats
3. urban legends
4. learning curve
5. lost touch with
6. for what it's worth
7. whatnot
8. whatsoever
9. trendy
10. so to speak