How does language make a difference?

Centenary projects.

Language is a unique characteristic of humans; it marks us out among other species, it is our unique brand. There are various forms of communication between other species but only humans use an intricate network of sounds and sense to convey meaning. Only humans can lie – because of language!

The relationship between language and thought has long fascinated people and scholars. The 20th century Russian-American phylologist, Roman Jakobson, said that the difference between languages is not in what can be expressed in them but what cannot not be expressed1.

Each language forces its speakers to make different choices. For instance, English forces us to choose between the pronouns he and she when we talk about someone, which is a choice we do not have to make in many other languages. In some languages there is one single pronoun for ‘he’ and ‘she’. This is not to say there is no way of knowing in these languages whether we talk about a man or a woman, just this information is conveyed differently, somewhere else in the sentence. It is in such choices that the real difference between languages lies. It is only by knowing (and knowing well) different languages that the astonishing cultural diversity of the world becomes accessible to us.

Here, at SSEES we offer a particular, Central and Eastern European brand of this diversity by teaching some fifteen of the languages of this fascinating region to BA and MA students and on evening courses. Languages we teach and research include all the Slavonic languages of Eastern Europe, such as Ukrainian, Serbian, Czech, Polish, and Russian, and even Slovene on the evening course programme. But what makes SSEES truly unique in the UK is that it also offers a broad range of non-Slavonic languages, such as the Eastern Romance Romanian, and also Estonian, Hungarian, and Finnish, all of which are Uralic languages. You can combine these languages with other subjects: either another European language or history, political science, and one of the social sciences.

With language you can understand others and get closer to people. You can access literature and films in the original language without nuances, humour, details being lost in translation. Language will make a difference for cognition: bilingual people are less at risk of Alzheimer’s disease. Your memory and cognition will stay in good shape.

You can improve your employability by specialising in a language and culture. You will stand out in the job market. One of our students told us that learning a lesser known language, such as most

---

1 "The true difference between languages is not in what may or may not be expressed but in what must or must not be conveyed by the speakers." Roman Jakobson, ‘On linguistic aspects of translation.’ In On Translation, ed. R. A: Brower, pp. 232-239. Cambridge: Harvard University Press; p. 236.
languages taught at SSEES, became her unique brand while she was at university. She combined a degree in a more widely taught language, German, and one of the SSEES languages but her fellow students associated her with the smaller language; this was what made her stand out.

530 words

by Eszter Tarsoly and Riitta-Liisa Valijärvi