Polyglots:

Wunderbar! Incroyable! Straordinario! Дивовижний!

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Based partly on Michael Erard's book:

Babel No More: The Search for the World's Most Extraordinary Language Learners (2012)

Wondrous Facts!

- 7,102 living languages today (world population 7.3 billion)
    - 2,400 languages are classified as endangered
    - Over 230 languages are extinct
- The oldest written language was believed to be written in about 4500 BC
- Most difficult languages to learn (for native English speakers): Arabic, Mandarin, Japanese, Korean
- Easiest languages to learn: French, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish
- Most of the world's languages are spoken in Asia and Africa.
- Chinese has 50,000 characters, but you only need to know about 2,000 to read a newspaper
- A Khoisian language in Botswana consists of mainly 5 types of clicks
- The artificial language Esperanto is spoken by about 500,000 to 2 million people, and two feature films have been done in Esperanto
- After age 12, most people can't lose their 1st language accent when they learn a 2nd language

English – the global "lingua franca"

- English is mainly a mix of Old High German, Old Norse, and Anglo-Norman.

- English has largest vocabulary of any language, with over 615,000 entries in OED

- Average active vocabulary of an English speaker is about 20,000 words, but only 1,000 common words are found in 89% of everyday writing

- 11% of the entire English language is just the letter E.

- The longest English word has 45 letters: "pneumonoultramicroscopicsilicovolcanokoniosis"
  10 "lemmas" comprise 25% of all words used: *the, be, to, of, and, a, in, that, have, I.*

- Nine different ways to pronounce 'ough' in English. This sentence contains all 9:
  - "A rough-coated, dough-faced, thoughtful ploughman strode through the streets of Scarborough; after falling into a slough, he coughed and hiccoughed."

- The toughest tongue-twister in English: "The sixth sick sheik's sixth sheep's sick'."

Language Speakers

L1 = FIRST LANGUAGE   **L2 = SECOND LANGUAGE**

Language	L1 speakers (millions)	L2 speakers (millions)	Total
1. Mandarin	850	500	1.35 billion
2. English	350	850	1.2 billion
3. Hindi	300	240	540
4. Spanish	390	70	460
5. Arabic	340	50	390
6. Urdu	64	296	360
7. Portuguese	265	33	336
8. French	80	194	274
9. Malay	70	200	270
10. Russian	180	80	260
11. Bengali	250	20	250
12. German	95	50	145
13. Japanese	122	1	123

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Language Families

- Afro-Asiatic   381 million
- Austronesian   323 million
- Indo-European   2.9 billion

- Niger-Congo   437 million
- Sino-Tibetan   1.27 billion
- Trans-New Guinea   3.5 million

Main Germanic Languages	Main Romance (Latin) Languages	Main Slavic Languages
English	Spanish	Russian
German	Portuguese	Ukrainian
Dutch	French	Belarusian
Afrikaans	Italian	Polish
Norwegian	Romanian	Czech
Danish		Slovak
Swedish		Slovenian
Icelandic		Serbian
Yiddish		Croatian
		Macedonian
		Bulgarian

Important Ancient Languages

- **Greek**: Spoken in Hellenistic world after conquests of Alexander the Great; and in Byzantine Empire

- **Latin**: Spoken in Roman Empire; liturgical language for Catholic Church

- **Classical Chinese**: Spoken in East Asia during Imperial era of Chinese history

- **Persian**: Spoken during various succeeding Persian Empires; was main second language of Islamic world after Arabic

- **Sanskrit**: Spoken during ancient and medieval historical periods of various states in South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Central Asia; liturgical language of the Vedic religions

- **Turkish**: Language of the Ottoman Empire

Monoglots to Hyperpolyglots

- Monolingual: 40% of world population
- Bilingual: 43% of world population
- Trilingual: 13% of world population
- Multilingual: 3% speak 4 or more languages
- Polyglot: Less than 1% speak 5 or more languages
- Hyperpolyglot: Very rare – 6 or more languages

What Does "Fluent" Mean?

- How many languages do you "know"? (ability to use it without preparation, perhaps with a deeper attachment to the language and its culture, etc.)
- How many languages do you live in? (everyday use, regular exposure)
- How many can you understand? (listening)
- How many can you read?
- How many can you write in?
- How many can you speak–
  - To get by as a tourist
  - To converse in
  - Fluently (very good but not perfect)
  - Like a native (mastery)
- Extremely difficult to maintain fluency in more than 5-6 languages at one time.

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Guiseppe Mezzofanti – Superhyperpolyglot?

- 1774 – 1849, son of a carpenter, from Bologna Italy
- Catholic priest and cardinal, professor at University of Bologna
- Reputed to speak up to 72 languages; he claimed to speak 45–50
- His papers had written records of studies of 56 languages
- Exposed to different languages at early age
- Reportedly slept 3 hours a night and devoted nights to studying languages
- Spoke to many foreign visitors in his work, could speak a new language in 2 weeks

- After analysis of Mezzofanti's abilities, researchers concluded:
  - 30 languages – Mastery (perfect fluency, accuracy, comfort – on a par with most natives)
  - 9 languages – Fluent ("less perfectly" than the 30, but with excellent pronunciation)
  - 11 languages – Could converse, but too few eyewitness reports for most of them
  - 7 languages – Limited conversational skills only
  - 14 languages – Lowest level (he studied grammar and vocabulary but was never observed using the language)

Johan Vandewalle

- Born 1960, Belgian philologist and civil engineer

- Currently head of Turkish-language dept. at Ghent University in Belgium

- Won the Polyglot of Flanders/Babel Prize in 1987

- "Proven to possess communicative competences" in 19 languages (tested in 22)

- Has studied 31 languages:

  - Including 6 dead ones

  - Fluent in about 6–8 (Turkish, Russian, Uzbek, Kyrgyz, Kazakh, etc.)
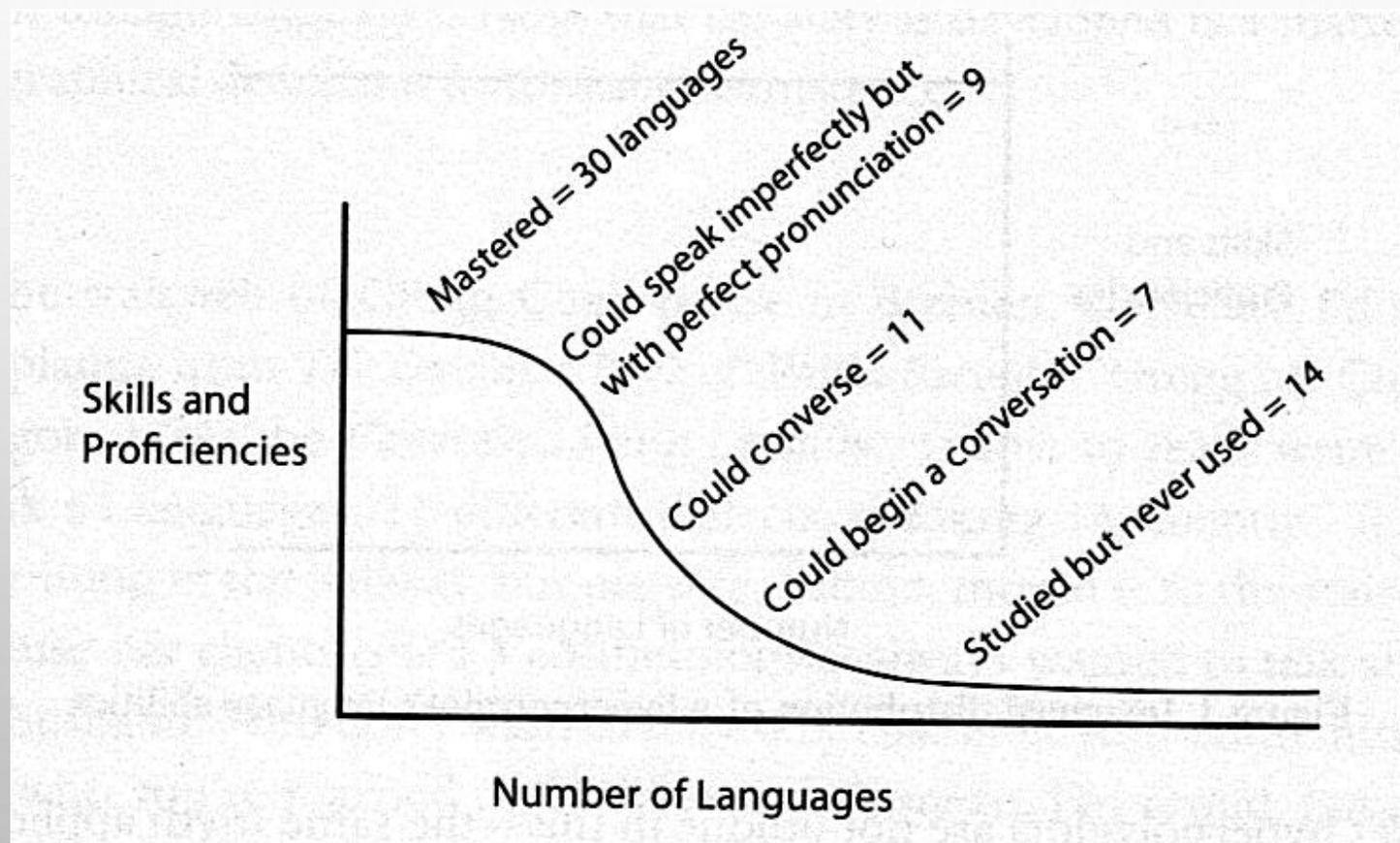
  - "Superficial" knowledge in another 7

Derick Herning

- Born 1932; Scotsman from near Edinburgh; gives tourist tours and plays the organ

- Won the Polyglot of Flanders/Babel Prize in 1990 – more rigorous than 1987

- Can hold a conversation in 22 languages – many of them minority languages

- Didn't enjoy the contest or award:
    - Studied really hard a month beforehand until he was "absolutely sick of languages"
    - After his win, had to write a speech in 9 languages, while exhausted with no sleep
    - Complained about award being too big and heavy with 12 heads and sharp points
    - "I had a heck of a time getting it home"
    - "I had to carry that blooming sculpture through three airplanes."
    - His wife now uses it to hang her hat.

Proficiency vs. Number of Languages

- Distribution of Mezzofanti's language abilities
- Curve is similar for other hyperpolyglots

India – Example of a Multilingual Community

- At least 22 different official languages, most Indians multilingual or at least know bits of several languages
- India is a *Sprachbund* ("language union") – When multilingual groups come together (migration, rise and fall of empires), languages start to overlap, meld and merge, and grammar structures become similar.
- Economics of learning languages in India: "If you don't speak. You don't eat. It's as simple as that." (Indians must learn enough to get by in their daily lives.)
- There's an economic limit to learning languages, as well as a time limit and probably a cognitive limit.
- Difference between cultural multilinguals and hyperpolyglots: economic necessity vs. privilege; cultural norm vs. rarefied/isolated quest.

What Sets Hyperpolyglots Apart?

- Erard: They are avatars for the "will to plasticity" – the belief that we can reshape our brains, and that the world impels us to do so

- "Multi-competence" – they aim for various levels of proficiency according to need and interest

- They have the opportunity and time to learn

- Not geniuses, but possess unusual neurological resources

Key Attributes of Hyperpolyglots

- Disciplined – consistently dedicate large amounts of time over years
- Enjoy learning languages
- Motivated to learn – often obsessively so
- Excellent memory for vocabulary
- Good working memory
- Higher level cognitive skills (genetic basis)
- Superior ability to switch between languages
- Open to new experiences, adaptable
- Good observer of native speakers

Geschwind-Galaburda Hypothesis

- The idea that certain traits may appear together and be linked neurologically, such as:
  - Left-handedness
  - Dyslexia
  - Gender
  - Autism and immune diseases
  - Homosexuality
- GG hypothesis may help explain some elements of hyperpolyglottery. They tend to be:
  - INTJ's (Myers-Briggs: Introverted, Intuitive, Thinking, Judging)
  - "Synoptic sharpeners"
  - Autodidacts (self taught)
  - Men (75%) - with higher proportion of gays
  - High in IQ
  - Bilingualists from childhood

What Does It Take to Become a Hyperpolyglot?

(From Michael Erard)

1. Find your niche (where you're exposed to languages)
2. Use native speakers to gauge your progress but don't try to be one
3. Manage your dopamine (make it pleasurable)
4. Create "flow" to improve brain plasticity
   (get in the zone as you learn)
5. Develop a feel for the language: *Sprachgefühl*
6. Find your tribe (hang out with multilinguals)
7. Stick to the method that works