



## The European Day of Languages – Why languages matter

Guy Deutscher in the introduction of his book *“Through the language glass”* says:

“There are four tongues worthy of the world's use,” says the Talmud: “Greek for song, Latin for war, Syriac for lamentation, and Hebrew for ordinary speech.” Other authorities have been no less decided in their judgment on what different languages are good for. The Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, king of Spain, archduke of Austria, and master of several European tongues, professed to speaking “Spanish to God, Italian to women, French to men, and German to my horse.” A nation's language, so we are often told, reflects its culture, psyche, and modes of thought. Peoples in tropical climes are so laid-back it's no wonder they let most of their consonants fall by the wayside. And one need only compare the mellow sounds of Portuguese with the harshness of Spanish to understand the quintessential difference between these two neighboring cultures. The grammar of some languages is simply not logical enough to express complex ideas. German, on the other hand, is an ideal vehicle for formulating the most precise philosophical profundities, as it is a particularly orderly language, which is why the Germans have such orderly minds. (But can one not hear the goose step in its gauche, humorless sounds?) Some languages don't even have a future tense, so their speakers naturally have no grasp of the future. The Babylonians would have been hard-pressed to

understand Crime and Punishment, because their language used one and the same word to describe both of these concepts. The craggy fjords are audible in the precipitous intonation of Norwegian, and you can hear the dark l's of Russian in Tchaikovsky's lugubrious tunes. French is not only a Romance language but the language of romance par excellence. English is an adaptable, even promiscuous language, and Italian-ah, Italian! Many a dinner table conversation is embellished by such vignettes, for few subjects lend themselves more readily to disquisition than the character of different languages and their speakers. And yet should these lofty observations be carried away from the conviviality of the dining room to the chill of the study, they would quickly collapse like a soufflé of airy anecdote-at best amusing and meaningless, at worst bigoted and absurd. Most foreigners cannot hear the difference between rugged Norwegian and the endless plains of Swedish. The industrious Protestant Danes have dropped more consonants onto their icy windswept soil than any indolent tropical tribe. And if Germans do have systematic minds, this is just as likely to be because their exceedingly erratic mother tongue has exhausted their brains' capacity to cope with any further irregularity. English speakers can hold lengthy conversations about forthcoming events wholly in the present tense (I'm flying to Vancouver next week ... ) without any detectable loosening in their grip on the concepts of futurity. No language-not even that of the most "primitive" tribes-is inherently unsuitable for expressing the most complex ideas. Any shortcomings in a language's ability to philosophize simply boil down to the lack of some specialized abstract vocabulary and perhaps a few syntactic constructions, but these can easily be borrowed, just as all European languages pinched their verbal philosophical tool kit from Latin, which in turn lifted it wholesale from Greek. [...] Philosophers of all persuasions and nationalities have lined up to proclaim that each language reflects the qualities of the nation that speaks it. In the seventeenth century, the Englishman Francis Bacon explained that one can infer "significant marks of the genius and manners of people and nations from their languages." "Everything confirms," agreed the Frenchman Etienne de Condillac a century later, "that each language expresses the character of the people who speak it." His younger contemporary, the German Johann Gottfried Herder, concurred that "the intellect and the character of every nation are stamped in its language." Industrious nations, he said, "have an abundance of moods in their verbs, while more refined nations have a large amount of nouns that have been exalted to abstract notions." In short, "the genius of a nation is nowhere better revealed than in the physiognomy of its speech." The American Ralph Waldo Emerson summed it all up in 1844: "We infer the spirit of the nation in great measure from the language, which is a sort of monument to which each forcible individual in a course of many hundred years has contributed a stone." The only problem with this impressive international unanimity is that it breaks down as soon as thinkers move on from the general principles to reflect on the particular qualities (or otherwise) of particular languages, and about what these linguistic qualities can tell about the qualities (or otherwise) of particular nations.

The truth is that language is what makes us human and the peculiarities of our languages are what make us unique. That's the main idea behind the European Day of Languages. Every language counts and every language can cast a different light on everyday life events.

## THE EUROPEAN DAY OF LANGUAGES

The European Day of Languages (**EDL**) was first celebrated in 2001 during the European Year of Languages. At the end of this campaign the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers decided to make EDL an annual event, to be celebrated each **26 September**. Every year, millions of people in the Council's member states and elsewhere organise or take part in activities to promote linguistic diversity and the ability to speak other languages.

The general aim is to draw attention to **Europe's rich linguistic and cultural diversity**, which has to be encouraged and maintained, but also to extend the range of languages that people learn throughout their lives in order to develop their plurilingual skills and reinforce intercultural understanding. EDL is an opportunity to celebrate all of Europe's languages, including those that are less widely spoken and the languages of migrants. ([see](#))

## CELEBRATING LANGUAGES IN CLASS

### ACTIVITY 1 – LANGUAGES FOR...

Create a poster illustrating a specific topic in various languages.

- [LANGUAGES FOR PEACE](#)
- LANGUAGES FOR FOOD
- LANGUAGES FOR SPORT
- LANGUAGES FOR ENVIRONMENT

### ATTIVITÀ 2 – SFIDA LINGUISTICA

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Qual è la parola più lunga/più difficile che ti viene in mente nella tua lingua?<https://edl.ecml.at/Activities/Mostdifficultletterwordphrasetopronounce!/tabid/4296/lingual/it-IT/Default.aspx>

## **ATTIVITÀ 3 – LE METAFORE CON CUI VIVIAMO**

[Great Inspirations](#)

## **ATTIVITÀ 4 – IL LIBRO ILLUSTRATO DEI DETTI. CURIOSI ESPRESSIONI DA TUTTO IL MONDO**

[Great Inspirations](#)

## **ATTIVITÀ 5 – PERSO NELLA TRADUZIONE: PAROLE CULTURALI**

[Great Inspirations](#)

## **ATTIVITÀ DI INSEGNAMENTO-CONDIVIDI ONLINE**

<https://edl.ecml.at/Teachers/Teachingmaterials/tabid/3097/language/en-GB/Default.aspx>